

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: BLACK LIVES MATTER AND
BLACK MILLENNIAL MEANING-MAKING

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This dissertation is a study of Black millennial meaning-making in relation to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. As a case, this research supports an investigation of the social psychological processes through which oppressed racial groups interpret the character and actions of racial justice movements and the social contexts in which they mobilize. I use Symbolic Interactionism and critical theories of race and racism to address deficits in the way traditional social movement theories explain the relationship between social structure, interpretive processes, and mobilization—particularly for race-based movements. The study uses data from interviews with 36 Black millennials, conducted across an approximately one-year span starting in early 2019. Although these data provide for analysis of a wide range of topics (e.g. gender dynamics, social and news media impacts, participation, tactics, and collective identity), the dissertation focuses on three areas of meaning construction about the movement that became clear through preliminary analysis. First, I explore interpretations of the purpose and goals of BLM, extending the *framing* perspective to capture the external framing processes that

occur in response to movements. The second portion of the analysis explicates the powerful role of *collective memory* of past iterations of Black activism in the U.S. in evaluations of BLM. Finally, examining definitions and projections of success for BLM, the third empirical chapter interrogates the relationship between *political opportunity structures* and *prospectus* for social change through activism. Across all three chapters, I specifically point to the ways that Black millennial meaning-making about BLM in the U.S. context was decidedly dependent on sociostructural understandings of racism. Thus, I argue that theories of social movements must explicitly incorporate historically constituted systems of racial domination.

**BLACK LIVES MATTER
AND BLACK MILLENNIAL MEANING-MAKING**

by
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DEDICATION

Like Alicia Garza’s 2013 Facebook post, this dissertation is first and foremost a love letter to Black people—past, present, and future. Our lives, our knowledge, and our voices are infinitely important, and I will never stop centering them in my work. I specifically offer this research as a memorialization of one group of Black people’s understandings of one of the many movements started by us and for us in pursuit of a liberated world. I pray we never stop fighting. And I dream of our success.

On a personal level, I dedicate this dissertation to three of the most important people in my life who I lost in the process of doing this work, but who I know wanted to see me keep going. To my father (Vernon Durham Jr.), grandmother (Emma Jean Durham), and grandfather (Horace Nicholas Windeshausen—completing this journey while carrying the grief of losing you felt impossible at times. Yet, knowing that you are still *with me* in spirit is one of few things that kept me going. Even though you aren’t here to express it, I know and *feel* how deeply proud of me you are. I hope I continue to exceed the wildest dreams you had for me. I love you, I miss you, and I thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, EMPIRICAL CASE, AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

Social movements serve as agents of change in society, particularly for oppressed groups who lack structural power and must advocate for change outside of established societal channels. The white supremacist and anti-Black¹ racial structure and culture of the United States has long been a target of mobilization efforts. The dynamics and outcomes of racial justice activism are often a topic of sociological inquiry. In contrast, how individuals and groups engage in interpretive meaning-making processes in response to these movements and the racial structures they seek to change, as well as the potential implications of these socially constructed meanings, are less central to the literature. In the present dissertation, I ask the question: *how do members of oppressed racial groups construct meanings about racial justice movements and the racial structures and relations they respond to?* I frame my inquiry through an integration of concepts from the social movements literature, critical theories of race and racism, and Symbolic Interactionism and use data from interviews with 36 Black millennials about their perspectives on the contemporary Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as a case.

Social movements have implications for policy, institutional structures, intergroup relations, cultural narratives and discourse, and individual experiences and worldviews. Often, these outcomes are interrelated and co-constituting. In a racial state like the U.S., these policies,

¹ I capitalize “Black” throughout this dissertation while choosing not to capitalize “white” because I conceptualize Black people in the U.S. as a distinct racialized cultural group resulting from and treated based on the history of marginalization originating with chattel slavery. I do not capitalize “white” in the same way because white people in the U.S. often maintain ties to specific ethnic group identities from their country of origin in ways that Black people are often unable to do as a result of this violent history. Further, the attachment to “white” as an identity implies an upholding of white supremacy in a manner that capitalizing “Black” does not in the context of this history. This choice in capitalization reflects an intentional dedication to anti-racist scholarship and action, as well as the centering of Black voices as experts on their own experience in a social system characterized by white domination. It also aligns with my membership in and dedication to this cultural group.

structures, and culture intertwine to form a single complex system that inequitably shapes people's subjective experiences and life outcomes on the basis of their location in a hierarchy of racial groups. Social movements that seek to alter this existing racial system become objects around which people build or renegotiate their understandings of these phenomena, the society in which they occur, and their place within it. The actions people take based on these understandings have consequences for movement development. In turn, the resultant trajectory and dynamics of these movements determine whether and what kind of shifts in the racial system occur. *This study attends to this cycle and is designed to refine understandings of the meaning-making processes that mediate the relationship between race-based social movements, the groups they represent, and the racialized social contexts in which they exist.*

I use Symbolic Interactionism and critical theories of race and racism to extend existing social movement theory in two primary ways. First, while existing frameworks typically either examine structure and interpretive processes separately or in a way that emphasizes the former over the latter, I employ a Symbolic Interactionism to do the opposite. By doing so, I enhance our sociological understanding of the way social structure shapes the way members of society construct meanings about social movements, particularly in relation to race. Second, I strengthen theoretical knowledge about race-based mobilization by explicitly grounding my research in critical and structural theories of race and racism. This approach accounts for the way social movements are inherently linked to the axes of domination that exist in society—in this case racism, and more specifically anti-Blackness—and cannot be fully understood without attention to these structural systems.

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss the 21st century Black Lives Matter movement as the case for empirical inquiry and give an overview of the theoretical perspectives that guide this

research. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological details of this research, including: the research design, data collection process, sampling parameters and resultant sample characteristics, analysis process, and my positionality as a researcher. The following three chapters detail my findings in response to specific research questions, each of which speak to the overarching inquiry about the relationship between meaning-making, socio-structural environments, and race-based mobilization efforts. In Chapter 3, I utilize and extend the framing perspective by introducing the concept of *external framing* to examine Black millennial understandings of the goals and purpose of BLM, with critical attention to how these frames are built upon their existing understandings of the American racial structure. Chapter 4 applies the concept of *collective memory* to explicate how Black millennial perspectives on BLM are rooted in their understandings of past Black movements that have challenged the same racial hierarchy. Lastly, Chapter 5 investigates the ways that Black millennials define success for BLM and how those definitions shape their *prospectus* for social change in relation to the *political opportunity structure* and its structural roots in race as an axis of domination. In the final chapter, I draw conclusions about how the findings from the three preceding chapters cumulatively extend the existing literature on social movements by theoretically illustrating the relationship between interpretive processes, social structure, and mobilization from a critical race and symbolic interactionist perspective.

Black Lives Matter As A Case for Inquiry

The 20th century preeminence of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States, a country built upon and plagued by racism and anti-Blackness specifically, makes it an ideal case for examining the processes and implications of meaning-making about racial justice movements. Initially, the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” emerged in a social media exchange

between Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. As the hashtag spread like wildfire, these Black women activists worked to build a functioning social movement organization out of the ideas the hashtag represented. BLM is now many things: a movement, an organizational network, a critique of the racist structure of society, and a call to action to try and change that structure and create a safer world for Black people.² The BLM Global Network (BLMGN) collectively identifies as a social justice effort to produce Black liberation and eradicate white supremacy and anti-Black racism. It centers the humanization of Black people, who are the targets of systemic violence and discrimination in all aspects of social life in our society and have been throughout history. It prioritizes inclusivity, advocating for Black people of all identities and backgrounds, particularly those who hold other marginalized identities that intersect with their Blackness to produce compounded inequality (Black Lives Matter n.d.).

Even early in its tenure, BLM was described by some as the civil rights movement of our time—linking it to a long and important history of protest and resistance against racism in the Black community, particularly in the U.S. (Day 2015). In response to a series of highly publicized murders of unarmed Black people such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in early 2020, a mass wave of protest catapulted BLM to the position of the largest social movement in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020; Wright 2020). This protest wave also expanded BLM’s reach and influence, sparking protests of solidarity and in

² Throughout this proposal, “BLM (movement)” broadly refers to all mobilization and social movement activity carried out by myriad individuals, groups, and organizations that espouse this rhetoric. While BLM is also a formal organization comprised of smaller local chapters, in cultural discourse it is often used in this broad sense, likely due to its inception as a hashtag. This conceptualization is congruent with the similar colloquial use of “Movement for Black Lives” as an umbrella term and the often-interchangeable use of these two labels, despite the latter also being a defined organizational coalition. My use of the term in this generalized manner aligns with this pattern in U.S. discourse broadly as well as the linguistic patterns of interview participants in this study specifically.

response to local racial issues in countries across the globe (Kirby 2020). Later that year, the founders of BLM were named in Time Magazine's global list of the 100 Most Influential People (Fulton 2020), signaling the scale and power of the organization and movement they have spearheaded. With this level of prominence and impact, BLM is assuredly a central feature of racial meaning-making among Americans, and thus an opportune case for this investigation.

The significant divisions in perceptions of BLM further add to its utility as a case. Quantitative public opinion data provides one window into the wide variety of perceptions, interpretations, and opinions about the movement over time. Black people have consistently expressed the highest levels of support for the movement compared to other racial groups, but that support is not universal across the group. In 2016, 40% of Black people expressed strong support for BLM. However, only 20% expressed the belief that the movement would be very effective in bringing racial equality, and a congruent number doubted that it would be effective. These figures were drastically different among whites—only 14% expressed strong support for the movement and a mere 6% thought it would be very effective in achieving racial equality (Parker, Horowitz, and Mahl 2016).

Many people (including social movement scholars) viewed the increased and more diverse participation in the 2020 BLM protest wave as an important turning point for the movement (Fisher 2020; McAdam 2020). At this time, support for the movement increased across racial groups but was still heavily divided—while 71% of Black people strongly supported BLM, only 31% of whites expressed the same (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020). This was short lived. By September 2020, support for BLM outside of the Black community waned significantly and has since remained stagnant (Thomas and Horowitz 2020; Horowitz 2021). The pervasive narrative associating BLM protests with violent and destructive

rioting is cited as a likely reason for this drop in support for the movement, but is based on assumption and anecdotes rather than actual data (Robbins 2020). In fact, despite media coverage highlighting these behaviors, research shows that about 94% of BLM protests during this period were non-violent (Kishi and Jones 2020; Kishi et al. 2021). These data on broad patterns in opinions of BLM across social groups are helpful and important. However, their lack of nuance and depth also points to the importance of digging deeper into perspectives on this movement specifically, as well as other movements seeking to alter the racial structure of society. The truth is, we know relatively little about the qualitative meanings people attach to the movement and the social psychological processes through which they come to hold these perspectives. It is a theoretical and sociological interest in these meaning-making processes and products, particularly among the Black community, that serves as the foundation for this dissertation.

The movement has already become a major topic of social scientific study, with a multitude of articles, special journal issues, edited volumes, and books dedicated to the subject. These studies overwhelmingly focus on either the historical development and trajectory of the movement (Allen, Durham, and Jones 2025; Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; Ransby 2018; Rickford 2016; Wesley 2016), digital activism and media discourse (Carney 2016; Durham 2022a, 2022b; Dunivin et al. 2022; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Langford and Speight 2015; R. Ray et al. 2017; Stewart et al. 2017; Tillery 2019; Wilkins, Livingstone, and Levine 2019), participation in BLM across demographic groups (Hong and Peoples 2021; Hope, Keels, and Durkee 2016; Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021; Ruffin 2023), or the ideas and actions of BLM activists and the movement (Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Cobbina 2019; Destine 2022, 2023; Petitjean and Talpin 2022; Ransby 2018; Woodly 2022). My dissertation research

will contribute to this burgeoning body of literature by using semi-structured interviews to analyze and illustrate the meaning-making processes that Black millennials carry out in relation to Black Lives Matter. In particular, I examine the way their existing knowledge of the American racial structure influences their perspectives on the movement's purpose and goals, relationship to past Black movements, and potential for achieving social change.

Guiding Theoretical Frameworks on Social Movements, Meaning-Making, and Race

As stated above, this research is situated at the intersection between social movement theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and critical theories of race and racism. This dissertation deploys the latter two perspectives in order to begin to fill two gaps in extant theoretical perspectives on social movements: (1) understandings of how social (in this case racial) structure shapes the interpretive processes through which people construct and attach meanings to social movements and (2) the way movement phenomena are intimately related to the systems of domination that organize society. In the rest of this section I provide an overview of relevant perspectives in the social movements literature for understanding social structure and interpretive processes and identify the ways they stand to be improved by symbolic interactionist and critical race approaches.

Integrating Social Movement Perspectives with Symbolic Interactionism

Classical social theorists conceptualized revolutions and social movements as forms of collective action occurring in response to conflict between groups over resources and power in society, particularly in relation to inequality between economic classes (Marx and Engels [1848] 2018; Buechler 2011). Today, *social movements* are defined as efforts to produce (or sometimes resist) social and political change in relation to some interest or value held by a group of people (McCarthy and Zald 1977). They involve intentional, sustained, and at least somewhat organized

action by groups with a sense of shared purpose and solidarity in opposition to dominant groups and social structures that produce inequality (McAdam and Snow 1997; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Through these established definitions, we can understand social movements as mechanisms through which social groups mount challenges against the societal structures that perpetuate their subjugation and/or create unpropitious conditions in order to pursue a more just, humane, or ideal society.

In early works, scholars conceptualized movements as focused on either norms or values. The former are concerned with instituting new or affecting existing societal norm(s) surrounding a particular issue and are limited in their focus, while the latter are broader attempts to shift and redefine whole sets of social values within a given group or setting (Smelser 1962). The latter type will inevitably produce shifts in societal norms in alignment with the broader values being adopted. Scholars have expanded on this initial theorization to address not only the type and extent of change sought by a movement, but also the location of that change—within individuals or within society. This has resulted in four generally recognized types of social movements: (1) alterative, which seek partial change within individuals; (2) redemptive, which focus on total change within individuals; (3) reformative, which focus on partial (typically normative) change within society; and (4) revolutionary, which advocate for total (value based) change within a societal system (McAdam and Snow 1997). Following this typology, Black Lives Matter is a revolutionary, value-oriented movement because it seeks to holistically transform the way Black people are viewed, treated, and valued and ultimately demolish the overarching system of anti-Black racism that undergirds society and shapes all aspects of social life (Bailey and Leonard 2015; Bracey 2021; Black Lives Matter, n.d.; Movement 4 Black Lives n.d.; Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Francia and Wright-Rigueur 2024; Ransby 2018; Ray 2020a).

The structural formation of society is a critical determinant in the manifestation, trajectory, and impact of mobilization efforts. The *political process perspective* is arguably the most dominant structural paradigm in the social movements literature, focusing on the overarching relationship between socio-structural context and movement emergence, dynamics, and outcomes (Andrews 1997; Kriesi et al. 1992; Meyer 2004). Under this model, a given society has a *political opportunity structure (POS)*, encompassing the full range of political, social, and economic factors that cumulatively shape political and collective behavior (Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi 2004; McAdam 1999; Tilly 1978). The list of elements that make up this structure is extensive and includes state institutions, electoral politics, legislation and policy, distribution of structural and cultural resources, mechanisms of repression, social stratification hierarchies, intergroup relations, and power dynamics (Einwohner 2003; Tarrow 1996; Van Dyke and Cress 2007). *Political opportunities* refer to shifts in this multifaceted structure that promote or constrain possibilities for mobilization and its impact on society (Koopmans 1999; Suh 2001).

Social movement scholars broadly recognize interpretive processes as the final impetus needed for groups to take action in response to the political opportunities and mobilizing structures and resources available to them. Yet, ideas about meaning-making processes and products related to social movements are commonly organized into their own separate theoretical perspectives and concepts (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Morris and Herring 1987; Snow and Benford 1988). This separation and a historical bias in favor of structural frameworks in the field of social movement studies has created a gap in our understanding of the interplay between social structure and interpretive processes (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Meyer 2004; Polletta and Gardner 2015; Snow, Vliementhart, and Ketelaars 2019). When scholars do incorporate meaning-

making concepts into structural paradigms for understanding mobilization, they typically remain underdeveloped in comparison to social structure. For example, McAdam introduced the concept of *cognitive liberation* to describe the transformed consciousness of a sizeable portion of an aggrieved group involving collective definition of their social conditions as unjust, attribution of that injustice to a particular group or structure, and shared perception of that situation as changeable through collective action (1999). In his political process model, cognitive liberation constitutes the link between political opportunity and mobilization, but the actual processes and effects of cognitive liberation make up a very limited portion of the analysis in comparison to his discussion of the POS and the resources from internal community organizations that facilitated mobilization. Further, he failed to consider the possibility that cognitive liberation can occur as a result of perceived, rather than objectively existing, openings in the POS or via framing processes that manage to inspire mobilization even in the absence of structural openings for social change (Einwohner 2003; Suh 2001). While other scholars have worked to expand upon these ideas, studies on the relationship between social structure and interpretive processes are still relatively limited, particularly in relation to racial structure and meanings.

This study on meaning-making about the BLM movement extends theoretical knowledge of social movements by examining the relationship between interpretive processes and social structure through a symbolic interactionist frame. As a theoretical paradigm, Symbolic Interactionism focuses on the ways people act toward each other, objects, and conditions in their social environment based on the meanings they assign to them. These meanings are produced through social interaction and impacted by people's social locations and experiences (Blumer 1969; House 1977; Stryker and Vryan 2003). The perspective was largely built on George Herbert Mead's ideas about the development of the self through social interaction and the

importance of reflexive consciousness in the way we humans interpret and respond to their social environment (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969). While initially only focused on micro-level phenomena, this framework eventually expanded to include interpretations of and interactions with structural phenomena as well (Stryker 1987, 2008). In turn, Symbolic Interactionism is well positioned to assist in building understandings of meaning-making about social structure and context in relation to social movements (Williams 2004). I employ this approach through a critical, qualitative study of meaning-making processes about BLM among Black millennials and illustrating the way they are contingent on existing knowledge about the racialized social structure of the United States. The three interpretive processes I examine—framing, collective memory, and prospectus—are discussed in detail in their respective empirical chapters.

Using Critical Theories of Race and Racism to Study Social Movements

As explained above, the structural formation of society is a critical determinant in the manifestation, trajectory, and impact of mobilization efforts. The present dissertation answers recent calls for integration of critical theories of race and racism into the study of social movements in order to account for the way race functions as a social structure that shapes mobilization processes and mobilizing groups (Bell 2016; Bracey 2016, 2021; Durham 2024; Fleming and Morris 2015; Mansbridge and Morris 2017; Oliver 2017; Smith 2020; Watkins Liu 2018). Through analysis of award-winning books by members of the Collective Behavior and Social Movements section of the American Sociological Association, Watkins Liu (2018) documents that the most celebrated work in the field is predominantly white and male in authorship, empirical cases, and theoretical approaches. In books that examined minority group mobilization, she found that the voices of those groups and the structural systems of power by which they are marginalized were not given analytic priority. She advocates for the integration of

sociostructural frameworks in the study of social movements and advances an integrated Critical Race Theory–Intersectionality approach—attentive to how power structures operate to subjugate particular categories of people based on their intersecting identities—as one lens for doing so.

Even frameworks relying on analysis of explicitly race-based movements often do not sufficiently account for race as a social structure. For example, McAdam’s (1999) political process model was developed through research on the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, which contextualized within the history of Black insurgency going back to 1876 and continuing through the CRM era to provide a structural backdrop for the emergence, trajectory, and decline of the movement (McAdam 1999:65-116). Yet, Bracey (2016) argues that McAdam’s theoretical analysis exhibits a white racial frame, which normalizes the vents and provides sterilized, detached descriptions that do not adequately or accurately communicate the insidious depth of anti-Black racism and the lasting impacts of this oppression. Further, by starting his review in 1876, he completely skipped over the three and a half centuries of Black enslavement upon which the social and political structure of the United States was built—a history of vital importance for understanding the structural context of the United States and Black American mobilization within it (Bracey 2021; Combs 2022; Echols 2022; Roediger 2019; Ward 2023).

Oliver (2017) argues that movements should be studied with consideration for the axes of domination that organize the societies in which they occur, and specifically outlines the way that race/ethnicity acts as one of these axes to shape mobilization processes. She discusses the way that racial/ethnic groups in the United States (and elsewhere) were socially constructed in the process of state formation—achieved through war, conquest, genocide, slavery, and legal exclusion. Once racial/ethnic distinctions are established, they become the basis of inequitable distribution of resources and differential treatment, and this system is maintained through social

structures and cultural domination. The racial/ethnic axis of domination shapes mobilization by all groups and for all purposes because it organizes the social structure and culture they seek to change. But because this axis shapes movement related phenomena such as political opportunities, access to resources, and state repression, considering this system of domination is especially important for studies of mobilization mounted by racial/ethnic groups who are oppressed within that system.

My methodological approach and theoretical analysis in this research broadly falls under a Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach to empirical research (Barnes 2016; Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2019, 2021; Golash-Boza 2016). CRT, which initially grew out of critical legal studies, posits that race and racism are central to the foundational construction and ongoing functioning of society (Bell 1991, 1995; Crenshaw et al. 1995). This now interdisciplinary framework rests on a few core tenets for understanding racism as a social structure, its perpetuation, and its impact on day-to-day experiences (Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2019; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). First and foremost, it conceptualizes racism as an ordinary and permanent feature of (American) society, shaping the day-to-day lives of all people. Next, this approach argues that white supremacy is reinforced by the material and psychic benefits to the dominant group, including both elite and working-class whites, respectively. It is also upheld by a broad, socially constructed racial categorization system, which promotes differential racialization (definition of qualities and value on a racial basis) across groups, and also intersects with other systems of categorization (e.g. gender, class, sexuality) to produce varied identities and experiences. This point has led to the development of multiple theoretical offshoots designed to specify the experiences of groups within this system. For example, BlackCrit is used to understand anti-Blackness as a particular form of racism in the wake of slavery (Combs 2022; Echols 2022;

Howard 2020; Lewis 2000; Roberts 1999; Sharpe 2016; Vargas and Jung 2021; Wallace 2022).

Finally, the Critical Race Theory perspective emphasizes the unique situated knowledge of people of color dominated within this system, which positions them as experts on race and racism through their own life experience.

Applying this framework in empirical sociological research requires: (1) letting go of faulty value-neutral, apolitical orientations toward social phenomena occurring within a racialized social system; (2) using the tenets of CRT to inform research design and methodology; (3) analytically centering race and racism across micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis to uncover the myriad structures, mechanisms, and impacts of racism; and (4) treating race relationally, given that racial categories must be understood in relation to one another within a broader system of categorization and domination (Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2021). The primary methodological approach adopted within this theoretical paradigm is counter-storytelling—the narration of personal experiences and perspectives by members of oppressed racial groups for the purposes of understanding race as a dominating structure (Barnes 2016; Chávez 2012; Delgado 1989; Merriweather Hunn, Guy, and Mangliitz 2006; Miles 2019; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). A critical race approach also inherently implies a dedication to disrupting and resisting race as a system of domination (Bell 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Thus, this framework is particularly suited for studies of social movements which pursue this same aim (Bracey 2016, 2021; Watkins Liu 2018).

The present dissertation fits squarely within a critical race approach. First, I use the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement as an empirical case and center Black millennial voices as the data through which to understand this movement. Studying Black mobilization specifically is important because these movements, particularly those of the mid-20th century,

have driven human rights advancement and shaped mobilization practices of other groups worldwide (Bell 2016; Fleming and Morris 2015). By documenting the ways BLM challenges the prevailing system of racial domination in society, as well as perceptions of that challenge among Black people as a dominated group, I contribute to a body of knowledge meant to advance us toward liberation (Allen 2024; Anderson and Samudzi 2018; Kelley 2002). Next, I account for race across multiple levels of analysis by examining the way racial structure shapes micro-level, socially constructed perspectives about the movement. I also pay attention to the way race is discussed in relation to other intersecting forms of oppression, and the way that anti-Blackness constitutes a particular form of oppression shaping Black lives and movements. Finally, I use critical theories of race and racism—such as Racialized Social Systems theory (Bonilla-Silva 1997), Systemic Racism Theory (Feagin 2006), Mueller’s (2020) Theory of Racial Ignorance, Color-Blind Theory (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Doane 2017; Gallagher 2003); and Afro-Pessimism (Ray et al. 2017; Wilderson 2020)—as the primary lens through which to understand these phenomena. Utilizing this critical race approach with a symbolic interactionist frame and existing concepts from the social movements literature, I extend theoretical understandings of the relationship between interpretive meaning-making processes, social movements, and racialized social structures.

CHAPTER 2:

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation research is a critical qualitative examination of racialized meaning-making among Black millennials in the U.S. pertaining to the Black Lives Matter movement. I use data from a set of semi-structured interviews with a theoretic convenience sample (N=36) of this population. Through analysis of these data, I answer three sets of questions about perceptions of the purpose and goals of BLM, its relation to past iterations of Black American mobilization, and definitions of success and projections of the future impact of the movement. In the sections below, I discuss my research design, data collection process, sampling parameters, resultant sample, and analytic approach. I also discuss the impacts of my positionality as a member of the target population on the research. All procedures were carried out in accordance with ethical requirements of human subjects research and were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland (approval number 1402771-3).

Research Design and Data Collection

The study was conducted using a predetermined interview guide, which contained four primary topical categories of questions (Appendix A). The first set of questions was designed to ascertain their general knowledge and interpretations of the BLM movement in American society. This included questions about what they felt the movement was trying to accomplish, why and for whom it was created, how it is structured and who is involved, and the timing and catalysts of its emergence. The second set of questions revolved around participants' personal feelings about and experiences with the movement, particularly their degree of support for, identification with, and participation in the movement. Thirdly, I asked questions about the

sources of information from which they gathered knowledge about BLM and how those sources shaped their perspectives on the movement, with particular attention to social media and news media. Finally, the interviews explored participants' thoughts on the future trajectory and potential societal impacts of the movement. In this section, I was particularly interested in how they defined "success" in terms of movement outcomes, their projections of whether BLM would achieve those measures, and how they understood BLM in relation to Black movements of the past. Together, these four areas of questioning were designed to elicit broad reflections on the movement that would provide a basis for holistic analysis of perspectives on and experiences with Black Lives Matter among Black millennials in the U.S. Due to the breadth of these data, some topics pursued in the interviews are beyond the scope of the present work. The process through which I narrowed the scope of the dissertation is outlined in the Analytic Approach section later in this chapter.

Participants were recruited through purposive convenience sampling via social media platforms. The study was advertised on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, which allowed for the recruitment call to be spread by other users through reposts and direct messaging. I interviewed all volunteers for the study, except in cases of unresponsiveness or where scheduling constraints prevented moving forward. Interviewing took place over a twelve-month span, from March 2019 to February 2020. Thus, these data reflect perspectives of the state of and future possibilities for the movement only prior to the major BLM protest wave that occurred in summer 2020. While the 2020 uprisings and their dissipation likely impacted perspectives on the movement in ways these data do not capture, this analysis will provide an important comparison point against which later studies can be analyzed to trace perspectives on this movement over time.

Most of the interviews were conducted by phone, but interviews with respondents living in the Washington DC metropolitan area (n=8) were conducted in person. Informed consent was collected verbally after reviewing information about the study with participants. Questions were asked in a conversational manner—the structure of the questions varied slightly across participants, but the focus of the questions remained consistent across interviews. When necessary, questions were rephrased for clarity, either by participant request or due to answers that veered away from the intent of the question. In all cases, additional probing and clarifying questions were also asked based on participants' individual responses. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed either by myself (n=6) or through an automated online software called Temi (n=30).³ Interviews varied in length, ranging between approximately twenty-five minutes to an hour and a half, with an average interview length of approximately forty-five minutes.⁴ At the end of each interview, I verbally administered a demographic questionnaire, which measured age, sex, gender, sexuality, racial/ethnic background, regions of origin and residence, self-identified class status (current and family background), education level, income, occupation, political ideology, and political party identification. (Appendix B). Following the questionnaire, participants were given the option to either choose their own pseudonym or have one assigned at random. Participants are only referred to by their pseudonyms throughout the dissertation to protect their anonymity.

³ The switch in mode of transcription was made after receiving UMD DRI funding for this project, prior to it becoming my proposed dissertation.

⁴ Five of the interviews were 20-30 minutes in length, nineteen were 30-45 minutes, six were 45-60 minutes, and six were longer than an hour.

Sampling Parameters and Resultant Sample

Theoretic Sampling of Black Millennials in America

U.S. Black millennials were chosen as the population for this study based on a theoretic sampling technique. This approach advocates choosing a study population based on their ability to provide data that would be most useful in answering research questions and informing future research and theory building on a specific topic (Warren and Karner 2015; Weiss 1994). This population is operationalized based on three characteristics: (1) identification as Black, (2) current residence in the U.S., and (3) membership in the millennial generation. This sample population was chosen in alignment with the tenets of critical race theory and methodology, which include centering the voices and knowledge of marginalized racial groups, avoiding essentializing and recognizing intersecting identities and experiences within particular racial groups, challenging traditional (i.e. color-blind or race-neutral) theories and perspectives on social life, and making race and racism a primary consideration in all aspects of the research (Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2021; Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso and Solórzano 2005).

First, regardless of citizenship, multiracial lineage, or immigration status and generations, respondents self-identified as Black. This parameter accounts for heterogeneity in the Black population in the U.S. and its political effects (Capers and Smith 2016; Smith 2014). It also aligns with CRT's emphases on anti-essentialism and centering the voices and knowledge of marginalized racial groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Further, it mirrors the BLM movement's focus on inclusivity and intersectionality in representing all members of Black communities (Black Lives Matter n.d.; Bunyasi and Smith 2019; Clark, Dantzer, and Nickels 2018; Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; Ray 2020). While these varied backgrounds

undoubtedly shape participants' relationships with Blackness as an identity, they do not preclude them from identifying and experiencing social life in similar ways due to being racialized and categorized into the 'collective Black' group that sits at the lowest level of the racialized social structure of U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2004) and the "linked fate" that position produces (Dawson 1994; Smith, Bunyasi, and Smith 2019).

To provide a common contextual basis for meaning-making about the movement, the second defining characteristic of participants in this sample is current residence in the U.S.. While BLM is a global Black liberation movement, it may be associated with varying social meanings across geographic contexts based on their historical record of race relations and current manifestations of racism. Further, the era of American history in which Black millennials grew up provides an important lens through which to understand Black mobilization. Black people have mobilized against white supremacy through almost every era of U.S. history since enslavement (Robinson 1997). However, the perceived wins in racial progress during the Civil Rights-Black Power era led to a lull in this pattern (Franklin and Higginbotham 2021; Peniel 2007). Born in the 80s and early 90s, Black millennials grew up during what was arguably the first, and perhaps only, historical period not characterized by widespread, organized Black resistance that gained notable attention or outcomes (Franklin 2014). During this period, Black people enjoyed new levels of opportunity, social mobility, and stability in their everyday lives, and overt racism simultaneously faded into the background as new covert mechanisms developed—obscuring the continuance of racism and creating a façade of racial equality (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Bruce 2018; Landry and Marsh 2011). In millennials' early adulthood, the election of the first Black president produced claims that America had overcome racism and entered a post-racial era (Dawson and Bobo 2009; Ikuenobe 2013; Rodríguez 2014). However,

the murder of Trayvon Martin and the slew of highly publicized instances of police killings that followed ruptured this façade, bringing racism back to the forefront of sociopolitical discourse just as Black millennials were entering adulthood (Lebron 2023; Lowery 2016; Mercado n.d.; Ransby 2018; Thomas 2019).

Lastly, respondents in the sample were required to be part of the millennial generation. Pew Research Center defines this group as those born from 1981 to 1996 and now between the ages of 23 and 39 (Dimock 2019).⁵ At the outset of the BLM movement, millennials were in emerging and early adulthood, a stage of the life course associated with maturation and situating oneself within the broader societal context (Bynner 2005; Lachman 2001; Medley 1980). Members of the age range millennials represented at the time of this research are known to be more commonly engaged in protest (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017), and millennials have already proven to be a primary group engaged in BLM (Garza 2020; Higdon 2019; Jones-Eversley et al. 2017). This generation is also more likely to use social media platforms for social connection and obtaining information about current events (Perrin and Anderson 2019) and constitutes the first generation of digital natives (Milkman 2017; Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Social media platforms have been integral to the BLM movement's development, tactics, and communication with and reception by the general public (Carney 2016; Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; R. Ray et al. 2017; Tillery 2019; Wilkins, Livingstone, and Levine 2019). As part of the first generation of digital natives and the first generation of Black Americans to live in a

⁵ One of the participants slightly defies this definition. Upon collecting demographic data at the end of Kevin's interview, I became aware that he was born in January 1997, but he volunteered for the study because he identifies as part of the millennial generation (rather than Gen-Z). Given his identification, the comparability of his answers to the rest of the sample, that he was born only slightly beyond the 1996 cutoff, and the myriad factors that influence how researchers and historians subjectively "define" generations (Pew Research Center, 2015) he was not eliminated from the sample.

color-blind era, Black millennials were ripe for politicization through these platforms. Thus, #BlackLivesMatter made activism widely accessible and brought many Black millennials through their screens into the streets.

Based on these characteristics, Black millennials are an ideal population from which to glean insight into Black Lives Matter—a race-based and digitally mediated social movement, and the only large-scale iteration of Black activism in the 21st century. Because the theoretical focus of this study is meaning-making *about* the movement, participation in BLM activism was not a requirement for participation in the study. However, the sample parameters of this study still strategically increase the likelihood that the data includes those who have, or at minimum those who have been directly exposed to the movement in some capacity. By accounting for both intra-movement points of view (through those who have directly participated in the movement) and extra-movement points of view (among those who have been exposed to but have not participated), this purposive sampling strategy allows for a more holistic analysis of perspectives on the Black Lives Matter movement .

Black Millennials Interviewed for this Study

Demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 1 (also in Appendix C). Details about each individual participant are available in Appendix D (abbreviated demographic characteristics) and Appendix E (written descriptions), but are not included here due to space. In line with the theoretic sampling approach, the sample interviewed for this research is not (nor intended to be) representative of the entire Black or Black millennial populations of the U.S. Still, social characteristics across the sample are varied and represent myriad social locations and experiences within this heterogeneous population.

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 35 at the time of the interviews. Twenty-eight participants were women and eight were men—all of whom were cisgender. The majority (n=26) were heterosexual, but ten identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Thirty of the participants were monoracial Black people, one of whom had Afro-Caribbean roots and one of whom was a Liberian immigrant. The other six participants identified as Black but had multi-racial/ethnic backgrounds, one of whom was from Spain.

Table 1: Sample Demographics (N=36)

Age	Sex	Gender	Sex. Orientation	Race/Ethnicity
22-24: 10	Male: 8	Male: 8	Straight: 26	Black alone: 30
25-27: 10	Female: 28	Female: 28	Bisexual: 4	Black+: 6
28-30: 7			Pansexual: 2	
31-33: 5			Queer: 4	
34-35: 4				
Education	SIC Family	SIC Current	Income in USD	Occupation
Voc/Trade: 1	Uppermid: 5	Uppermid: 5	<25K: 16	Manager/
Some College: 3	Middle: 12	Middle: 7	25K-<50K: 8	Professional: 9
Bachelors: 6	Lowermid: 5	Lowermid: 14	50K-<75K: 8	Serv/Trade: 3
Some Grad: 6	Working: 11	Working: 9	75K-<100K: 2	Student: 16
Masters: 17	Lower: 3	Lower: 1	≥100K: 2	Higher ED: 5
PhD: 3		Uppermob: 12		Military: 2
		Downmob: 24		Other: 1
Org. Region	Current Region	Political Party	Pol. Ideology	
West: 8	West: 5	Democrat: 28	Radical: 2	
Northeast: 14	Northeast: 17	Republican: 0	(V) Progress: 2	
South: 6	South: 9	Other: 8	Very Liberal: 11	
Midwest: 6	Midwest: 5		Liberal: 13	
Outside U.S.: 2	Shift: 13		Moderate: 8	

Notes: Age was collected in years and then organized into five categories for inclusion in the table. The questionnaire included separate questions for sex and gender, both of which could be answered with male, female, or other in order to capture intersex, trans, fluid, and nonbinary identities (although none were present). Sexual orientation options included straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other (with specification). For race/ethnicity, “Black alone” refers to monoracial Black people, while “Black+” represents those who identified as both Black and one or more other racial or ethnic categories. The region variables are reflected as measured in the demographic questionnaire. The two respondents who were originally from outside the U.S. originated from Liberia and Spain. “Shift” in region of residence captures the number of respondents who lived in a different region at the time of the interview than where they were born. Education was measured across 8 categories from less than a high school

diploma to a doctoral degree; no respondents had less than a high school diploma or GED and none had a professional degree (J.D., MD, etc.). Self-identified class (SIC) was measured across 6 categories from upper to lower-class for both their current status and their family of origin. None of the respondents self-identified as upper class either in childhood or currently. “Uppermob” and “Downmob” capture how many respondents perceive themselves as experiencing upward or downward mobility in relation to their family of origin. Income in USD is listed as measured in the demographic questionnaire. Answers to the open-ended occupation question are collapsed into categories adapted from the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) categories. Political Party is listed as measured in the demographic questionnaire; those in the other category include independents, democratic socialists, and those with no specific party affiliation. Political ideology was measured across 5 categories from very liberal to very conservative. None of the respondents identified as (very) conservative. Those who identified as radical or (very) progressive felt that the five categories provided did not adequately capture their political ideologies.

Participants were raised and live across all four regions of the United States, but the majority were raised and/or living in the Northeast at the time of data collection. There was a broad range of self-identified class statuses across the sample, both for their families of origin and as adults, but none identified as upper class at any point in their lives. Only four of the participants were making upwards of \$75,000 per year at the time of the interviews and nearly half were making less than \$25,000. This is directly related to the fact that sixteen of the participants’ were students at the time of the study. A strong majority (n=26) had either achieved or were presently pursuing post-graduate education. Respondents overwhelmingly identified with the Democratic Party (n=28) and as ideologically liberal (n=24); none identified as Republicans or described themselves as ideologically conservative.

The demographic questionnaire did not capture religious affiliation or level of religiosity of participants as a social characteristic which might influence perspectives on the BLM movement. While religion was visibly central to the dynamics of past Black movements and politics (Chapman 2006; McDaniel, Dwidar, and Calderon 2018; Savage 2009), religion is not *explicitly* present in the framing of the BLM movement (Black Lives Matter N.d.). Thus, religion was not a topic of theoretical primacy in my construction of the study. However, the open-ended structure of the interview questions (particularly the more general beginning and ending questions, see Appendix A) did leave room for participants to discuss religion personally or

generally in relation to the movement of their own volition. Participants ultimately did not bring up religion very often throughout the interviews, and in the few cases where they did it was in cursory ways that were not central to their perspectives on BLM. While religion is not within the scope of this dissertation, this is not to say that BLM or perceptions of the movement are not connected to religion in any way. The relationship between religion and Black resistance in the Black Lives Matter era is captured in work by other scholars in various ways (Allen 2024; Cameron and Sinitiere 2021; Gray 2019; Johnson 2021).

Variations in demographic characteristics generally were not associated with observable patterns in divergent meanings constructed about the movement in the analysis. While a couple participants did express perspectives that slightly departed from the common narratives, these outliers did not share demographic characteristics that pointed to explanations for their divergence. Despite BLM participation not being a requirement for participation in the study, many respondents interviewed did have some limited but direct experience with BLM participation online or on the ground. A couple had organized Black Lives Matter related events, particularly on college campuses, but did not identify specifically as Black Lives Matter activists and were not affiliated with local BLM chapters or the national organization. Discussion of participation experiences among participants is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but will be pursued in future work.

While the sampling strategy intended to capture the perspectives of Black millennials in the U.S. generally, the resultant sample is significantly skewed in terms of political ideology, gender, and education level—they are primarily Democrats with liberal values, women, and highly educated. The complete lack of Republican viewpoints in the sample is not surprising given that upwards of 80% of Black Americans identify with or lean towards the Democratic

Party, a trend that has remained stable over the past few decades (White and Laird 2020; Pew Research Center 2024). In addition, members of the millennial generation on average are significantly more liberal in their political attitudes than previous generations (Levitz 2023; Rouse and Ross 2018). In this sense, the skew toward liberal and Democratic perspectives largely aligns with the theoretic sample chosen for the study. Importantly, I did not observe systematic differences in the meanings constructed about the movement among those in the sample who identified as moderate, Independents, or politically unaffiliated. Future studies, however, should intentionally capture Black conservative perspectives on BLM.

The specific overrepresentation of highly educated, Democratic, and liberal Black women provides a unique lens through which to understand this movement. Black women are integral to American politics, both historically and contemporarily. Black women have acted as *thought leaders* since the early 1800s and truly asserted themselves as key thinkers about race through the 20th century (Cooper 2017; Newman 2023). Their relentless commitment to education has been central to this effort. Pursuit of (higher) education degrees and careers has long been a tool of intellectual leadership and activism among this group, supporting their efforts toward community building and influence, social change, and disruption of prevailing narratives that perpetuate racial (and gendered) inequality (Baumgartner 2019; Jackson 2023; Jean-Marie 2008; Jean-Marie and Normore 2006; Rosser-Mims 2018).

Black women's leadership has also consistently extended beyond the intellectual and educational realm into the worlds of electoral politics and mobilization. Today, Black women constitute a critical and highly consistent voting bloc in American politics generally and within the Democratic Party specifically, making their perspectives a crucial aspect of racial and liberal/progressive politics in the U.S. (Ford 2016; Opoku-Agyeman and Taylor-Skinner 2024).

Black women have also consistently overcome barriers in order to obtain positions of power in electoral politics at local and national levels, and their intersectional perspectives and experiences of marginalization guide their legislative decisions (Boyce-Davies 2022; Brown 2014; Brown and Lemi 2020; Darcy and Hadley 1988; Rogers 2005). Educated, middle-class, professional Black women exhibit strong intersectional awareness of their marginalized position and a radical imagination of a free and equitable world in the future, which produces what Pearl K. Ford Dowe (2020, 2023) calls *ambition on the margins*. This ambition and the intra-community support and resources drawn from their integration in myriad Black organizations and institutions (e.g. HBCUs, Black churches, and Divine Nine sororities to name a few) serve as the basis for their long history of electoral pursuits and broader community-based civic engagement.

Perhaps most importantly to their capacity to offer critical insights on Black Lives Matter is Black women's extensive record of social movement organizing. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they made major contributions to the Abolitionist Movement against slavery (Yee 1992), the Black and Women's Suffrage Movements (despite being marginalized in both) (Epps and Warren 2020; Siegel 2024; Terborg-Penn 1998), the Anti-Lynching Movement (Brown 2000). In the mid 20th century, their activism was critical to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (Barnett 1993; Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Farmer 2017; Robnett 1996, 2000), as well as the Women's and Feminist Movements (Brienes 2006; Joseph 1999; Springer 2005). They went on to be active in a wide range of mobilization efforts in the post-Civil Rights period (Springer 1999), and today are at the forefront of the Movement for Black Lives (Destine 2022, 2023; Lindsey 2017).

Given the magnitude of Black women’s engagement in and contributions to American racial politics, their heavy presence in the sample only strengthens the capacity of this research to produce meaningful insights into the U.S. Black Lives Matter movement and race-based mobilization generally. However, this study is not exclusively a reflection of highly educated Black women's perspectives, and the voices of millennial Black men in the sample are represented across all three chapters of findings in the dissertation. Overall, their perspectives on BLM largely mirrored the Black women in the sample. The variation in Black millennial men and women’s narratives about Black Lives Matter that I did observe—women were more likely to express concerns that public discourse around BLM obscured its intersectional framing by focusing exclusively on Black men killed by police and thus were also more likely to explicitly discuss the importance of #SayHerName⁶—came up in very few interviews. Further, these differences were not consistently part of their responses to the questions analyzed for this dissertation, and thus are not discussed in the analysis. In future work using other portions of the interview data, I hope to more critically explore any potential variations across participants by gender as well as in their discussion of gender dynamics of the movement.

Analytic Approach

My general orientation toward qualitative analysis is a constructivist one—rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective—which emphasizes the construction of meanings among research subjects, the interpretive role of the researcher in defining the meaning of the data, and the impact of standpoint and context in these processes (Borland 1991; Charmaz 2016; Charmaz and Belgrave 2012). However, the development of this research was heavily shaped by my pre-

⁶ #SayHerName is a spin-off campaign of the BLM movement designed to draw specific attention to the state-sanctioned violence suffered by Black women. It was inspired by and mobilized in response to events such as the deaths of Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. (Brown et al. 2017; Crenshaw and African American Policy Forum 2023; Crenshaw and Ritchie 2015)

existing interest in the Black Lives Matter movement and knowledge of social movements, critical race, and symbolic interactionist theories and literature. These foundations led me to adopt an abductive analytic approach, rather than a wholly inductive one. While inductive analysis emphasizes analysis of data on its own terms without theoretical influence, abduction allows for consideration of extant theory and literature throughout the analysis while still allowing the data to speak for itself through emergent themes (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Throughout the analysis, I combine elements of multiple modes of qualitative analysis in order to best organize, explore, and interpret these data, including the sort and sift, flexible coding, and grounded theory approaches. In the rest of this section, I describe my overarching process of analysis and the specific coding schema for each of the three empirical chapters.

Broad Analysis Process

To organize the data, I began analysis with strategies from Deterding and Waters's *flexible coding* approach. Using the qualitative analysis software NVivo, I engaged in what they describe as "index coding": applying broad codes to segments of data based on interview questions and topics of interest (2018:15).⁷ These codes—based on the four areas of questioning described earlier in this chapter—included: purpose, goals, and development; support, identification, and participation; media and other influences; and significance and success. The index codes were applied across the entire transcripts, rather than only the responses to the questions designed to focus on those topics, to ensure all data points relevant to each topic were accounted for. Portions of the data that departed from these planned areas of interest were index coded into an "other/emergent" category. Throughout the indexing process, I simultaneously utilized strategies from the *sort and sift* method (Maietta et al. 2021)—particularly the processes

⁷ Also referred to as structural or utilitarian coding, see Saldaña 2013.

of quote identification, data inventory, and topic monitoring—to identify data segments that seemed particularly powerful and thus directed my attention to salient topics to prioritize in the analysis. Aspects of the data that spoke to me in this process largely pertained to the varied and nuanced meanings Black millennials constructed about the movement and the ways they seemed to reflect their broader perceptions of the racial structure and history of the United States. Following this emergent interest, the dissertation focuses specifically on the first and fourth categories of questioning.

Once focused on the “purpose, goals, and development” and “significance and success” indexes, I engaged in a second round of a priori index coding to further organize the data by subtopics within each area based on the individual interview questions. Second round sub-index codes for the first section of the data included: movement goals, purpose/reason for creation, catalysts and development, movement structure, and participants and beneficiaries. Sub-index codes for the second section were: future of BLM, definitions of success, projections of success, and historical comparisons. Upon completion of sub-index coding, my analysis shifted to a more traditional grounded theory approach—engaging in inductive, open coding of the data to understand the meanings participants constructed and attached to BLM directly through their own perspectives (Charmaz 1983, 2006, 2008; Linneberg and Korsgaard 2019).

I proceeded by engaging in *initial coding* of the transcript excerpts in each sub-index category. Types of codes in this stage included *process codes* (applying gerunds to capture what the participant is doing), *descriptive codes* (directly reflecting content and ideas), *value codes* (capturing the values, attitudes, beliefs, and overall worldview of participants), *emotion coding* (representing the feelings expressed or exhibited by the participant), and *versus codes* (identifying dichotomous comparisons drawn by participants) (Saldaña 2013). Next, I engaged in

focused coding to identify the most frequent and significant initial codes from which to develop meaningful conceptual categories and then wrote *analytical memos* to interpret these codes and how they related to one another (Charmaz 1983, 2006, 2008; Charmaz and Belgrave 2012; Maietta et al. 2021; Saldaña 2013). These memos facilitated *thematic analysis* and *pattern coding*, through which smaller codes were cycled up into themes representing larger analytic ideas that captured prominent meanings Black millennials in the sample constructed about BLM (Charmaz 2006; Linneberg and Korsgaard 2019; Saldaña 2013).

Coding Schemas for Each Chapter

The first empirical chapter developed through analysis of the “purpose, goals, and development” index code, particularly the “movement goals,” “purpose/reason for creation,” and “catalysts and development” sub-indexes. I use these sections of the data to answer the research question: how do Black millennials understand BLM in terms of its purpose in American society? Through the sub-index coding process, I discerned that perceptions of the “movement structure” were an analytically separate inquiry from understandings of the BLM’s general purpose and development, and thus eliminated that sub-index code for the present analysis. Analysis of the “participants and beneficiaries” sub-index was eventually eliminated from this chapter as well—although more directly related, the depth of perspectives in this area was too great to include in a single chapter along with perceptions of the general purpose of the movement. Initial codes in the remaining three sub-indexes were plentiful, but some examples (from each of the resultant themes) include:

- mattering; dehumanization, affirmation, empowerment, slavery, value and dignity;
- awareness of racism, ignorance, anti-Blackness, overt vs. covert, colorblindness, post-racial society, racial inequality/injustice;
- police brutality, violence, exhaustion, rage, police reform, mass incarceration, institutions and government, abolition, social media;

- policy/legislation/laws, structural change, equal rights, equality, structural/institutional reform, systems of oppression, and liberation/freedom.

Through focused coding, memoing, and thematic analysis, these initial codes eventually became four discrete themes in Black millennial understandings of BLM’s purpose: affirming the value of Black life, calling out anti-Blackness and racism, escaping state-sanctioned violence, and changing the system to achieve equality.

Findings in the second and third empirical chapters are both drawn from subcodes within the “significance and success” index code. Once again, sub-index coding allowed me to glean cleavages between different areas of data within this broader category. In the second empirical chapter, I specifically use the “historical significance” sub-index to answer the question: how do Black millennials understand BLM in relation to past iterations of Black activism in the U.S.?

Initial codes here included:

- drawing similarities, continuation of same struggle, filling generational gap, continuity of racism, lingering issues and inequalities, same message, resurgence, progression;
- contrasting, different lived experiences, forms of racism, severity of racism, segregation, lynching, slavery, emphasizing context;
- challenging patriarchy, rejecting respectability politics, women leaders, gender and sexuality, intersectional(ity), division vs inclusion, women’s hidden labor;

Four themes were built from these initial codes, using the same processes as in the previous chapter. They include: BLM as a continuation of past Black movements, variation in form and severity of oppression, movement inclusivity and representation, and divergent tactics and movement structures.

Lastly, the third findings chapter contains my analysis of the “definitions” and “projections of success” sub-index codes. The final “significance and success” sub-index code—“future of BLM”—was eliminated from this analysis because narratives in this section of the data represented predictions about the organization/movement itself rather than its outcomes. In

this chapter, I pursue the question: how do Black millennials define success for BLM, to what extent do they believe the movement will achieve that success, and why? The initial codes for this final area of analysis included:

- awareness/attention/voice, Black solidarity, disrupting racial ideology/dialogue, focus on Black issues, challenging stereotypes, reducing stigma;
- eradicate racism, Black liberation, end anti-Black violence, equitable laws, institutional reform, infrastructure/resources, reparations, abolition, equal rights;
- hesitance, skepticism, doubt, issues of consistency, reception and pushback, repression, embeddedness of racism, unaware/unsure of policy changes, rate of progress;
- thankfulness, appreciation, hope, faith, praising, emphasizing increased awareness, shifted discourse, community solidarity, protest/rallies, media attention;
- disappointment, exhaustion, anger, hopelessness, pessimism, dismissing, backlash, focus and scope, message obscured, inconceivability, and power of white supremacy.

The first two sets of initial codes reflect definitions of success, while the latter three reflect projections of success. Through focused coding and thematic analysis, these sets of initial codes were aggregated into broader categories. The first set of definition codes were collapsed into a “cultural definitions” code and the second set culminated in a “structural definitions” code, both of which reflect existing ideas in the social movements literature. This same process applied to the initial codes pertaining to projections of success resulted in three broader codes: skepticism about success, assessments of cultural outcomes, and assessments of structural outcomes.

Following the creation of these categories, I engaged in analytical memoing and pattern coding to chart the relationships between them. This gave rise to three themes: general skepticism about social change through BLM, positive assessments of cultural change, and pessimistic outlooks on structural change. Cumulatively, the coding processes and resulting themes outlined here form the basis of the findings of the dissertation that I begin presenting in the next chapter.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality is of central importance in the construction and execution of this study. I am a Black, mixed-race woman, a part of the millennial generation, and a resident of the United

States. Thus, I fit within the theoretic sample whose perspectives constitute the basis for this research. At the time BLM emerged, I was an undergraduate student at Morgan State University, a historically Black university in Baltimore, Maryland. Throughout its existence, I have supported and participated in BLM in various ways, including attending numerous Black Lives Matter meetings and protests, donating to the BLMGN parent organization and individual local chapters, creating an information guide about the movement that is publicly available online, and co-authoring a reference book on the movement. My choice to study race-based mobilization and meaning-making grew out of my dedication to anti-racist praxis and investment in the social pursuit of Black liberation and racial equity. As a critical race scholar, I am dedicated to centering the experiences and voices of the Black community as an intervention into a society systemically dominated by whiteness (Bernal 2002; Collins 2000; Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2019, 2021; Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Solorzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso and Solorzano 2007).

Holding insider status presents both difficulties and advantages for my research, many of which have been documented by other scholars (Berkovic et al. 2020; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Shaw et al. 2020). A primary concern was the way my shared background with participants could lead to assumptions of understanding between me and the participants that could cloud the collection and analysis of these data. To address this issue, I intentionally avoided interjecting my personal experiences, knowledge, and opinions into the interviews in order to avoid shaping the thoughts and responses of participants. I also asked probing, clarifying questions in instances where I felt I understood their statements based on personal experience or it seemed that respondents expected me to comprehend deeper implied meanings without explicit discussion. Throughout the analysis, I adhere to prevalent research practices employed by qualitative

researchers engaging in research from an insider perspective by avoiding projection of my own opinions or perspectives onto the data and ensuring that my findings emerge directly from the narratives of participants (Dow 2019; Mills 2017; Milner 2007; Moore 2011; Rios 2011).

Through these efforts I avoid potential pitfalls of insider status and avoid bias, preserving the scholarly quality of my work in process and product (Darwin Holmes 2020; Jacobson and Mustafa 2019). Membership in the group being studied also provided direct advantages for recruiting participants and obtaining rich data. Our shared identities served as a basis for a strong rapport that led to more candid and profound discussions during the interviews. Participants expressed a sense of trust in my intentions for the work and felt more comfortable discussing issues related to Black people with me than they potentially would have with other researchers, resulting in greater depth in the data.

CHAPTER 3: THE PURPOSE OF BLM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Alicia Garza’s first use of the phrase around which she and her co-founders built the movement was a response to the violent theft of and disregard for Black life. The February 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin—a 17-year-old, unarmed Black boy walking through the gated community of his father’s fiancée—shook the Black American community to its core. On his return home from a snack run to the local convenience store, Martin was spotted by George Zimmerman, the coordinator of the community’s neighborhood watch. Despite police instruction to avoid engaging and wait for law enforcement, Zimmerman followed and ultimately shot Martin. The case sparked a heated discussion about criminalization, racial profiling, and racially-motivated violence across the nation (Fasching-Varner 2014; Hodges 2015; Lane et al. 2020; Yartey 2016). When Zimmerman was acquitted in July 2013, Black people were left in profound dismay. Expressing her feelings on Facebook, Garza posted her now famous “love letter to Black people”: “Black people, I love you, I love us. Our lives matter. Black Lives Matter.” Her words were the genesis for what we now know as the Black Lives Matter movement, which activated a new generation of Black liberation activism (Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Garza 2016, 2020; Mercado n.d.; Mahdawi 2020; Olney 2021).

BLM is a revolutionary movement seeking transformative change and an intersectional intervention to protect Black life from the oppressive structures of anti-Black racism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism (Black Lives Matter n.d.; Francis and Wright-Rigueur 2024; Garza 2016; Issar 2021; Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; Olney 2021; Ray 2020). While examination of the movement organization and founders’ language makes this clear, qualitative

research on how the broader public and Black community specifically understand the movement in alignment with the aims it advances is limited (Babu 2022; Fahs and Swank 2022; Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021). Yet, meaning-making that occurs outside the bounds but in response to this movement (and others) has important implications for mobilization that should not be neglected (Durham 2022a, 2022b; Jones 2020). In this chapter, I ask and answer the question: *how do Black millennials understand BLM in terms of its purpose in American society?*

To answer this question, I analyze Black millennial responses to questions about what they think BLM is trying to accomplish, why it was created, and what events led to its emergence. I situate this inquiry in the *framing* perspective of the social movements literature, which describes the active process of meaning construction in which movement entities act as signifying agents to create shared sets of ideas about movement related phenomena (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004; Snow et al. 1986). Specifically, I extend this literature to account for *external framing* processes enacted to interpret and characterize movements—as well as how understandings of social structure (in this case racial structure) shape the construction of those meanings. I also integrate insights from racial formation theory (Omi and Winant 2015) to demonstrate the way external frames help us understand BLM as a *racial project* meant to change the existing racial structure of the United States.

From Framing and Frame Resonance to External Framing and Racial Projects

The framing perspective mentioned above is arguably the most well-developed theoretical approach to understanding meaning-making in social movements. Within this perspective there are three primary elements: collective action frames, frame alignment processes, and frame resonance. *Collective action frames* are essentially messages constructed by movement actors to communicate their ideas and goals to the rest of society. *Diagnostic frames*

are the initial definitions of a social phenomenon as a problem and attribute blame to some entity for its existence. Then, *prognostic frames* identify potential solutions, tactics and strategies to achieve them, and targets at which they should be directed. Finally, *motivational frames* prompt people to act in accordance with the diagnostic and prognostic frames, and to engage in collective action in pursuit of social change (Snow and Benford 1988). Diagnostic and prognostic frames are most relevant to the present analysis, since they encompass movement goals.

All three types of frames are critical to producing mobilization. Together, diagnostic and prognostic framing achieve *consensus mobilization*, in which the movement actors inspire people to think about an issue, its causes, and how it can be addressed in a common way. Motivational frames then build on this ideological consensus to inspire people to participate in efforts to do something about the issue, achieving *action mobilization* (Klandermans 1984). To maximize the extent to which individuals accept and are mobilized on the basis of their frames, movement actors intentionally engage in *frame alignment processes*. *Frame bridging* is the process of connecting people who already share common grievances and related attributions with an organizational structure from which to do something about them. *Frame amplification* is used to clarify and stimulate the values and beliefs relevant to the defined problem in relation to action meant to address the problem. *Frame extension* widens the bounds of movement aims by connecting the primary mission to issues that are salient to the population of potential participants and thus promote higher levels of engagement. Lastly, *frame transformation* involves reconfiguration of people's existing understandings of social conditions and their causes to match those of the movement (Snow et al. 1986; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019). The ultimate goal of these processes is called *frame resonance*—the acceptance and integration

of the movement frames into the social schemas through which people understand society (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019). Frame resonance is a measure of success of framing efforts and is seen as critical to the mobilization of the public on behalf of a movement.

Whether or not resonance is achieved depends on many factors, which movement actors must account for in order to be successful. Data suggests that collective action frames are more likely to resonate with the public when they fit into existing sets of cultural ideas, align with people's everyday emotions and experiences, provide specificity in attribution, and make sense within the discursive and structural context in which they are deployed (Berbrier 1998; Ketelaars 2016; McVeigh, Myers, and Sikkink 2004; Robnett 2004; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019; Starr 2017). The final point is of particular importance for the purposes of this research, as it points to the potential importance of understandings of the racial structure (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2004, 2015, 2018; Feagin 2006; Golash-Boza 2016; Omi and Winant 2015) of the U.S. in shaping perspectives of BLM and on race-based mobilization generally. Wade Smith (2020) specifically explores the relationship between social structure and frame resonance for anti-racist social movements. He advances the concepts of diagnostic and prognostic racism as barriers to achieving framing resonance and subsequent mobilization of participants in their efforts to change the system of racial domination. *Diagnostic racism* involves lack of recognition of racial inequality and/or misidentification of its causes, which impedes anti-racist movement efforts. *Prognostic racism* is the rejection (to varying degrees) of a movement's proposed solutions and activities to achieve those solutions.

While Smith's perspective importantly extends the framing perspective to explicitly account for race, it still maintains the framing perspective's intra-movement lens by focusing on

barriers to resonance of frames constructed by movement actors. This approach overlooks the way members of society may construct their own frames about the movement based on knowledge and information from a wide variety of sources and experiences beyond the messages communicated by the movement itself. Thus, this research focuses on and advances the concept of *external framing*—the way members of society independently construct meanings about social movements based on their identities, experiences, existing knowledge about the world, and information from myriad sources. Collective action frames are those constructed by *intra-movement actors* (leaders, organizers, and consistently engaged activists) in order to define problems and targets, garner support, and inspire action. In contrast, *external frames* are meanings constructed about and attached to the movement by *extra-movement actors* from the outside looking in. This includes both people who have had only indirect exposure to movement through secondary channels (e.g. news coverage, information seen on social media, opinions of others) and those who have engaged with or participated in the movement in some limited way (e.g. posting on social media, active pursuit of information, attending isolated protest events). In either case, these people are outside the bounds of the movement itself, and thus are not a part of traditional framing efforts that are commonly studied in the literature.

Understanding external framing has multiple implications for our theoretical understandings of social movements. First, studying external frames and the processes and logic through which they are constructed can assist in determining whether or not movement actors successfully achieve frame resonance (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019). Relatedly, understanding external frames may significantly increase the effectiveness of frame alignment processes employed by intra-movement actors. These frames also provide a basis for understanding perspectives on a given movement across myriad groups,

who may either facilitate or hinder the movement's success. These include those that the movement is fighting on behalf of (beneficiaries), believe in the goals of the movement (adherents), are indifferent to the movement (bystander publics), are actively against and may attempt to repress the movement (opponents), and have resources which would help the movement in reaching its goals (elites) (Davenport 2005; Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong II 2008; Earl 2011; Ferree 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oliver 2008). Finally, external frames are important because they likely influence other interpretive processes through which people construct meanings about social movements, such as collective memory and prospectus (Brown 2016; Kubal and Becerra 2014), which are explored later in this dissertation.

In this analysis of Black millennial perspectives on BLM, I emphasize the way perceptions of social structure serve as the foundation for external frames about the movement, in order to clarify the way that race acts as an axis of domination (Oliver 2017) that shapes race-based mobilization and responses to it. Through this approach, we can use external frames to understand the way that Black Lives Matter constitutes a *racial project*, a concept advanced by Omi and Winant's Racial Formation Theory (2015). This theory argues that race is a master category that operates at all levels of social structure to shape social outcomes for all groups. Racial formation is the sociohistorical process through which racial categories and structures are created, integrated into the structure of a given society, and continuously maintained and renegotiated over time. *Racial projects*—the interpretations, representations, explanations, and meanings assigned to racial phenomena taken on by various social actors and entities to influence the racial formation of society—are one of the primary mechanisms that facilitate this process. By this definition, racial justice movements like BLM constitute racial projects meant to challenge the existing racial hierarchy. Examining the external framing of BLM thus illuminates

what kind of racial project the movement is perceived to be and what changes to American racial formation it seeks to make.

External Frames About BLM Among Black Millennials

The primary conclusion from my analysis of Black millennials' external framing of Black Lives Matter is that they understand the movement as a discursive and agentic challenge to the ideological narratives and social structures that perpetuate racism in American society. Four salient themes were present in this area of analysis, which each constitute an external frame and together provide an understanding of BLM as a racial project. First, BLM was understood as an effort to affirm the humanity and value of Black life, countering the long history of dehumanization of Black people since chattel slavery. Second, Black millennials in the study saw BLM as an awareness campaign of sorts, meant to eradicate ignorance and denial of racism's continued existence and disproportionate impact on Black people in the U.S. The third theme in conceptualizations of BLM's purpose was an emphasis on the need to unburden Black America from the weight of state-sanctioned violence, particularly in the form of police brutality. Lastly, participants perceived BLM as seeking systemic, structural change through policy and legislation, with the ultimate goal of eradicating racism and achieving equality for all.

"Our Humanness Has Always Been On Trial": Affirming the Value of Black Life

It became clear very early in the analysis of these interviews that affirming the value of Black life was commonly perceived as central to the purpose of the movement. Fourteen of the thirty-six participants discussed this goal, often by breaking down the name of the movement and the message it communicates. For some participants, the name reflected the one goal of the movement they felt was clearly identifiable:

Black Lives Matter, I think as a movement, is very fragmented and to some extent ambiguous. But I think what is not ambiguous is what the three words mean: Black

Lives Matter, period. ... Black lives matter when it comes to our hair, Black lives matter when it comes to our jobs and our survivability, our ability to move about the world as we should, you know, be it driving, going to the grocery store, going to swimming pools, everywhere. So we don't get called on, you know, by barbecue Beckies and 911 calls, right? ... [It's] undeniable that it is a movement that says Black lives do matter in a world where the state, everyday people, and forms of systemic oppression, attempt to prove otherwise. –Carmichael

Carmichael is upfront about his lack of clear understanding of all that BLM is trying to accomplish and how it plans to do so. However, the one very clear impression he has of the movement is that it is an effort to combat devaluation of Black life. In a moment where the U.S. criminal justice system effectively told the world that Black lives are disposable, Garza used the phrase “Black Lives Matter” to assert that they are not. Similarly, Carmichael rattles off multiple contexts in which Black people’s lives *should* matter, but in reality often don’t. Instead, we live in a world where Black teens lack the ability to freely “move about the world” without threats to or attacks on their survival. Carmichael ultimately sees BLM as an effort to advocate for deeper consideration and better treatment of Black people in a structural environment that strips them of their worth.

In addition to drawing connections to the name of the movement, participants pointed to the racial structure and history of America as reasons why the humanization of Black people was an important aim of BLM. For example, Sierra said,

I think they are trying to accomplish exactly what their name stands for, which is to communicate to this country, which is a white supremacist society, that in fact Black lives do matter and are worth dignity and worth humane treatment in all of its institutions and practices.

Here, Sierra directly names the structural system that Carmichael alludes to: white supremacy. In a white supremacist society, Black (and other non-white) people are systemically dehumanized by the government, institutions, and dominant group (Allen 1994, 1997; Belew and Gutiérrez 2021; Billings 2016; Painter 2010; Roediger 2019). Sierra sees BLM as attempting to unravel

this deeply rooted lie. Eve expresses similar sentiments, but traces the historical origins of this issue:

[BLM is] a proclamation that basically affirms the humanity and humanness of Black life in America. Since enslaved Africans were forced into this country, our humanness has always been on trial. Our dignity has always been up for question. We refer to it as chattel slavery, and distinguish it for a reason. So fast forwarding it back to this current moment, Black Lives Matter is really kind of drawing upon that history and that legacy that Black life has not mattered in the American context since our ancestors were forced over here through the transatlantic slave trade. So the first aspect of it is there's a proclamation, that Black life has human dignity and humanness, even though we have this long history and legacy of telling us that there isn't any humanity in that—in being Black.

Eve emphasizes that chattel slavery—a system rooted in complete ownership of human beings as property—is the origin of Black dehumanization in America (Roberts 2011; Sharpe 2016). The level of violence that characterized this system of forced labor and complete social control necessitated stripping Black people of all humanity, dignity, and intrinsic value (Patterson 1982; Sharpe 2016; Wilderson 2010). Thus, Black life truly did not matter during the formation of this country, other than as a commodity to be bought and sold for capitalist and white supremacist benefit (Hartman 1997; King 2019; Vargas and Jung 2021). Despite now being legally recognized as humans and citizens, this history of dehumanization continues to shape how Black people are treated in the United States (Billings 2016; Jardina and Piston 2021, 2023; Roediger 2019; Vargas 2018; Ward 2023; Wilderson 2020). From Eve's perspective, BLM intentionally confronts this history and affirms the humanity and value of Black life.

While many of the Black millennials I talked to felt BLM's demands for humane treatment of Black Americans were directed toward the rest of society, some felt it was equally important for Black people to hear this message themselves. Jocelyn advanced this perspective by saying,

I think Black Lives Matter was created as a way to emphasize the fact that Black lives haven't mattered, within our criminal justice system and within society more broadly. So I think that it was started as more of a campaign to just acknowledge the fact that Black lives do matter, but we're not doing anything to show that, to demonstrate that. So an emphasis is needed, right? If lives aren't being treated equally within our system, or equitably, if lives are being taken away at disproportionate rates, then those lives haven't mattered. And I think Black voices need to hear that their lives do matter. And regardless if that's within a movement, or an organization, or a hashtag, I think it's really powerful in a lot of different ways.

Echoing the sentiments of many participants, Jocelyn first recounts the importance of telling the rest of society that Black lives matter. She points to inequitable criminal justice system treatment and disproportionate violence (Alexander 2010; Lee 2024; Wacquant 2002) as both evidence that Black lives are dehumanized, including by the state (Bustamante, Jashnani, and Stoudt 2018), and as the rationale behind BLM's campaign to change that. However, Jocelyn goes beyond this point by arguing that Black people's receipt of BLM's message is important as well. She sees Black people living in a white supremacist environment as in need of reminder that, contrary to how society treats them, their lives do indeed matter. Implicitly, she points to the power of *racial hegemony* (Omi and Winant 2015)—the dominant, taken for granted narratives about race that reflect the ideas of the dominant group and reinforce racial hierarchy—in shaping the worldview of all members of a society, not just those in the dominant group. This is captured by the concept of *internalized racism*: the inculcation of racist ideals among the minds and self-concepts of those who are denigrated by them (David, Schroeder, and Fernandez 2019; Pyke 2010). Indeed, research demonstrates that both experiencing racial discrimination and internalizing racism can have deleterious consequences on the mental health and self-esteem Black Americans (Brown, Sellers, and Gomez 2012; Brown et al. 2000; Graham et al. 2016; James 2020; Johnson 2020; Molina and James 2016; Mouzon and McClean 2017). In some cases, internalized racism even promotes self-blame for inequitable treatment by racist systems (Delgado 1989; Ladson-Billings

1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Tallent, Shelton, and McDaniel 2021). Thus, as Jocelyn notes, provision of this affirmation not only about Black people but *to* them is an important purpose of the movement.

Sunday dove even deeper into this idea, positioning BLM as not only affirming Black humanity but prompting a discourse among Black people about what it means for Black life to matter and whether all Black lives matter equally. Speaking at length about the topic, she mused,

One of the things I have seen is them shifting the dialogue a lot about how we talk about Black life. Which I'm not sure if that's like a formal point that they want to make, but I definitely think it's been something that's a part of the culture. Like how do we value Black life? Whether that's Black children, Black women, and Black men. I've seen a lot of great scholars kind of push back and say, "Well Black lives matter, but are we talking about Black men or are we talking about Black people? Because it's starting to feel like we're talking about Black men. And if this movement is to be inclusive, we have to include everybody." Right? And then other scholars being like, "Well, y'all sayin' Black lives matter, but y'all really mean Black heterosexual life matters. So what about, like, the trans community?" So, I really appreciate that in general it's creating layers and layers and layers of how we value Black life. I've heard folks, disability scholars as well, come in and say, "Well we got others, we got Black people who have these things.. Black mental health has been a thing." So I think that valuing of Black life has become this umbrella term that I think is really awesome because I think it's given people the opportunity to really question like.. Do I value myself? And if I value myself what does that mean?

Sunday's words highlight the heterogeneity of the Black community. Blackness produces a collective racialized experience in significant ways, reflected in concepts such as linked fate (Dawson 1994) and diasporic consciousness (Smith 2014). However, the lives, behaviors, and beliefs of people within this group are differentially shaped by the other social characteristics they hold and their temporal context (Capers and Smith 2016; Cohen 1999; Gershon et al. 2019; Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021; Simien 2005; Smith, Bunyasi, and Smith 2019). Although she wasn't quite sure if it was a pre-established goal, she sees the Black Lives Matter movement as pushing the Black community to reckon with those differences and what it means to affirm and value Blackness across them. Research examining the platform, language, and aims of the

movement suggests this is a primary and intentional focus of the movement (Clark, Dantzer, and Nickels 2018; Méndez 2016; Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin 2019; Ray 2020a). Her description of this layered discourse prompted by BLM as “really awesome” parallels Jocelyn’s assertion that reinforcing Black people’s belief that their lives do matter is “really powerful.” Together, their perspectives draw attention to BLM as an effort to empower *all* Black people and loosen the grip of white supremacist ideology that devalues Black life.

Collectively, the perspectives of these Black millennials reflect an understanding of BLM as advancing a discursive intervention to disrupt the historical dehumanization of Black people in America. Broadly, participants saw the movement as emphasizing that Black people’s lives should matter and be treated as valuable across all contexts of life—both interpersonal, ideological, and institutional. They explicitly point to the institution of chattel slavery as the origin of this lack of care for Black life, due to the way it reduced Black people to property and justified treatment of them as less than human. Further, they explicate the way white supremacy continues to diminish Black personhood in America today, both in a broad ideological sense and in tangible treatment within social structures. While discussing the humanization of Black people and Black life as a primary purpose of the BLM movement, most participants focused on the dissemination of that message to the dominant group—white people— and other non-Black groups. However, a few participants saw the message as having important implications among Black people as well, by disrupting pervasive hegemonic narratives about Blackness that Black people may internalize as a result of being surrounded by a dominant culture rooted in anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Thus, Black millennials conceptualize Black Lives Matter to be a movement that challenges racial hegemony by advocating for people of *all* racial groups to recognize Black people’s humanity and value.

“We’re Not In A Post-Racial Society”’: Calling Out the Persistence of (Anti-Black) Racism

The need for humanization of Black lives dovetails with a second theme expressed by the Black millennials in this study. Emphasizing the value of Black life is necessary not only because of dehumanization’s roots in racist structures of the past, but because it is sustained by the persistence of racism in the present (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Omi and Winant 2015). Participants saw calling out this racism as a primary function of BLM, characterizing the movement as an arbiter of racial truth that forced the American populous to reckon with racism as a festering social issue. For some participants, this included calling out not only the broad system of racial oppression, but anti-Blackness specifically. For example, Adrienne said,

I think the point is that to some degree, Black people suffer, at least more openly, injustices more than other ethnicities. And that’s been since you know the beginning of this founding country. I don’t think that [BLM is] minimizing the fact that everyone matters. I think that they just wanna remind people that, you know, Black people experience injustice more often than not in this country.

While she recognizes that other racial or ethnic groups may experience inequality in the U.S., Adrienne points out that Black people “suffer” the injustices of racism more often and more severely, and that this has been the case throughout American history (Gossett 1963; Kendi 2016). She understands BLM as not an effort to diminish the experiences of other marginalized groups, but to draw specific attention to the disproportionality and historical extensiveness of inequality experienced by Black Americans. Sherryl felt similarly:

They pretty much want to help and bring information and make people build awareness towards police brutality and to combat the anti-Blackness and racism that people have against Black lives. And they just want to put it out there that our lives matter—that Black lives matter—and just to be able to try to change the dynamics from what has happened in the past, to what's going on now and still going on.

Like Adrienne, she focuses on the treatment of Black people in America throughout history as different from other groups. However, rather than describing this as simply greater frequency, intensity, or extent the same general form of racism that other groups also experience, she identifies this as a distinct form of oppression—anti-Blackness. This reflects an understanding of the way Blackness is subjugated, treated with contempt, and denied belonging within humanity and society in ways that other racial identities have not (Combs 2022; Vargas 2018; Vargas and Jung 2021). Due to this distinction, anti-Blackness must be addressed through new and visionary solutions that build a new social world, rather than pursuing racial equality within that which we currently exist (Allen 2024; Anderson and Samudzi 2018; Howard 2020; Kelley 2002; Wallace 2022). Thus, Sherryl and some of her Black millennial counterparts saw BLM as a movement to call out and educate the masses about this peculiar form of racism in hopes that we will push forward toward this possibility. In this way, BLM constitutes a *freedom dream* that envisions a world free of anti-Blackness (Bailey and Leonard 2015).

Regardless of whether participants were talking about anti-Blackness in particular or the overarching system of racism, they felt increasing consciousness around these issues was an important purpose of the movement and a first step toward other goals. Across the interviews, “ignorance” arose as a salient concern. For example, Destiny shared,

I think the biggest thing that came out of the Black Lives Matter movement is the importance of educating and not allowing *the ignorance* [emphasis added]. And kind of bringing forth like, this is what the world is and this is how it is in the world today, you know? It's not all so nice, like racism didn't die in the 90s, or didn't die when Martin Luther King died. It's still alive. And I think essentially it's just to educate and bring these issues to the forefront that I feel like, for a long time, everybody had kind of just forgotten about, or just buried it.. like these issues aren't real.

Destiny points to the fact that despite the passage of time and past efforts toward achieving racial equality, racism is still alive and well in the United States. She sees racism as something

America has tried to move on from without truly addressing—“burying” it instead of facing it head on. In contrast, she sees BLM as an intentional effort to educate people about racism and its continued impact on society. Neglect and denial of racism allow it to continue operating at a structural level, and the fight against racism requires both evidence that it exists and social pressure for solutions (Elias 2024). The movement, from her perspective, forces people to pay attention to racial issues instead of operating in ignorance.

Concerns about racial ignorance, particularly among white people, were expressed by a number of participants and point to white ignorance as an epistemological mechanism that upholds racism (Mills 2012). Bernice described BLM as “bringing more awareness to injustice and systemic racism. And also to me it seems like they target some of the covert racism for white people or other groups that maybe just *decide to ignore* [emphasis added] race problems in America.” Like her counterparts, she sees racism as something that goes unacknowledged and unchecked. However, instead of seeing this lack of attention as racism being “forgotten,” Bernice attributes this to other groups’ ability and choice to intentionally ignore racism. Her perspective is supported by Jennifer Mueller’s Theory of Racial Ignorance (2020), which builds upon Critical Race Theory to conceptualize white ignorance as not just a lack of knowledge about racism, but strategic evasion of that knowledge in order to uphold white supremacy. BLM, in her mind, seeks to disrupt this ignorance and the existing racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 1997) by bringing race and racism to the forefront of public discourse.

In the quote above, Bernice explicitly linked white ignorance to the way racism has evolved from being entirely overt to more covert in form (Coates 2008, 2011). Other participants doubled down on this notion and addressed this historical evolution of racism in more detail. Jacob saw this history as central to the purpose of the Black Lives Matter movement:

[The movement tries] to highlight that we're not in a post-racial society. Because in comparison to, I mean, you go back to the institution of slavery when it was legal, and then you move into the Jim Crow era, and then you move into the Civil Rights Movement. And then you move into modern times, where racism isn't as overt as Jim Crow laws anymore, and you do see people of color in influential positions within the U.S. and around the world. But there are still vestiges of racism. And the institutions that are still that way, empowered back during I guess times of slavery, are still operating, not in overt but covert dynamics when it comes to race and how people operate in their latent attitudes about, specifically Black people, but also just people of color. And BLM highlights that race still matters and we need to actually see that, accept that, embrace it, and change it, by deconstructing white supremacy.

Jacob traces racism across multiple historical eras and argues that we still have not entered a “post-racial society” in which race no longer matters—a myth that originates in the belief that the legislative wins of the Civil Rights Movement successfully pushed us toward the elimination of racism in American society and crystallized in 2008 when Barack Obama became the first Black President of the United States (Dawson and Bobo 2009; Ikuenobe 2013; Rodríguez 2014). Racism’s metamorphosis from overt to covert is central in his explanation of its contemporary existence despite this long history, throughout which it has been challenged multiple times. Today, the “vestiges” of overt racism in the slavery and Jim Crow eras he mentioned are sustained through covert structures and practices, highlighting the protean nature of white supremacy (Roediger 2019). Thus, only “deconstructing white supremacy” on both overt *and* covert levels would eradicate racism and bring racial equality for Black people and other people of color in the United States. He sees BLM as advancing this mission forward.

Jacob’s thoughts exemplify the way many Black millennials in the study wrestled with the disconnect between dominant narratives of post-slavery and post-civil rights racial progress, and the realities of ongoing racial inequality. Recent critical race scholarship speaks to this issue, arguing that the dominant teleological progress paradigm advances linear narratives of racial progress that do not adequately capture the realities of racism as an enduring structure (Christian,

Seamster, and Ray 2019; V. Ray et al. 2017; Seamster and Ray 2018). Eve expanded on her counterparts' points to discuss the unique challenges of talking about and addressing racism in the contemporary era in more detail. While describing what BLM is trying to accomplish, she stated,

It's very hard to pinpoint racial issues when people don't even acknowledge race, even though when sociologists like ourselves do pretty much any analysis and include a race variable, we see racial disparities. So it's a really frustrating time to be focusing on this thing. But I believe Black Lives Matter is actually calling attention to that very issue. And the fact that regardless if we want to call this time period in our history of this country, if we want to refer to it as colorblind or post-racial—racial construction, racial categorization, and racial prejudice and discrimination are still impacting everyone's day to day lives. And we're seeing these disparate outcomes, across every measure of success that we have. So I think Black Lives Matter, the purpose of the movement, is to kind of draw attention to some of these inequities.

Eve starts by echoing the challenges of confronting racism when it operates covertly and is purposefully ignored by many, despite abundant evidence of racial inequality provided by sociological research. From her perspective, the “disparate outcomes across every measure of success” that exist across racial groups directly refute notions that racism is a thing of the past. She uses this evidence to point out a paradox between the ideas of “colorblind” racism, a “post-racial” society, and the reality of American race relations. Theories of colorblindness explain the way that in the post-Civil Rights period, racially inequitable treatment and outcomes are presented and perpetuated in seemingly neutral terms in order to escape detection, delegitimize anti-racist calls for social change, and maintain white dominance (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Doane 2017; Gallagher 2003). Colorblind ideology essentially creates an illusion of a post-racial society by obscuring that race is in fact extremely consequential (Bonilla-Silva 2015) in the ways Eve points out, necessitating a movement like BLM to bring attention to them.

Regardless of the form of racism named, participants consistently discussed racism in structural terms, rather than just as interpersonal discrimination. Some specifically highlighted the government as the institution largely to blame for upholding white supremacy in America, both today and throughout history. They saw BLM as trying to draw attention to the state as a racist actor. For example, Zahra said,

After slavery was discontinued—quote discontinued, not even like completely discontinued—there were laws still in place that didn't allow freedom for anyone who wasn't white. So, I think that the Black Lives Matter movement was just trying to get, first, acknowledgement that this is a thing that we have never really moved on from because we never really accepted it in the first place. And to also say that it exists in our government agencies. That it's something that has happened again and again and it's not something that's of the past, or something that is completely unheard of, or something that's completely absurd to even mention, when we have laws in place that do restrict people of color from doing anything, or in some cases fulfilling their basic rights.

Similar to other participants, Zahra argues that racism is not an artifact of the past, no matter how much people resist acknowledging its continued existence. In fact, she points out that throughout U.S. history, advancements in the fight against racism have often been followed by efforts to curtail those gains. These efforts are often referred to as *whitelash* and include “individual, institutional, and structural countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy or actions, real or imagined, that seek to remedy existing racial inequities” (Embrick et al. 2020:203). As race and Critical Race theories and scholars point out, these countermeasures are often perpetuated and enforced by government structures, particularly the law (Bell 1995; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Bracey 2015; Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Omi and Winant 2015). Examples of this cycle are plentiful (Alexander 2010; Joseph 2022; Lippard et al. 2020; Lowery 2023; T. Smith 2020): the Emancipation Proclamation and Northern Union’s victory in the Civil War engendered the Black Codes; political and economic gains for Black people achieved during the Reconstruction era were derailed by Jim Crow; Civil Rights Movement victories were

followed by Southern Strategy “law and order” politics, the War on Drugs, and Mass Incarceration; and the election of the first Black President, Barack Obama, sparked a resurgence in white nationalist violence and the election of explicitly racist President, Donald Trump. From Zahra’s perspective, Black Lives Matter exists to call out this cycle and the role of the state in reinforcing racial inequality.

The Black millennials in this study clearly see racism as an ongoing social problem that needs to be addressed, rather than an affliction of the past. In their eyes, Black Lives Matter seeks to bring racism to the forefront of societal discourse, with the ultimate goal of pushing us toward racial equality. While discussing this goal, participants highlighted multiple barriers that have stymied racial progress in the past. First, Black millennials called out the willful ignorance about racism exhibited by white people and other non-Black groups. Multiple participants highlighted that this ignorance runs deep enough that some Americans have convinced themselves we now live in a post-racial society. They attributed this false narrative to the proliferation of covert racism, including within government agencies and the law, and drew attention to myriad debilitating disparities in social outcomes for Black people that exist as a result. Ultimately, they see the BLM movement as uncovering racism as a covert operation and pushing for overt address of these issues in the sociopolitical arena.

“We’re Fucking Tired”: Escaping the Burden of State-Sanctioned Violence

One of the areas of disparity alluded to by Eve and mentioned by other participants above is the treatment Black people by formal agents of social control. Given that BLM originally emerged in response to killings of unarmed Black people at the hands of police officers (as well as other actors taking public safety into their own hands), it’s not surprising that an overwhelming number of the participants saw combatting state-sanctioned violence, particularly

police brutality, as Black Lives Matter’s main goal. Multiple participants described BLM as an expression of the Black community’s long-standing grievances with police violence:

I think its [goal is] to bring this awareness that we’re fed up and we're not going to stand for our sons, brothers, sisters, daughters being innocently killed without people who are supposed to be protecting us being held accountable for doing it. – Maia

We're fucking tired. I mean, it's.. What we're up against is so pervasive, so up in your face, so explicit and it gets away with everything it does, including its violence with so much impunity. –Indya

Central to these women’s words is a sense of collective exhaustion from the long history of violence Black people in the U.S. have suffered at the hands of police dating back to slavery (Echols 2022; Embrick 2015; Ihaza 2020; Joseph 2020a; Lyons, Painter-Davis, and Medaris 2024). They highlight what scholars call racialized emotions—the emotions specific to racialized societies and experienced by members of certain groups based on their location within the racial order (Bonilla-Silva 2019). The violence Maia and Indya identify as producing this emotion is seen as largely indiscriminate, rather than limited to those who engage in criminal or violent behavior. Research on police use of force supports this narrative—Black people are more likely to experience police violence across a range of situations and in greater severity (Fryer 2019; Lieberman 2024). Black people cannot trust that their innocence will provide them with safety in the ways it is supposed to. Further, as a result of their structural position, police officers are rarely held accountable for use of lethal force even when it was unjustified (Gilbert and Ray 2015; NAACP n.d.; Police Brutality Center 2025). Their language of “fed up” and “fucking tired” implies that Black America had reached a tipping point and could no longer carry the burden of this systemic violence (Camp and Heatherton 2016), which is supported by research on the mental health impacts of direct and vicarious experience with police violence among Black Americans (Bryant-Davis et al. 2017; McLeod et al. 2020; Smith Lee and Robinson 2019;

Turney 2021). Thus, Black Lives Matter emerged as a vehicle for Black people to alert their fellow citizens about their collective lived experience through counterstories of police as an ever-present threat of violence rather than as a source of protection (Delgado 1989; Merriweather Hunn, Guy, and Mangliitz 2006; Miles 2019; Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

Many participants noted that social media was critical to BLM's ability to effectively inform the public about the ubiquity of anti-Black state-sanctioned violence. For instance, Ashley said:

I think it was created because people are tired and sick of being treated like, you know, shit, quite frankly. And don't get me wrong, Black folks especially have been fighting police brutality for decades. ... But I think that in the age of social media and things like that, there is a new platform to be able to talk about the feelings that we're having, that our lives aren't being taken seriously. And the cases like Trayvon Martin are just an example of what goes on in a lot of our everyday lives, you know?

Here, Ashley begins by situating BLM within a prolonged struggle against the exhausting cycle of police violence Maia and Indya discussed. She then goes on to argue that social media has reinvigorated this fight. In her view, these platforms constitute an invaluable tool that Black people can use to talk about their experiences with state-sanctioned violence and advance social discourse on this issue in a way that previously wasn't possible (Carney 2016; De Choudhury et al. 2016; Ray et al. 2017; Schuschke and Tynes 2016; Wilkins, Livingstone, and Levine 2019).

Jocelyn shared a similar but expanded perspective:

I think initially Black Lives Matter was trying to, more than anything, call mass attention to the disproportionate numbers of not only Black bodies being incarcerated, but also those being killed. And with the advent of social media, the video and the visual images of Black death became this thing that was proliferated in ways that the movement was trying to not only call attention to, but also develop an organizational structure to combat these in different ways.

Whereas Ashley's response highlighted discourse, Jocelyn's calls attention to another function of social media—imagery. In Jocelyn's view, social media is integral to BLM's efforts because it

facilitates not only discussion of anti-Black violence, but visual documentation (Edrington and Gallgher 2019; Liebermann 2021; Richardson 2020). These images and videos constitute a body of evidence in support of Black narratives about the state-sanctioned violence they endure (Ahaotu and Oshamo 2023). Jocelyn sees that evidence as the foundation upon which BLM has been able to build an idea into an organization and movement that can take action against the issue.

This understanding of BLM—as not only an effort to draw attention to state-sanctioned violence, but a direct pursuit of solutions to the problem—was common across Black millennials in the study. For example, Danielle stated:

I think Black Lives Matter is trying to [raise] awareness about the extent and frequency of police violence against Black people. And also, while raising awareness, to protest this police violence—to express this sort of collective, historical anger and rage that we have about being targeted violently. I think that there's also some people who want police reform, who want the reformation of the police, who want to be able to influence policy and police practice regarding use of excessive force, de-escalation tactics with citizens.. So I think that the goals of Black Lives Matter are many.

Like the other participants, Danielle emphasizes the collective emotions of Black Americans in response to the history of police violence against Black people in the U.S. She directly links this shared anger to a desire to tangibly change the way this institution affects Black lives. From her perspective, BLM protests are not simply vocalizations of pain—they represent explicit demands for policy intervention to reform practices and transform the structure of the U.S. policing institution (Ray 2020b; Vitale 2017).

While Danielle saw BLM's goal as reform, other participants saw the movement as seeking more revolutionary outcomes. Instead of seeking positive change in existing institutions, they saw the movement as seeking elimination of these structures:

I know they focus on police brutality, but I think that their overall goal is more focused on dismantling the carceral state as a whole, not just getting rid of police or trying to prosecute individual police officers. So I see it more as a broader mission to try to find alternative ways, where communities of color can actually protect themselves from the real threat of crime and violence, without having that exacerbated by police presence. –Ashley

Here, Ashley describes police brutality as a symptom of a broader problem: the carceral state.

“The carceral state” refers to an insidious system of social control over members of society by their government (Gottschalk 2008; Hernández, Muhammad, and Thompson 2015; Khan 2022; Martensen 2020; Simon 2007). This social control is facilitated through the myriad mechanisms of punishment, surveillance, criminalization, and confinement present in the criminal justice system. Carceral culture in the United States is inextricably linked to anti-Blackness and white supremacy, due to its historical roots in chattel slavery (Alexander 2010; Pemberton 2015). Thus, as Jocelyn alluded to by connecting police violence to mass incarceration and its disproportionate impact on Black people in the U.S., all of the structures that make up the criminal justice system pose a threat to Black lives. Ashley argues that this threat is so overbearing that it impacts Black people’s ability to address everyday crime and violence in their immediate communities through formal channels, thereby creating a need for “alternative” structures of safety and social control that do not reproduce the harms of the structures we have today. Theoretically, the pursuit of these radical alternative structures in which historically dominated people will be able to live freely is captured by the concept of abolition (Cullors 2022; Davis 2003; Kaba 2021; Kaepernick 2021). Based on this understanding of policing and the criminal justice system, Ashley and Jocelyn see Black Lives Matter as going beyond seeking police reform to mounting a challenge against the entire carceral state.

The above quotes cumulatively demonstrate that Black millennials in this study see state-sanctioned violence as the primary issue of concern for the Black Lives Matter movement.

However, their perspectives vary slightly regarding what BLM is actually doing about this issue. Participants commonly saw the movement as a vehicle for increasing public awareness of how this issue impacts Black people in the U.S. Some participants saw this awareness in and of itself as the primary goal of the movement, yet others felt that raising awareness was simply the foundation for action to address the issue. Among those who saw the movement as action oriented, further differences existed in what they thought that action was supposed to accomplish. BLM's visible response to police brutality, particularly protests against the killings of unarmed Black people and associated imagery that proliferated on social media, led some Black millennials to see police reform as the primary goal of the movement. In contrast, those who saw policing as fruit of the tree of carcerality, saw the movement as rooted in abolitionist ideals, seeking to dismantle the entire criminal justice institution in order to protect Black lives.

"I'm All About the Policy": Changing the System and Achieving Equality

As discussed in relation to Eve's words earlier in the analysis, racism produces disparate outcomes across a broad range of social outcomes. Aligned with recognition of racism as multifaceted, Black millennial perceptions of BLM as action oriented were not limited to ameliorating state-sanctioned violence through police reform or abolishing the carceral state. While most participants recognized this as an important focus of the movement, some Black millennials I interviewed saw the movement as seeking wide sweeping structural change and a comprehensive solution to racism at a societal level. Shakisha believed BLM was created to combat multiple manifestations of racial inequality: "Because of the prison industrial complex. Because of generational wealth gaps. Because of police brutality in general. Because of disparities in the educational system. ... All of those things." Her list highlights that the carceral state is only one of many systemic issues plaguing the Black community that needs to be

addressed. Despite its responses to state-sanctioned violence being most apparent, she sees Black Lives Matter as responding to all of these issues simultaneously.

While Shakisha pointed to a collection of specific structures to describe the multifaceted racism that BLM seeks to deconstruct, other participants described it in more amorphous terms. Harmony said, “I think they're trying to seek more equality overall, really. Just more equality with pay, with power in general, with respect, just as a human being.” Rather than stressing the existence of various observable outcomes of racism, she conceptualizes BLM as responding to racism in vaguer, yet holistic, terms. The accentuation of power is important here. Instead of seeing the movement as separately tackling a number of racial inequities, she characterizes it as trying to dismantle the overarching power structure that produces them. Her words present a clear window into participants’ awareness of race shapes all aspects of social life because it is a foundational element of societal organization and structures (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2021; Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Feagin 2006; Goulash-Boza 2016; Omi and Winant 2015).

Harmony’s mention of equality on the basis of being a “human being” is a reminder of the emphasis participants placed on affirming Black life. Through the humanization of Black people, Black Lives Matter strengthens its own fight for them to gain the equal opportunity and treatment in society that Harmony describes. While describing what he thinks BLM is trying to accomplish, Kamar similarly emphasized humanity through a discussion of human rights:

The constitution says we have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And when we say matter, [it’s] not just matter in the sense of we're going to give you those rights, but we're going to respect those rights as well and allow—or not allow, cause that sounds like control—but give you the free range to coexist among all the different lives here in America, whether it be Asian-American, Caucasian American, Pacific Islander, so on and so on and so forth.

Quoting the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776 (rather than the Constitution), Kamar points out that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” have been ideologically

considered an inalienable human right in this country since its inception (National Archives, n.d.). But as he implies, this right has not always been extended to Black people in the U.S. by law, and still is not fully extended in practice.

When the right to life and liberty was enshrined in American law via the Constitution in 1788, slaves were not given official personhood or citizenship. Instead, the writers of the constitution included the Three Fifths Compromise—wherein slaves counted as only three fifths of a person for representation purposes only. It was not until the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified after the end of slavery in 1868, that Black people in the U.S. were fully considered people and granted citizenship (Nittle 2020, Rael 2016). Yet, Black people still did not have the “free range to coexist” that Kamar emphasized above. For example, voting rights didn’t follow until the 15th Amendment in 1870 for Black men, and the 19th Amendment in 1920 for Black women (and women generally). Through many other laws and practices, Black people continued to be restricted in their life and liberty. For Kamar, Black Lives Matter is fighting for a world in which these restrictions no longer exist, and Black people’s personhood and rights are fully established and respected by all people and structures.

Kamar pointed to the importance of the law by bringing up the U.S. Constitution. Other participants were even more explicitly focused on legislative change as a vehicle through which structural change can be achieved. Elena, for example, said,

[BLM is] this global network of like-minded individuals, trying to get the system to see the error, and make a change. ... My hope is that they’re accomplishing policy and political change, because that’s where it has to happen eventually to make direct change to the individual person. But I also think they are informing people of things that are going on as well, keeping the different communities abreast of what is going on. So I think they're multifaceted in the things that they do. But.. I'm all about the policy and political change. We need to change the laws and the structure of this company, country, which is ran like a company.

Like her counterparts, Elena is concerned about the laws and structures of American society broadly rather than just in a particular institution. She describes our political system as being run like a company, which to her is an issue that needs to be addressed. This idea points to the historical relationship between capitalism, racism, and politics in the United States. Because of its origins in the institution of slavery, Black Americans have always been perpetually relegated to a subordinate position in our economic system. Our legal and political structures maintain this system of economic organization—upholding the status quo (Bell 1995; Bracey 2015). Elena sees BLM as both informing people of these issues, convincing people at the top of the structural hierarchy to see this as a problem, and working to correct it.

Multiple participants specifically discussed why advocating for Black people is central to overhauling the racial structure of American society. The “lift all boats” principle was often referenced in their descriptions of what BLM is trying to achieve:

If we are able to fix and restructure the policies that are geared towards keeping Black people oppressed, I think across the board, we will be able to do that for all races. Because I think if you can solve Black people’s problems you can solve anyone’s problems in America [laughs]. –Sherryl

Sherryl’s words communicate recognition that there are other racial groups beyond Black people that suffer from oppression and inequality in America. However, they also convey her awareness that Black people sit at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Combs 2022; Vargas and Jung 2021; Wallace 2022). She argues that because policies and structures that perpetuate racial inequality affect Black people *the most*, addressing social problems plaguing this group is most difficult. Thus, she sees “solving Black people’s problems” as the key to achieving racial equality at a societal level for all groups, and BLM’s focus on uplifting the Black community as aligned with this effort.

Carmichael expressed similar sentiments, but went beyond race to recognize other forms of oppression:

By focusing on the most marginalized, you can, idealistically, create better systems and promote more justice and a more equitable society by targeting those that are at the very bottom in terms of being marginalized. I think that's the goal of intersectionality, right? It's like, by focusing on the most disadvantaged and most marginalized—Black, queer, disabled, women—those that are at the very matrix of multiple forms of domination. Once you start to attack those multiple interlocking systems, lives for all improve.

In discussing the “most marginalized” in society, he notes the importance of not only race, but characteristics such as sexuality, gender, and ability as well. Carmichael explicitly draws on the theoretical concept of intersectionality—the idea that people’s various statuses and identities intersect to produce particular social locations and experiences, particularly in relation to structures of power and domination (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1991). In his mind, Black Lives Matter is not simply a racial justice movement meant to improve the lives of Black people. Instead, BLM “attacks interlocking systems” of inequality to improve the lives of those “at the very matrix of multiple forms of domination.” As Black feminist and intersectionality theories posit, our experiences cannot be reduced to one identity or status separate from others because they are mutually constitutive (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989). Thus, to achieve equality for Black people means to address *all* the various forms of inequality they endure, including those tied to other systems of oppression (e.g. sexism, ableism, classism). The end result of addressing the issues of the oppressed writ large is a society in which all people live freely and equitably (Friere 1970; hooks 1984; Young 1990).

This final collection of quotes from Black millennials demonstrates their understanding of BLM as an effort to upend the existing white supremacist and anti-Black racial structure of the U.S. broadly, to achieve racial equality, and social equality more generally. Participants were

attuned not only to the issue of state-sanctioned violence, which has been the focal issue associated with BLM in the media, but to a holistic range of manifestations of racism suffered by Black Americans. They externally framed BLM as pursuing transformation across a wide range of institutions in order to produce systemic change in power structures and radically change the racial formation of this country. For these Black millennials, changes to legislation and policies are critical ways of achieving this goal, along with shifting the ideologies that obscure the way existing laws and structures continue to oppress Black people in contemporary America. Ultimately, they see Black people as sitting at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and BLM as a vessel through which they can be freed from that position and simultaneously uplift other marginalized groups in the process.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyze Black millennials' answers to questions about the purpose and goals of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Participants constructed four primary meanings about BLM, all of which were explicitly built upon their preexisting understandings of the system of racial domination shaping the lives of Black people in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2006; Omi and Winant 2015). First, they characterize the movement as a discursive intervention against the historical practice of dehumanizing Black life, which reinforces the racial order that has evolved since chattel slavery (Allen 1994, 1997; Jardina and Piston 2021, 2023; Sharpe 2016; Ward 2023; Wilderson 2020). Second, saw the movement as an effort to call out the persistence of racism, and specifically anti-Blackness, in an era where the mechanisms and impacts of racism are often obscured through color-blind ideology and post-racial narratives (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Combs 2022; Doane 2017; Gallagher 2003; Ikuenobe 2013; Vargas and Jung 2021). Third, BLM was understood to be an effort to relieve Black people of the exhausting

burden of living with the ever-present threat of state-sanctioned violence, a mechanism of social dating back to slave patrols and lynching (Alexander 2010; Echols 2022; Embrick 2015; Lyons, Painter-Davis and Medaris 2024; Thomas 2019). Finally, participants perceived BLM to be in pursuit of wide-sweeping political and structural changes designed to achieve Black liberation and eradicate racial inequality in America (Bailey and Leonard 2015; Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Francis and Wright-Rigueur 2024; Garza 2020; Ray 2020).

These constructed meanings constitute what I call *external frames*. This concept extends the existing literature on framing (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004; Snow et al. 1986; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019) by attending to the meanings created about and attached to social movements by extra-movement actors, which are currently overlooked in the literature. As discussed at the start of the chapter, these external frames help us understand the extent to which intra-movement actors successfully achieve frame resonance through their framing and frame alignment processes. The external frames here do indicate that the frames advanced by BLM have resonance among Black millennials (Ketelaars 2016; McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017; Robnett 2004; Snow and Benford 1988). However, messages constructed and disseminated by BLM movement actors or organizations were rarely brought up by participants in their explanations of these frames. This legitimizes the conceptual need for *external framing* in order to understand how myriad groups in society construct meanings about movements in relation to social structure and based on their own identities, views, and experiences, rather than only in direct response to movement messaging. This will increase our understanding of how externally constructed meanings influence the way adherents, beneficiaries, opponents, and elites respond to the movement in ways that either promote or stymie its efforts.

Much of these Black millennials' meaning-making was explicitly built upon existing knowledge about anti-Black racism and the system of racial domination that has structured American society since its inception. The centrality of racial structure to their framing substantiates arguments for explicitly race-based approaches to studying social movements made by other scholars (Bell 2016; Bracey 2016, 2021; Durham 2024; Fleming and Morris 2015; Mansbridge and Morris 2017; Oliver 2017; Smith 2020; Watkins Liu 2018). In this case, using a racial lens to understand external framing of BLM among Black millennials provides a lens through which we can specifically understand this movement as a *racial project* seeking to shift the racial formation of the United States (Omi and Winant 2015). Cumulatively, this analysis points to the importance of both *external framing* as a theoretical process and the integration of critical theories of race and racism with existing social movement theories to understand race-based mobilization.

CHAPTER 4:

BLM AND THE LINEAGE OF BLACK AMERICAN ACTIVISM

Black Lives Matter follows a long line of Black social movements in the U.S. that have advocated for racial justice and Black liberation. Throughout its tenure, its message, structure, tactics, and impacts have often been compared to those of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), Black Panther Party (BPP), and broader Black Power Movement (BPM) (Clayton 2018; Jones-Eversley et al. 2017; Joseph 2020a; Makalani 2017; Ray 2020; Rickford 2016). These analyses primarily rest on theoretical arguments or examinations of historical records and publicly available cultural materials and vary in their assessment of similarities, differences, and relationship between these movements. Direct examinations of how members of the U.S. population make sense of the relationship between these movements and the social structures they seek/sought to change are less prevalent. Further, we know that perceptions and memories of movements change over time, making it important to have accurately recorded information about movements and public opinion about them from the eras in which they operate.

In this chapter I contribute to this gap in knowledge by answering the question: *How do Black millennials understand BLM in relation to the broader lineage of Black activism in the United States?* I employ the concept of *collective memory*—a body of shared knowledge about and memories of previous movements and events (Fleming and Morris 2015; McAdam 2013; Meyer and Whittier 1994)—as a lens through which to understand the importance of the meanings participants constructed about BLM in relation to the long history of Black American activism. The data analyzed for this chapter primarily comes from participant responses to

questions about BLM's emergence and development, what they think the historical significance of BLM will be, and how it compares to Black movements of the past. However, respondents often drew comparisons between BLM and previous cycles of Black mobilization on their own at other points throughout the interviews—these data points were also included in the analysis.

Movements and Memory Over Time

Collective memory is a powerful mechanism in the sphere of politics and mobilization. Movement actors draw on knowledge and memories of previous movements in the process of developing their own ideologies, frames, identities, and tactics (McAdam 2013; Meyer and Whittier 1994). People within and outside movements also engage in memory work on an ongoing basis meant to memorialize and document movement events and activity from a lens that aligns with their own missions, frames, and worldviews, contributing to collective memories that will live on in history (Florini 2014; Harris 2006; Smit, Heinrich, and Broersma 2018). Memories constitute important mechanisms through which collective identity is developed and maintained across generations of a given group dedicated to a shared struggle and their respective mobilization efforts (Gongaware 2010, 2011; Schwarz 2022; Whittier 1997). Clearly, legacies, memories, and interpretations of past events and movements have direct implications for the development of contemporary ones that seek to tackle the same lingering issues, including ethnic and racial movements like BLM (Fleming and Morris 2015).

Memories of historical events and movements also shape public opinion on contemporary social dynamics and issues (Griffin and Bollen 2009), and therefore inevitably inform perceptions of social movements that seek to change societal structures and conditions. Myriad institutions, organizations, and groups have power to shape these perceptions. For instance, political officials respond to existing collective memory in their institutional activities, and also

shape collective memory through public statements and action (Verovšek 2016). Similarly, news media outlets advance particular narratives around social issues and events, and these narratives shape public opinion (McCombs and Valenzuela 2021). Research shows that news outlets largely provide oversimplified and depoliticized depictions of Black movements of the past, and fail to contextualize contemporary Black mobilization in relation to these movements and the enduring structure of racial oppression (Jackson 2021). However, recent research on news coverage of BLM demonstrates that media outlets may also advance messages that either bolster or delegitimize the movement (Durham 2022b).

As a result of the power the media has to influence public opinion in various ways, collective memory of Black activism in the U.S. is often distorted, including the in-process memory construction about current movements. However, Black people and other marginalized groups resist these distortions through *counter-memories*—collective remembrances of past events and phenomena by members of oppressed groups which challenge dominant cultural collective memories which neglect or erase experiences of marginalization (Lipsitz 1989; O’Brien and Sanchez 2025; Weedon and Jordan 2012). Counter-memories evolving out of the Black community provide a powerful corrective to this obfuscation of race relations and racial mobilization (Baker 1994; Browne 1999; Squires 2006). Theoretically, the concept of counter-memory aligns with Critical Race Theory’s emphasis on *counter-storytelling* as a method, which involves centering the voices of oppressed racial groups in the study of race and racism to provide a more accurate understanding of race as a structure of oppression (Barnes 2016; Chávez 2012; Delgado 1989; Merriweather Hunn, Guy, and Mangliitz 2006; Miles 2019; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). The present research is designed to document perceptions of the Black Lives

Matter movement within the historical context of Black movements in the U.S. as a contribution to collective counter-memories about Black activism.

Black Millennial Conceptualizations of BLM Within Their Collective Memory

The overarching finding from this portion of the analysis is that collective memories of Black mobilization throughout U.S. history are critical to Black millennial understandings of the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement. Three prominent themes emerged from the analysis. First, these Black millennials predominantly saw BLM as the most recent resurgence of a continuous, interconnected lineage of Black American movements, regardless of visible differences in structure and tactics between them. However, there were two particular areas of difference that were commonly identified across participants. The second theme reflects the way participants drew clear distinctions between the forms and severity of racism shaping Black people's lives in the CRM/BPP/BPM era and BLM eras. Finally, analysis revealed participants' keen awareness of BLM's emphasis on intersectionality, which led them to see it as much more inclusive and diverse (especially in terms of gender and sexuality) compared to past Black movements.

"A Branch from a Big Tree": Continuing the Legacy of Past Black Movements

Many of the Black millennials interviewed in this study talked about the Black Lives Matter movement in the context of the long, ongoing fight for Black liberation in the United States. They characterized BLM as an extension or advancement of past efforts to achieve equality and freedom for Black Americans. For instance, Danielle shared,

I think of Black Lives Matter as just sort of like another iteration of Black people organizing towards the long black liberation struggle, however that can be broadly defined. To me, it's within the tradition of Black people organizing to respond to different types of violences. I just think of this as like a modern sort of iteration of something that Black people have always done.

Here, Danielle directly places BLM within an ongoing lineage of Black mobilization against the violences of racism and in pursuit of freedom. She draws attention to the fact that Black resistance is nothing new—in fact, Black communities have been actively resisting the violence of racism since chattel slavery (Aptheker 2021). Her conception of BLM as part of this broader historical effort reflects the general consensus of participants in the study, and demonstrates the importance of collective memory for understanding the purpose and historical relevance of racialized mobilization in the present (Fleming and Morris 2015).

Beyond contextualizing BLM within a broad history of Black liberation activism, Black millennials drew connections between BLM and past Black movements and mobilization efforts. The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party were most commonly mentioned, but more particular moments in the history of U.S. Black resistance were mentioned as well.

Shawn's comments exemplify this:

I think that this is like another sector of the Black community trying to branch out into their own thing. I think it's no difference between the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther movement.. anything of that nature, the Million Man March.. All that stuff is just like a branch from a big tree of the Black community.

The metaphoric picture he paints of BLM as “branch from a big tree” draws attention to the way that particular mobilization efforts do not happen in a vacuum. Resistance efforts grow over time, like trees, branching off in different directions, but remaining connected by a shared set of roots. Shawn sees the Black Lives Matter movement and other notable Black movements or mobilization efforts throughout American history as growing out of the same foundation. Essentially, since racism has a centuries long history, so too does Black mobilization—a history which scholars label the Black Liberation Movement (Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Ince 2018; Lebron 2023).

These sentiments were echoed, and expanded upon, by many members of the sample. Another example, provided by Jacob, applies the language of Black Lives Matter to describe these past movements:

And with the Civil Rights Movement, that was also a Black Lives Matter movement in its own right, just saying that, you know, we are Black people and we mattered too, like we deserve equal rights, we deserve the same rights as our white counterparts, we deserve to be treated like humans, we are not second-class citizens, yeah. So that is also a Black Lives Matter movement in and of itself. But it just looked different because it was in a different time period.

While most participants' remarks described BLM as being "like" past movements, Jacob takes the reverse approach. He retroactively describes the CRM as being "like" BLM—as pursuing conditions in which Black people and their lives are treated as if they matter. His words highlight the shared goals of each of these movements that supersede any ideological, representational, tactical, or structural differences they may have. Ultimately, this demonstrates how movements throughout history are often evaluated in connection with one another as people draw upon and continue to construct collective memory.

General comparisons between BLM, the CRM, the BPP, etc. may not be surprising, given that they are all social movements that have been carried out by the Black American community in effort to address racism. Yet, participants provided even more specificity in their rationale for placing BLM in the same family tree as these movements. Multiple participants provided lengthy explanations of the way BLM and other Black movements are not only similar to each other, or emerging from the same foundational issues, but grow out of unrealized goals from past movements of the same lineage. Destiny made this assertion by saying,

I think that Black Lives Matter was Black people getting together to say, "Okay, we fought to be a citizen, but we can't be a second-class citizen." Like we can't be the underdog. Like you sat there and you gave us our rights and you made us feel like we can contribute and be a part of this society or whatever, and nothing has changed. And I think that Black Lives Matter made us realize that we were basically underplaying ourselves like, "Oh, we have rights, everything's fine." And it's like,

clearly it's not because of systematic racism that literally is the reason why police kill Black men, why we can't get jobs, ... everyday life stuff is harder for Black citizens. And I guess we all assumed it would stop or it stopped after the Civil Rights Movement and everything that we did. And then Black Lives Matter just brought it back to like, "Oh, this is still our reality."

Destiny's analysis of BLM goes beyond surface level comparisons to chart the history of the CRM, its outcomes and failures, and how they directly prompted the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Her understanding of this process aligns with existing research on how social movements occur in waves or cycles, are sustained by communities committed to the underlying cause, are adapted over time by new generations; fluctuate between periods of action and abeyance or quiescence, and are shaped over time by the changing social structures and conditions in which they exist (Almeida 2003; Gillan 2020; Meyer 1993; Staggenborg 1998; Taylor 1989; Whittier 1997).

In Destiny's mind and the minds of participants who made similar statements, BLM is an *intentional* effort to pick up where past Black movements left off. If those movements had truly achieved racial equality and Black liberation, BLM would not have been necessary, and thus never emerged. Differences in tactics, structure, and other characteristics—which were noted throughout interviews—did not detract from this overarching understanding of BLM in relation to collective memories of Black movements throughout U.S. history. Collectively, the perspectives of Black millennials in this study see Black Lives Matter as carrying the same torch kept aflame by the Black Panthers, Black Civil Rights activists, and even those who participated in slave revolts centuries prior to the emergence of this contemporary Black liberation movement.

"This is just systemic oppression": Forms and Severity of Racial Oppression

Black millennials' recognition of BLM as part of a long legacy of Black resistance draws attention to the fact that racism has plagued American society throughout its history. However, a

second prominent theme that emerged through analysis of these interviews was their sense of distinct differences between the forms and severity of racial oppression that exist in the BLM era compared to that of past Black movements. Adrienne was one of many participants who pointed to these differences:

Like I don't wanna compare the Black Lives Matter movement to the Civil Rights Era because I feel like they.. their struggles, while they're still our struggles, they were dealing with different things, as a majority. Lynchings, murder, you know, those kind of things. But it was more open, there wasn't so much darkness behind that. ... So I think that it's important—I don't know whether or not.. we can't take credit for something that happened before us. It's the reason we sit here.

Here, Adrienne points out that generations of Black Americans share in a collective struggle against racism. Her words reflect recognition that the experience of living with racial violence is contiguous and align with scholarship that likens police brutality and other racially-motivated violence against Black people in the contemporary era to the anti-Black violence of the past, going all the way back to slavery (Echols 2022; Embrick 2015; Ore 2019). However, she hesitates to paint BLM as the same as the CRM because racism and specifically racial violence was more “open” and normalized in day-to-day life in the latter era than it is today. This is true, as the Civil Rights Movement followed a many decade long and pervasive phenomenon of violent, indiscriminate, extralegal, and spectacalized lynching of Black people in the U.S. (Berg; EJI Staff 2017; Waldrep 2009). In her view, BLM can only address Black people's current struggles because these more severe struggles were addressed by the CRM.

Adrienne's perspective highlights a duality of truth—that the forms and severity of oppression have shifted and in some respects softened over time, yet still very much exist and impact Black lives in a way that necessitates further mobilization. Dual truths were a common feature of participant narratives on this topic. Monique brought up the Civil Rights era while answering a question about the future of BLM, saying, “Some of the problems we're dealing

with now are the same things that were going on during the civil rights era. So this group will probably be around for quite some time.” In this excerpt, she identifies continuity between BLM and the CRM, but walks this back when I specifically asked about how she compares the two:

You know, I think Black Lives Matter is writing history in its own way. I think it's a little different, because during the Civil Rights Movement Black people were.. I think the level of oppression in the two different time periods is different. One was like physically being oppressed, versus this is just systemic oppression and ways that the people in power try to negate people of color. So I think it's just different, and it's hard to say it'll be as.. I definitely think Black Lives Matter has written its own history and is successful in its own way, but I'm not sure it's comparable to what the Civil Rights Movement did.

Her mention of physical oppression is akin to Adrienne's reference to the practice of lynching, but the contrast she draws between that and the racism of today is a bit different. Whereas Adrienne was focused on the lessened severity and visibility of a persistent issue, Monique describes BLM and the CRM facing wholly distinct forms of oppression. She argues that the racism of today is systemic—operating indirectly through the full range of social institutions, structures, and entrenched practices and beliefs which differentially influence life experiences and unequally distribute resources and power across racial lines (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2021; Braveman et al. 2022; Feagin 2006). The point upon which she returns to agreeing with Adrienne is in agreeing that, while BLM's effort to address racism in its contemporary form is important, it is not seen as comparable to CRM efforts to address the violent, physically oppressive racism of the past.

Some participants' attention to the varied forms and severity of oppression across the two eras centered on what Black people's day to day lives look like within each system of racial system. For example:

I feel like they were tackling something way bigger than what we are right now. Like... [racism,] it's definitely a major problem.. But I feel like we're also able to live a happy and successful life with the way the climate is right now. And it's

unfortunate that, you know, sometimes we have to move the way that's "right" [scare quotes indicated verbally by participant] for us to move, you know what I mean? Like in certain companies and in certain neighborhoods and stuff like that. I feel like that's definitely wrong and we shouldn't have to do that. But, I don't know, I don't.. I do not think it's gonna be as big as that. –Riley

Riley ultimately agreed with the idea that BLM will not quite reach the status of the Civil Rights movement in terms of historical significance. Her rationale seemed to be that the form of racism that the CRM was "tackling" was bigger, and therefore BLM can never "be as big" or meaningful as she understands the CRM to be. To substantiate the idea that contemporary racial oppression is a smaller problem, she describes Black people today as having opportunities for happiness and success. Riley recognizes that structural opportunities and personal freedom for Black Americans are still limited in some ways, but emphasizes the way they have improved between these two eras of mobilization.

Black millennials in the study also pointed to the day-to-day experiences of Black people during the Civil Rights Movement as concomitant evidence of the starker racism that oppressed Black Americans during that time. Carmichael described the way resistance in this era was met with inhumane and violent repression at multiple points in his interview, referencing "dogs and water hoses" being used as mechanisms of social control, "people just trying to go to school being attacked," and these things being done out in the open where they could be "captured on camera." His counterpart, Steven reflected on these historical experiences as well while reflecting on BLM in comparison:

My plain answer is no, but my emotional answer is I hope not. Because they went through a lot for civil rights.. Along the way there was a lot of stuff that folks had to go through to earn the rights that we have now. And I guess I'm just not wishing that upon anybody else. Like just doing the research, and looking at the history, and folks bringing up old photos during Black history month and different things like that.. You're just like, man, my family members or people I know went through hell for the right to vote, the right to equal education.. And I don't want my friends and my coworkers and my colleagues to go through that same hell for something for all

intents and purposes we should already know. So I don't want it to get as big as the Civil Rights Movement—only because I would hate to see history repeating itself.

The commonly remembered images of CRM era violence (Berger 2010, 2022) that Carmichael mentioned served as the basis for Steven's hope that BLM *wouldn't* ever be as significant. He directly links the significance of Civil Rights mobilization of the mid 20th century to the alarming levels of physical oppression that existed at that time. Simultaneously, he expresses reverence for the prior generation's willingness to persist through those experiences and a deep desire that the present generation never has to. Unfortunately, the repeat history he hoped to avoid did in some ways repeat itself—similar imagery can now be found of violence enacted against BLM protesters during the 2020 uprising that occurred just months after our interview (Amnesty International 2020; Anderson et al. 2022; Chaudhary and Richardson 2022).

While awareness of the way racial oppression has shifted over time was common across the sample, not all participants equated difference in form with reduction in severity. Eve, who discussed colorblindness and post-racial myths in the BLM era in the previous chapter, definitely saw differences across eras of racism and the mobilization meant to address it. But she disagreed that these differences would render BLM as less historically significant—just significant for different reasons:

My hope is that [the contrasts] will be adequately reflected. Instead of the comparisons to the Civil Rights Movement being geared to kind of denigrate and diminish what was actually done during the Black Lives Matter movement, I believe that—or my hope is that—history will remember it as operating under a particularly and distinctly different racial climate than the Civil Rights Movement. And as a result, they had to operate in this nuanced and intricate way because it was fighting an ideological battle about what race is and how it impacts our day to day lives. Where in the Civil Rights Movement, everybody knew what race was. And everybody knew how it was impacting our lives. But today we have to show statistics and STATA output to get people to see that there's a problem. So you've got to understand, they couldn't have been the same type of movement, and I just want history to reflect that.

Here, Eve argues that comparisons to the CRM often do BLM a disservice—downplaying its importance and obscuring the reasons why this movement looks and operates differently. Unlike her peers in the study, she doesn't describe contemporary racial oppression as any less severe, simply different in a way that makes it harder to identify, evidence, and address. As discussed previously, these differences and the mechanisms that created them have allowed for the continuance of structural and systemic racism over time (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 2021; Feagin 2006; Omi and Winant 2015; Roediger 2019). As long as anti-Black oppression continues to exist, history suggests that Black people will continue to resist. Thus, BLM carries on the incomplete work of past Black movements, which did address certain forms or manifestations of racism, but did not wholly achieve an anti-racist, liberated society (Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Francis and Wright-Rigueur 2024; Ince 2018; Thomas 2019).

“The Forerunners are Queer Black Women”: Intersectional Representation and Inclusion

The Black millennials in this study commonly cited another difference between past Black movements and BLM—its gender and sexuality dynamics. These dynamics were discussed along two different lines: the ideology undergirding the movement's actions and the characteristics of movement leaders. Bernice succinctly points to the former by saying,

I've also really seen how they advocate for black and Brown LGBTQ and like trans women just because we've definitely seen more instances of their lives being lost. So I feel like they're the only black organization that's supporting or inclusive.

She highlights BLM's intentional attention to the way that various axes of domination (race, gender, and sexuality) intersect to produce specific forms of violence (Collins 2000; Dupuis-Déri 2016; Peretz 2021). This concept is called intersectionality—it emerged out of Black feminist theory and has since become the dominant paradigm for understanding the complex and compound oppression experienced by individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Carastathis 2014; Collins 2000, 2006; Crenshaw 1991). From her perspective, BLM actively

draws attention to the disproportionate violence endured by Black people who sit at these intersections in a way that differs from previous Black movements. Research supports this notion (Destine 2022, 203; Lindsey 2017; Ransby 2018; Thomas 2019), as do the express tenets of the BLM movement (Black Lives Matter n.d.).

Other participants were fully aware of intersectionality as a concept and explicitly linked it to BLM's ideology. An example is Jocelyn, who specifically described BLM as:

started by some women who really emphasize intersectionality within the movement. So they were really intentional about moving past the Civil Rights Movement's respectability politics in the sense that they felt like every Black person—every Black body—mattered, in every way, including Black trans people, Black immigrants, that kind of thing.

Respectability politics refers to the idea that complying with dominant social norms is an efficient strategy for advancing the condition of a marginalized social group (Harris 2014; Dazey 2021). Here, Jocelyn highlights that while this ideology was prevalent among Black elites and activists of the Civil Rights era, BLM eschews respectability politics in favor of inclusivity of all identities, statuses, and ways of life among the Black community (Hooker 2016; Kerrison, Cobbina, and Bender 2018; McDougall 2017; Rasaki 2016). Her statements allude to the way some social identities and statuses are held in low regard regardless of the behavior of the individuals who hold them, and that Black people who hold these other stigmatized identities are further marginalized in society and even within the Black community. Ultimately, she sees BLM as utilizing intersectionality to humanize and advocate for these multiply-marginalized members of the Black American community.

The second difference in gender and sexuality dynamics between BLM and its predecessors that Black millennials saw as important was the identities of movement leaders. Carmichael had much to say on this topic. Critiquing the gendered division of labor in Black movements of the 20th century, he said,

I think one thing that we can talk about if we do want to do a comparison is why Black women in particular are often left to do the labor and the hard work of social justice movements, right? It has always been that Black women are the ones who do a disproportionate amount of work. ... And that's because black women often have the largest stake in the injustices that are going on.

Here, Carmichael builds on the above points about intersectional oppression by linking this phenomena to the amount of work that Black women contribute to racial justice movements in the U.S. From his understanding, Black women have historically done a large proportion of the work, but have received a much smaller proportion of the credit. In the BLM era, however, this isn't quite the case. Eve, pointed to this difference while discussing the accomplishments of BLM:

It really started also having us, the community at large, engage in a conversation about gender, leadership, and, you know, sexuality. It just was forcing our community to kind of reconcile with some issues and have some conversations that we just had never really had in this very public, very cross-country kind of way. Because we, for the most part, are used to seeing Black liberation movements led by a single straight Black man, right? And Black Lives Matter is not like that at all. The forerunners of the movement are queer Black women.

Here, Eve argues that BLM has forced the Black American community to face this issue and adjust to seeing women activists in positions of power in ways that, as Carmichael pointed out, they previously were not. Black women—specifically queer Black women—are *visibly* at the forefront of this contemporary movement, and fighting to avoid being erased (Garza 2016; Mahdawi 2020).

The perspectives of these participants align with scholarly analyses of activist organizations of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, which have often delved into the way Black women and sexual minorities were marginalized in these movements. Both groups were always present and doing a significant amount of work to advance these resistance efforts, but they and/or their intersectional identities were often relegated to the background while straight Black men occupied more prominent, public-facing leadership positions (Barnett 1993; Collier-

Thomas and Franklin 2001; Delinder 2014; Leighton 2013; Onifade 2023; Spencer 2008). The BPP was more revolutionary in its ideology, supporting self-determination and power for all oppressed groups, but gender and sexuality dynamics within the organization itself were still characterized by some degree of division (Alameen-Shavers 2016; Josephs 2008). However, Black women resisted sexism within their organizations, took on less visible leadership positions in their local contexts, and ultimately were extremely impactful in these movements' trajectories (Cleaver 1999; Farmer 2017; Robnett 2000).

When people think of the Civil Rights Movement, the very first person that comes to mind is usually Martin Luther King Jr. Secondarily, they likely think of Malcolm X, whose revolutionary politics during the same era are often contrasted with King's (Joseph 2020b; Nimitz 2016). For the Black Panther Party, the founders and highest profile leaders were Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale (Bloom and Martin 2016). In contrast, as Eve notes, the Black Lives Matter movement was spearheaded by Black and queer women activists—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Ayo (formerly known as Opal) Tometi (Allen, Durham, and Jones 2025; Garza 2020; Khan-Cullors and bandele 2017). This stark contrast in leadership sets BLM apart from past Black movements and has ushered us into an age where the fight for Black liberation is built upon Black feminist politics (Ransby 2018; Woodyly 2022).

Conclusion

The above analysis examines Black millennial understandings of the Black Lives Matter movement in the history of Black activism in the United States. Cumulatively, the three emergent themes of this analysis highlight the ways in which BLM has learned from its predecessor movements, built upon their efforts to address shifting forms of racism, and taken up new inclusive approaches to achieving Black liberation in the American context. Despite noting

differences across mobilization eras, this group sees BLM as the most recent resurgence of a continuous, interconnected lineage of Black American activism. Clearly, collective memory provides a powerful foundation upon which understandings of contemporary racial structures, politics, and resistance are constructed. Without knowledge of past Black movements, these Black millennials may have come to wholly different conclusions about BLM.

Given that collective memories are continuously negotiated over time, this study contributes an important record of how Black Lives Matter was understood by a sample of its primary constituent, participant, and beneficiary groups as it was unfolding, which can be compared to memories and perceptions of the movement that evolve in the future. In particular, it provides a Black millennial counter-memory that situates BLM as a necessary intervention against the same enduring, yet substantially transformed, system of racial stratification and oppression targeted by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panther Party. This research thus seeks to ensure the meaning and importance of BLM among this group live on as evidence of Black experiences and resistance within an oppressive society.

The findings herein support theoretical arguments about how temporally continuous social issues will continue to incite movements that seek to change them (Gillan 2020). They also point to the way movements are reinvigorated and made anew by subsequent generations of the same social groups in pursuit of expanded goals left unrealized by their predecessors (McAdam 2013; Whittier 1997). Research in the future should examine meaning-making around this critical Black movement among different groups and at different points in history. Through comparison between this work and future studies of its kind, we can obtain a more comprehensive picture of how BLM impacted society and will be remembered for doing so. Further, these comparisons may allow us to examine how myriad groups and structures may

influence the content and reception of these collective memories over time, and how those collective and counter-memories shape future mobilization efforts toward racial justice and Black liberation in the United States.

CHAPTER 5:

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS AND PROSPECTUS FOR CHANGE THROUGH BLM

Social movements are mechanisms through which social groups attempt to push society forward toward their fictional expectations of or desires for the future (Beckert 2013; Schulz 2016). Perceptions of what changes a movement seeks to make in society inevitably impact the development of and responses to that movement. As the BLM movement fights to build an alternate future characterized by racial equality and justice, a priority must be studying socially constructed images of desired social change and how it might be achieved. In a society where racism is ubiquitous and hegemonic, what impacts do people expect a movement like BLM to bring about? To what extent do people believe BLM (or other racial justice movements) will be able to achieve the imagined future they strive toward? Answers to these questions would build theoretical understanding of the relationship between imagined futures and social movements, particularly as they are situated within the existing social structure of society. Empirical research in this area will advance our knowledge of the effectiveness of racial justice movements as agents of social change in society.

In this final chapter of the analysis, I help address this disconnect in the literature by answering the question: *how do subjective definitions of success shape Black millennial assessments of whether or not BLM will successfully produce social change?* I employ the concept of *prospectus*—the collectively imagined horizon of possibility for social change in a particular area of life (Brown 2016)—as a lens through which to understand the relationship between meaning-making, sociostructural contexts, and mobilization efforts. Data analyzed for this chapter primarily comes from participant responses to questions about what they would

consider success to be for the Black Lives Matter movement, to what extent they believe BLM either has or will achieve those outcomes, and what impact these outcomes will or would have on the racial order of the United States. However, if respondents shared thoughts on similar topics in response to other questions throughout the interview, these data points were also included in the analysis.

Racial Justice Movements, Social Change, and Shaping the Future

Futures research encompasses the study of social life through the lens of “fictionality”—the process through which the mind becomes occupied with an imagined future state of the world and the beliefs about what will lead this future state to become a reality (Beckert 2013). The mental representations (termed “fictional expectations”) of the future that people develop in this process then form the basis for intentional and rational action designed to move toward the desired future state. Social movements are widely conceptualized as purposeful efforts to promote (or in some cases resist) changes in a given society (McAdam and Snow 1997; McCarthy and Zald 1977). In other words, they are collective efforts to push society toward a particular envisioned future. Despite the clear overlap in these topics, futures and social movement research traditionally have not intersected as much as one might expect. A current push by some scholars advocates for the integration of these two areas to promote more direct examination of social movements as agents of change that shape the future of society (Schulz 2016). This analysis meets this call, but with a particular focus on race, racism, and racial justice movements.

Social change comes in a variety of forms, which are often separated into three categories: biographical, cultural, and structural or political change. Biographical changes are the consequences of social movement engagement that manifest at the micro level in the life courses

of individuals (Giugni 2004). Cultural change includes anything pertaining to symbolic meaning, narratives and discourse, and beliefs and ideologies that shape human experiences, attitudes, and relations (Dyke and Taylor 2018; Earl 2004). In contrast, structural change encompasses the tangible transformations in the social environment, such as institutional processes, laws, and patterns in measurable life chances and outcomes across social groups (Giugni 2008). Since structural changes often emerge out of policy reform, this category is also referred to as political change (Amenta et al. 2010). Social movements vary in the extent to they pursue and achieve each form of social change. But in general, studies of social movements largely favor the examination of structural and political effects (Earl 2000; Giugni 2008). In this analysis, the fictional expectations of cultural and structural change through BLM are both examined.

Before developing fictional expectations that will serve as a basis for mobilization efforts toward social change, a particular set of conditions must first be comprehensible among those who desire those conditions. This means that social movements can be understood as the embodied collective expectations of social groups about what those efforts can realistically achieve. This horizon of possibility has recently been termed *prospectus* (Brown 2016). Prospectus is a useful concept because it expands the conceptual frame for interpreting the attainability of social change in a given social environment beyond more established concepts in the literature. For instance, studies on social movements often reference *collective efficacy*—beliefs about the capabilities of a group to effectively make political change—as an important factor in mobilization (Beaumont 2010). Collective efficacy is understood as a direct evaluation of the abilities of a mobilizing group to be successful in their aims, based on factors such as competency, cohesion, political representation, and treatment by media (Lee 2010). However, as Brown (2016) points out, the conceptualization of collective efficacy takes for granted that social

change is generally possible. In contrast, rather than an evaluation of people's abilities, prospectus reflects judgment about whether the social structure of a given society is changeable in general. Furthermore, prospectus provides a lens through which we can understand why certain types of social change—biographical, cultural, or structural/political—may be perceived as possible to varying degrees.

Social movements scholars use the concept of *political opportunity structures* (POS) to discuss the degree to which the structural organization of a society is amenable to change (McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004). Inherent in this concept is the idea that even when the POS is “closed,” there is the potential for it to “open” at another time. Collective efficacy is examined within and fluctuates in accordance with ongoing shifts in this structure (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Suh 2001). This approach overlooks people's overarching sense of imagination about the future and what potential futures can reasonably exist. The concept of prospectus, which offers a way of measuring and comparing this sense of imagined futures, points us to the question of whether there are types of social change that shifts in a POS simply cannot accommodate even at their most open, due to the foundational characteristics of that societal structure. If a POS never seems amenable to restructuring in a particular way, prospectus for change is likely to be low. This is not a reflection of the efficacy of the group, but an assessment of the environment in which the group exists. Therefore, the potential power of prospectus as a determining factor in mobilization should be more adequately considered. This analysis is one attempt to do so, specifically in relation to racial justice efforts.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and other theories of race and racism examine the role of race and racism in the foundational construction and ongoing functioning of society (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2018; Feagin 2006; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Race is

understood to be a product of social thought and relations (rather than inherent and biological phenomena), and the various racial groups that have been socially constructed over time are racialized differently, but always in ways that advance the social interests of those who sit at the top of the racial hierarchy. The processes of racialization, distribution of resources across racialized lines, and normalization of these conditions through hegemonic racial ideology result in racism being embedded in all aspects of the social structure of society and daily life (Golash-Boza 2016; Omi and Winant 2015). Scholars and adherents of critical theories of race (including CRT specifically) are generally dedicated to subversion of and resistance against this system, with an expressed dedication to anti-racism (Bell 1995; Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2019, 2021). In addition, they argue that the experiential knowledge of people of color who suffer this experience must be legitimized and centered in social inquiry (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Solorzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso and Solorzano 2007).

While racial justice movements are heavily studied by social movement scholars, the theoretical frameworks that emerge from these studies have been formulated in a largely colorblind manner and neglect the knowledge of CRT (Watkins Liu 2018). For instance, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s was a movement that targeted the existing race relations and structures of the United States. While the concept of the POS emerged from study of this movement, the concept is race-neutral and does not explicate the role of race as foundational to the development of society (Bracey 2016). Race acts as an essential axis of domination that shapes social movements and the environments in which they occur (Oliver 2017). If we are to truly understand how this fact shapes mobilization processes, we must consider race as foundational to the horizon of possibility for social change. By studying BLM—

a prominent racial justice movement—through a critical race lens, this paper offers one remedy to this ongoing issue in the literature.

Linking the concept of prospectus with the principles of CRT can help us understand how the racial order of a society shapes people's horizons of possibility for social change through social movements. According to Brown (2016), prospectus is linked to lived experience and the understandings of the world produced by those experiences. From a CRT perspective, racism is an ordinary and everyday experience built into the structure of society and foundational to one's worldview (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Golash-Boza 2016). Therefore, it follows that one's experience and understanding of racism in society would also be foundational to one's prospectus for social change through activism. Further, prospectus is likely to differ markedly based on the extent to which various groups are subjugated within the existing racial structure. In turn, that prospectus likely impacts the emergence, development, and outcomes of social movements. In the U.S. specifically, the racial structure is characterized by white supremacy, with white people and whiteness occupying the position at the top of the racial power hierarchy, Black people and blackness at the bottom, and other groups of color marginalized to varying degrees between them (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Collins 2001; Lewis 2004; McDermott and Ferguson 2022). In this research, I examine prospectus among Black millennials, who are part of the most oppressed group in the U.S. racial order.

While not exhaustive, this review of the futures, social movement, and critical race literatures points to the need for further exploration of how we can best understand the intersections between these social phenomena. Social movements influence the future, but how does prospectus—conceptions of what is possible in the future—influence social movements? And how do social structures of inequality influence this dialectical process? This study

contributes to this effort by integrating concepts from all three areas to explicate how members of a particular racial group imagine the future of U.S. society in relation to social movements designed to shape it. Using Black millennial perspectives on the BLM movement as a case, this study centers the lived experience of the Black community, accounts for the racial structure of U.S. society that undergirds social movement activity, and explores how this reality informs their prospectus for change and the imagined future impact of BLM among this group.

Black Millennial Visions of Social Change Through BLM

The foremost finding of this segment of the study is the presence of a near-ubiquitous sense of skepticism about BLM's ability to enact social change in the U.S. among Black millennials. In other words, their prospectus was quite limited—they generally did not envision the U.S. as ever being characterized by racial justice and equality, despite the movement's goal to produce such a reality. Upon further investigation, I found that this skepticism was rooted in contrary assessments of extant impacts of the movement and prospectus for change in the future based on the type of social change being considered. Participants perceived the movement as successful in centering Black issues in social discourse and challenging existing hegemonic narratives about race. Because they pertain to symbolic processes of meaning making and their impact on social life, I refer to these impacts as “cultural change” (Amenta and Polletta 2019; Dyke and Taylor 2018; Earl 2004) throughout the analysis. In contrast, participants expressed sincere doubts that BLM would bring about legislative or institutional reforms significant and widespread enough to effectively eradicate racism. This ultimate outcome—a wide sweeping transformation of the racial hierarchy and race relations in U.S. society—is referred to throughout the analysis as “structural change” (Amenta et al. 2010; Giugni 2008). The

perspectives of Black millennials in this study drew a clear distinction between cultural and structural change, and their general skepticism was largely tied to the latter.

“I’m Hesitant to Say”: BLM and General Skepticism About Social Change

The most common response to the question of whether or not BLM would effectively create social change was essentially “I don’t know, maybe.” A clear thread of skepticism emerged in respondents’ discussions of the success BLM has and will potentially achieve, to the point where some respondents felt they couldn’t provide a steadfast answer as to whether they see success in BLM’s future. For example, Kevin said the following about the movement:

Success for the movement would be, honestly, a complete overhaul of how this country works [laughs] and I think that’ll take a long time. ... That’s tough to answer [whether BLM will be successful]. Because like I said we do live in a place that like it’s embedded.. but how long that can last.. The sooner that we unteach or unlearn what the system has already placed in our heads, in our hearts, and within our community, the sooner that the actual changes can happen.

Kevin linked his idea of what success would look like for BLM to his assessment of whether that success is attainable. He defines true success for the movement as culminating in a tearing down of the existing social structure of the US and rebuilding it anew. But he recognizes that this is both a lofty and long-term goal. He cites the embeddedness of racism within the social structure and culture of the U.S. as barriers to this process. He notes that change in public sentiments and ideologies related to race must precede more tangible changes to policy and institutions that would produce racial equality on a structural level. This aligns with existing research on the simultaneous distinction between and interconnectedness of cultural and structural change (Bernstein 2003). Because of the long roots and pervasiveness of racism, he was at best unsure about whether BLM will be successful, in either its smaller objectives or its overall goal of creating a society in which Black lives are valued and cared for.

Similar to Kevin, Angie was dubious in her projections of social change as a result of BLM. In discussing change in U.S. policing, she lamented:

It's kind of like you want to be optimistic and you don't want to be pessimistic, but at the same time it's like.. Can we really stop white supremacy from infiltrating, you know, the police? Which is like, "eehhhhh.." [laughs]. And I don't want to be pessimistic when saying that, but it's like, what is all that we can do? And also, you know, not having a defeated attitude but, to what point can we make change? You know? But yeah..

While Angie is referencing a particular institution, rather than the overarching social structure that Kevin commented on, she still expresses the same skepticism. Her description of white supremacy as “infiltrating” the institution of policing reflects the way the overarching system of racial domination is upheld through an interlocking system of institutions, across which the same cultural meanings and ideologies exist (Collins 2000; Delgado and Stefancic 2017). In effect, she implies that this arrangement makes racism inescapable, and that possibilities for social change in race relations in the U.S. are limited.

Imani also expressed skepticism about whether BLM can successfully subvert white supremacy. However, she goes beyond recognizing the deeply rooted origins and enduring strength of racism to highlight the direct challenges against BLM’s efforts that impede its ability to produce change:

I hope.. But I am very, very skeptical just because.. anytime a movement seeks to move beyond the status quo, there is pushback. And that pushback can, you know, it can come in many ways. It can come in the termination of scholars from universities who seek to engage in Black Lives Matter ideals on their campuses. It can come in the form of the murder and executions of the leaders, which has already occurred. Like several people that have been involved with Black Lives Matter are like just dead. And I'm like, we're not going to talk about this?! Like, this is a thing that has happened before!

The perspective Imani offers provides an additional explanation for lack of confidence in BLM’s ability to produce social change in the U.S. Not only is racism at the core of our contemporary

institutions, culture, and social relations as a result of a long history of white racial domination, but in addition, efforts to draw attention to and change that are hotly contested. She is acutely aware that people whose life work is designed to bring racial equality, such as race scholars and activists, are at risk for being discredited, marginalized, and even killed. In mentioning that this is something that has happened in the past, she underscores the way that white supremacy has a history of violently silencing those who attempt to supplant it as the status quo.

Collectively, these respondents' exemplify the general sense of skepticism among Black millennials in this study regarding the potential to achieve social change through the BLM movement in the United States. But as the social movements literature demonstrates, the type of social change a movement seeks has a lot to do with the outcomes it produces and evaluations of those outcomes by participants and allies. Golash-Boza highlights the importance of both racial ideology and racial structure to theoretical understandings of race and racism (2016). The former is intimately related to attitudes, discourses, and identities—shifts within which movement scholars conceptualize as cultural change. In contrast, the latter is associated with institutions, laws, and measurable inequality, which social movement studies examine as structural outcomes. The next two sections detail the prospectus among Black millennials for cultural change versus structural change, a distinction that is already visible in the quotations presented above, and relate this prospectus to their evaluations of BLM.

“It’s Done So Much for Us” : Positive Assessments of Cultural Change

Black millennials in this study were much more optimistic about the extant and future success of BLM when it came to achieving cultural change than structural change. For example, Kenneth said the following when asked what he would consider success for BLM:

I think just shedding light on the issues, right? The social injustices. I think that's what a successful movement is. It's like, can you get a large amount of people to

stop what they're doing, not stop what they're doing but take a step away from their lives, and look at this issue that you're advocating. Right? So I think Black Lives Matter has done a great job of that.

Here, Kenneth identifies BLM as being successful in disrupting the racial ideology of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2018) and shifting cultural understandings of the Black experience in the U.S. To do so, he points to the way that BLM's efforts have pushed people to "step away from their lives" in order to see the social injustices that impact the everyday lives of Black people in a new way. By accomplishing this with a wide enough section of the U.S. public, he feels the movement has been successful. Eve also credited BLM with producing cultural change in the U.S.:

I think that it's actually doing what it's supposed to do, which is holding the country to task, via specific cities and chapters in specific cities, for focusing on race, in particular BLACK people and the BLACK community [capitalization to reflect respondent emphasis]. And centering issues and highlighting issues in the Black community, drawing attention to them, and thinking and rethinking ways to address those issues. ... And so I think in doing that and in continuing to perpetuate and normalize that conversation, Black Lives Matter is successful.

Just like other Black millennials in the study, Eve defined the way that BLM has brought race to the forefront of public discourse about inequality and social change as a success. They attribute the increasingly common attention to racism across societal spheres—media of all kinds, various levels of the political arena, the consumer economy, educational curricula, and micro level social interaction—to the efforts of this movement.

Beyond bringing racial inequality to the forefront of public discourse and institutions, Eve also cites BLM as effectively keeping it there. In her mind, by "perpetuating and normalizing" those topics on an ongoing basis, the movement holds those in power accountable to act in accordance with these expanded cultural understandings of race and racism. Her perspective aligns with existing assessments that it is BLM's dedication to shifting racial

discourse on the value of Black humanity generally that opens the door for eventual policy reform in areas of social life, such as policing and criminal justice, in which Black people suffer disproportionately negative outcomes (Ray 2020).

Black millennials in this study recognized BLM as achieving cultural change by interrogating both broad racial ideology and more specific ideas about racial groups, particularly Black people. For example, Jacob expressed:

It's been successful in continuing and furthering the conversation about the unfortunate stereotypes and stigma that is Black inferiority in the United States and almost worldwide, that's just been embedded in societies that were built by white supremacists. It sucks but it's a reality..

Here Jacob points to the embeddedness of cultural ideas about blackness within the social structure of white supremacist societies. Hegemonic racial ideologies are upheld through pervasive cultural narratives and images that become common sense, taken for granted ideas among members of a society (Omi and Winant 2015). In particular, he references the controlling images (Collins 2000) that stereotype Black people as inferior, serve as the basis for discriminatory and dehumanizing treatment, and reinforce white supremacy. From his perspective, BLM has forced a widespread conversation about the presence and role of these cultural images in the U.S.

Based on these responses, Black millennial prospectus for social change is favorable toward cultural change specifically. In line with findings of other studies on BLM and cultural discourse (Langford and Speight 2015; Rickford 2016), these responses support the idea that BLM has already been successful in shifting racial discourse and logic in the U.S. Disruptions to the existing hegemonic racial ideology are important because this system of knowledge, values, and beliefs undergirds the entire social structure (Omi and Winant 2015). By delegitimizing this ideology, BLM places the white supremacist racial formation of the United States in question.

However, cultural change is just one side of the coin. In the next section, I examine whether Black millennial prospectus also encompasses the possibility of structural change.

“I Just Don’t See It”: Pessimistic Outlooks on Structural Change

Despite optimistic perspectives on the cultural changes that respondents cited have and will continue to be made through the BLM movement, their expressed prospectus for achieving tangible structural changes (e.g. eliminating racial disparities in police violence, incarceration rates, and political power/representation) was drastically more pessimistic. In almost all cases, respondents felt that BLM’s work toward their vision of “a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise” (BLM, n.d.) would ultimately be unsuccessful. In explaining that position, many respondents alluded to the sheer magnitude of the task the movement has taken on and the myriad BLM would have to overcome to accomplish it. As Adrienne succinctly put:

I think it’s physically impossible to say whether or not the movement would be successful or not because there’s so many factors that play a role in that. For Black Lives Matter to succeed you would have to ultimately, uh.. uh, overcome a bigger goal which, you can’t really do without.. I mean obviously it ties a lot into racism. So if you can’t, they can’t really accomplish their ultimate goal without eradicating.. racism. Which, you know, is probably next to impossible.

Here Adrienne essentially waves off the idea of eradicating racism in the U.S. as not just implausible but impossible, and therefore outside of her prospectus for change. In citing the wide range of “factors,” she draws attention to the long list of structural inequalities faced by Black people that play a role in producing the conditions BLM is trying to address. She implies that the task the movement has taken on—addressing and ending racial inequality across all organizations, institutions, and social outcomes—is one that is simply too large to truly be accomplished. Based on her statements and similar ones by other respondents, the POS (McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004) of the United States lacks any opening for significant change in

the area of race relations. Her stance is supported by one of the oldest arguments of critical race scholars—that racism is permanent (Bell 1992) and cannot be eliminated within the confines of our existing society. However, as extant scholarship shows, it's not unusual for marginalized groups to still mount challenges in the face of a closed POS (Einwohner 2003).

Danielle also saw lasting structural change through BLM as unattainable. Specifically, she pointed out that social change is not linear, and movement outcomes do not always last:

I think of it very similar to the Civil Rights Movement in which, I mean there were wins and losses and then a subsequent backlash and.. Or a white lash rather.. and more losses. So I think that that's how it's going to have to be. I mean success? Will it have success? Mmm.. No, probably not. I hate to be pessimistic, but I'm also just recognizing the history of the United States of America.

By drawing on her knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement, Danielle highlights that appearances can be deceiving when it comes to social movements and their success. Specific changes may be achieved at any time. For instance, BLM activism has caused reforms to police procedures to be signed into law in some states (Black Lives Matter 2018; Campbell and Nuyen 2020; Gruber-Miller and Richardson 2020). However, opposing forces will constantly be trying to undo those changes or make changes of their own that nullify those gains. This is demonstrated by recent attacks on voting rights in Georgia which disproportionately affect Black voters (Griffith 2022), despite these rights being cemented by constitutional amendments two centuries ago.

Recognition of these processes have led some critical race scholars to critique what they call the *racial progress paradigm* (Christian, Seamster, and Ray 2019; V. Ray et al. 2017; Seamster and Ray 2018). They argue that because the structures and mechanisms of white supremacy are adaptable and shift in response to challenges mounted against them, focusing on gradual advancement toward racial equality through a series of small steps over time is a futile

approach. Further, Danielle's perspective points to the important distinction between prospectus and collective efficacy. By asserting that there will be wins, she demonstrates collective efficacy (Beaumont, 2010)—a belief in BLM's capability to achieve political change on behalf of Black people. However, lasting structural change is still outside of her sense of prospectus, reflecting the fact that social change is constrained by factors outside of BLM's control.

While expressing the implausibility of structural change, Ashley discussed the difficulty of imagining a future in which racism no longer exists. She said:

This kind of brings it back to the structure. I think it's hard to know exactly what the overall goal was and what that would look like. People will say things like, "we want Black liberation" or "we want economic liberation," but it's hard to really know.. Okay, but what does that look like? Especially when we've never had it. You know what I'm saying? And yeah, I agree with a lot of people that like there's power in imagining things, but like I said, if you don't know, if you've never seen it, it's hard to know what that would look like.

Ashley's perspective calls to mind the long and unrelenting history of racial oppression that has constrained the well-being and progression of the Black community. She argues that because liberation—social, political, economic, or all of the above—has never existed for Black people in America, it is hard to imagine how liberation would manifest. For example, Maddie stated in her interview that BLM would likely exist until we achieve liberation for all Black people. When I followed up and asked what liberation looks like, her answer reflected a lack of clarity similar to Ashley's:

I actually just finished reading this book called "Black Freedom" by Robin D.G. Kelley. And this was kind of what he's talking about. Like what could Black liberation look like? And talking about giving ourselves the space and the opportunity to dream up what that would look like and then mapping out a plan to do so. But it does take all being on one page. And so I think that because liberation still does not have a collective meaning for black people.. I don't know. ... But we have to come together to understand what that collective liberation place would look like.

In this response, Maddie points to the fact that Black radicals have already been actively engaged in *freedom dreaming* (Kelley 2002) about a future without racial subjugation and theorizing on its possibility. But based on these data and other recent research (Allen 2024), translating those dreams into reality has not yet become possible in the minds of Black millennials. Because a reality characterized by Black liberation is hard to imagine, it's even harder to develop and put into action a plan to achieve it, or to perceive the development and implementation of a plan of that nature as a possibility. As a result, the prospectus of Black millennials in this study does not include structural change through racial justice activism.

Conclusion

Cumulatively, the Black millennials interviewed in this study saw limited opportunity for change in the racial structure of the United States. They generally believed that social change through the Black Lives Matter movement has been and will likely continue to be cultural in nature, rather than structural. Their prospectus for social change is linked to their understanding of the racist social structure of U.S. society, as well as the forms and manifestations of inequality that result from that structure and associated social institutions. Despite consistent acknowledgement of BLM's significant impact on racial discourse, ideology, and stereotypes, these Black millennials were not optimistic about the future of American race relations. They were unable to envision a future in which the U.S. is not characterized by substantial racial inequality across social outcomes and experiences, particularly for Black people. This research demonstrates that *prospectus* for activism (Brown 2016) is contingent upon understandings of axes of domination, including race, rather than just upon perceptions of openings in the political opportunity structure that rests upon these axes. Future studies must attend to this fact by

accounting for these structures in order to provide accurate accounts of mobilization efforts by oppressed groups.

These future projections provide insight into the perceived challenges facing the Black community and those mobilized in the fight for racial equality and Black liberation. The pessimism around possibilities of transformation by BLM or any other movement that would follow in its footsteps in the long history of Black activism in the United States is significant. If the collective expectation of the Black community is that we are doomed to live with racism indefinitely, what does that mean for the strength and utility of these forms of resistance? How will Black liberation be obtained if it cannot be imagined? Some Black millennials, like Maddie, may already be ahead of the curve in efforts to answer this question and able to steer activists and scholars alike in the right direction. When I asked whether she thinks the movement will successfully achieve this elusive outcome, she said:

Probably not in this lifetime. I don't believe. And that's not to be pessimistic. I think that, you know, liberation is about the long haul. And if we think about how long the world has been in existence, how long Black people have been oppressed.. [scoffing laugh] We ain't achieving liberation in my lifetime. And that's okay, because I don't work for my lifetime, I work for the lifetime to come after us. So we in this for the long haul.

Data collection for this study concluded in February 2020. That summer, the successive deaths of multiple unarmed Black people at the hands of both police and civilians sparked a resurgence and spread of the BLM movement that propelled it to the status of the largest social movement in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020; Wright 2020). In addition to their prevalence, protest responses to the highly publicized cases of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade included a significantly larger and more diverse group of people than previous BLM protest waves (Fisher 2020; McAdam 2020). The U.S. uprising also sparked protests of solidarity as well as in response to local racism in countries across the globe

(Kirby 2020). These conditions may have significantly impacted Black millennial prospectus for the future in relation to the movement and what it can accomplish. However, despite continued protest activity through 2020 and beyond, the increased levels of support for the movement outside the Black community appeared to wane and returned to previous levels by September 2020 and have been stagnant ever since (Horowitz 2021; Nguyen et al. 2021). Just as the intensity of this protest wave may have improved fictional expectations and projections for the future, these conditions may have eventually eroded those perspectives. As the conditions in which BLM (and other racial justice movements) take place fluctuate over time, future studies of this nature will be important for understanding how systems of domination shape the relationship between prospectus, social structure, and mobilization.

CHAPTER 6:

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of this dissertation is to clarify the relationship between social structure, interpretive processes of meaning-making, and social movements, particularly in relation to race-based mobilization efforts. I sought to address two gaps in the existing social movements literature. First, while scholars recognize that interpretive processes and social structures are connected, those connections are often abstract or unclear. Interpretive processes are typically either closely examined through their own specialized, structurally detached theoretical approaches, or they are conceptually neglected in relation to social structures when examined together (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Meyer 2004; Polletta and Gardner 2015; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019). Second, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which the axis of racial domination that undergirds the formation of a society creates fundamental differences in the manifestation and impacts of these phenomena across mobilizing groups (Bell 2016; Bracey 2016, 2021; Durham 2024; Oliver 2017; W. Smith 2020; Watkins Liu 2018). In this study, I supplement the former approaches with insights from Symbolic Interactionism and multiple critical theories of race and racism to provide partial remedies to these theoretical oversights.

Through analysis of qualitative interviews with thirty-six Black millennials in the U.S. about the meanings they attach to the Black Lives Matter movement, I advance us toward closing these gaps in multiple ways. In the empirical chapters, I illustrate and extend sociological understanding of three interpretive processes of meaning-making from the extant social movements literature: framing, collective memory, and prospectus. First, I extend the framing

perspective (Klandermans 1984; McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2019) beyond its traditional intra-movement lens to account for the way extra-movement actors construct their own meanings about the movement through a process I conceptualize as *external framing*. This new concept offers a way to more clearly understand the way perceptions of movements are built based on more than (or even in absence of exposure to) direct messages advanced by movement actors through collective action frames. In doing so, I provide an avenue through which scholars can examine the disconnect between intra-movement framing and frame alignment processes and the degree of frame resonance they achieve. External frames also provide an opportunity to better understand the rationale behind responses to movements by myriad groups, which have implications for movement trajectories and outcomes. Black millennials in the study constructed four primary *external frames* of BLM, characterizing the movement as affirming the value of Black life, calling out the persistence of (anti-Black) racism, helping to escape the burden of state-sanctioned violence, and achieving equality through structural change. In all four of these frames, their preexisting knowledge of the history and system of racial domination in America served as the primary foundation for the meanings they attached to the movement and the social change it pursued. Thus, the external frames in this analysis point to racial projects (Omi and Winant 2015) as an important concept for understanding race-based mobilization.

The second portion of the analysis explicates the powerful role of collective memory (Kubal and Becerra 2014) in shaping understandings of contemporary social movements. In this chapter, I discuss the way Black millennials' interpretations of BLM were directly tied to their understandings of the history of racism and Black mobilization efforts in America. Ultimately, I found that participants leveraged these collective memories to situate BLM within a long legacy

of Black liberation activism meant to challenge the white supremacist, anti-Black racial structure of American society. However, these collective memories were also the basis upon which they drew distinctions between both the forms and severity of racial oppression and the gender and sexuality dynamics between BLM and its predecessors. It is important to keep in mind that collective memories are renegotiated over time, constructed by various groups, may either align with or challenge the status quo, and have direct implications for movements that seek to tackle lingering issues targeted by similar movements of the past (Fleming and Morris 2015; Florini 2014; Harris 2006; Smit, Heinrich, and Broersma 2018; Weedon and Jordan 2012). Through this analysis, I document the emerging collective memory of BLM among Black millennials in order to provide a future reference point for examinations of memory construction about this movement. Their perspectives constitute an in-progress counter-memory of this movement which serves to explicate the way that BLM has mounted a challenge against the racial structure which continues to marginalize Black people in the U.S.

Finally, examining definitions and projections of success for BLM, the third empirical chapter interrogates the relationship between political opportunity structures (McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004), axes of domination (Oliver 2017), and prospectus for social change through activism (Brown 2016). I found three interrelated themes in Black millennials' responses to questions about what success for BLM would look like, whether they think it has or will achieve this success, and why. Black millennials in the study expressed a general skepticism about whether BLM would effectively produce social change, rooted in dialectical opposition between prospectus for cultural change versus structural change (Amenta and Polletta 2019; Amenta et al. 2010; Dyke and Taylor 2018; Earl 2004; Giugni 2008). While participants saw BLM as capable and effective in bringing about changes in racial discourse, stereotypes, and ideology, they saw

the system of racial oppression as entrenched and formidable enough to make achieving significant gains in legislation, policy, institutional reform, or liberation highly unlikely if not impossible. These findings demonstrate that Black millennial prospectus was more strongly determined by their understanding of race as an axis of domination than by their perspectives of the political opportunity structure. Thus, the dominant theoretical focus on whether the opportunity structure is “open” or “closed” overlooks the way axes of domination shape the POS in foundational ways for different groups. Following this logic, prospectus must be understood through a lens that accounts for the underlying systems of oppression that shape whether or not particular types of social change are perceived as ever being possible in a given society based on its history and structural formation.

Through these three investigations, I offer three broad enhancements of sociological understandings of mobilization. First, I illustrate the way interpretive processes through which meanings about movements are commonly constructed are predicated upon existing knowledge of social structure. In all three cases, Black millennials’ awareness and understandings of the way (anti-Black) racism functions as an all-encompassing axis of domination in the U.S. developed through centuries of history going back to the transatlantic slave trade was inextricably linked to the meanings they attached to the American Black Lives Matter movement. Hence, I reinforce the argument that theories of social movements that do not give primacy to historically constituted systems of domination—including but not limited to race—are likely to miss, obscure, or misinterpret movement dynamics produced by these systems. This dissertation offers a second contribution to the literature by answering calls to further the study of race-based mobilization from this angle, demonstrating that ubiquitous structures of oppression heavily determine the possibilities, interpretations, pursuit, manifestations, and

impacts of mobilization efforts. Future work should continue to explicitly incorporate these frameworks in studies of social movements which seek structural and hegemonic change. Finally, I laid the groundwork for what I plan to call a *systemic domination approach* to studying social movements, which will better account for the impact of axes of domination on mobilization processes, including but not limited to the three studied in this dissertation. I hope to more clearly develop this framework in future versions of this work.

A tension present throughout the analysis was participants' perceptions of BLM as either a reformative movement seeking to change the institution of policing or a revolutionary movement seeking to restructure the entire societal system in order to eradicate racism. Extant scholarship that focuses on the messaging and ideology of the movement characterizes BLM as a revolutionary movement, in alignment with statements of purpose put out by movement entities that are publicly available (Bailey and Leonard 2015; Bracey 2021; Black Lives Matter, n.d.; Movement 4 Black Lives n.d.; Clark, Dantzler, and Nickels 2018; Francia and Wright-Rigueur 2024; Ransby 2018; Ray 2020a). However, because the movement is ongoing and its most high-profile actions and outcomes have been in response to instances of state-sanctioned violence (Ray 2022), sometimes the revolutionary character of the movement seems to be obscured in favor of focus on reforms in this area. Further, because these issues highlighted by BLM continue to plague the Black community (Bunn 2022; Woodall, Small, and Navarro 2024), it may be hard for people to see the movement in a revolutionary light. The Black millennial perspectives analyzed in this dissertation illustrate the way revolutionary movements like BLM may be subjectively understood as reformative in some capacity as they seek change in particular areas of social life meant to push forward toward the ultimate goal of total transformation of the racial structure, and particularly when that transformation remains unachieved.

While this study focused on race-based movements, this approach has implications for understanding all forms of mobilization operating within systems of domination. Most obvious is its capacity to provide a fuller picture of the reciprocal relationship between meaning-making and social structure for movements carried out in response to other axes of domination (e.g. patriarchy, heteronormativity, or capitalism) (Delinder 2014; McCammon et al. 2001). Just like with race-based mobilization, achieving holistic understanding of challenges to these other systems is unlikely through use of generalized theories that do not expressly identify and critically consider how they are organized to subjugate particular groups (Bracey 2016, 2021; Fleming and Morris 2015; Mansbridge and Morris 2017; Oliver 2017; Watkins Liu 2018). Centering axes of domination in the study of social movements also facilitates examination of matrices of domination (the broader organization of multiple co-existing and co-constituting systems of oppression), how they are perpetuated by the state, and how groups resist these intersectional, compounded forms of oppression (Collins 2000; Dupuis-Déri 2016; Peretz 2021). Further, a systemic domination approach allows for deeper understanding of the ways axes and matrices of domination shape mobilization of dominant social groups (Oliver 2017; Watkins Liu 2018), whether in pursuit of specific interests (such as the environmental movement) or maintenance of the existing status quo (e.g. white nationalism). Future work should build on the insights laid out in this dissertation to specify theoretical models of the relationship between systems of domination and the social structures, movements, and interpretive processes that happen within, and apply these models in research on other mobilization efforts by various social groups throughout history.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction and Verbal Verification of Consent

Thank you for your interest in my study on black millennials and Black Lives Matter! The audio recording is now on with your consent off the record, and I am now going to confirm your consent while the recording is on. Please verbally confirm that you have reviewed the study information sheet by saying “I understand the topic and procedures of this interview.” [Pause]. Thank you. Now, please confirm your consent to participation in this study by saying “Yes, I consent to participation in this study.” [Pause]. Thank you, and lastly, please confirm that you are okay with your interview being audio recorded by saying “I consent to this interview being audio recorded.” [Pause]. Great! Throughout the interview, I will also refer to Black Lives Matter as “BLM.” Do you have any questions before we begin?

Main Interview Questions

1. To start, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What made you interested in participating in this study?

2. Tell me what you know about Black Lives Matter

What do you think BLM is trying to accomplish?

What IS BLM?

Why do you think BLM was created?

What events do you think served as catalysts for its creation?

Why do you think BLM developed when it did rather than at other points?

How do you think BLM is structured?

Who do you think is involved in BLM?

Who do you think BLM represents?

Why these people?

Why not others?

3. Do you identify with BLM and those who participate? Why/Why not?

How much or to what extent?

Have you ever participated in anything BLM related? Why/Why not?

If you haven't, would you? Why/Why not?

If you have, how has this experience shaped your perspective? Why?

Do you support BLM? Why/why not?

4. Where or how have you gotten information about BLM?

What influence, if any, has information on social media had on your perspectives of BLM? Why has it had this influence?

What types of accounts or users do you see this information from on social media? Does this affect how you view the information?

What influence, if any, has information in news media had on your perspectives of BLM?
Why has it had this influence?
How would you compare the way that social media and news media have shaped your opinion on BLM?
Have you intentionally sought out information on BLM? Why/Why not?
How has this information shaped your perspective? Why?

5. If you had to make a prediction, what do you think will happen to BLM in the future?

Will the movement be successful? Why/Why not?
What would “success” look like in your opinion?
How long do you think the movement will last? Why?
How do you think BLM compares to past Black movements in the U.S.?
Will the movement be as significant in history as the 1960s Civil Rights Movement?
Why/Why not?

6. Can you think of anything else I should know about your perspective on BLM that we haven't discussed?

Thank you

This concludes the interview portion of the study. Thank you for your participation! Will you also fill out a demographic questionnaire? The data will not be linked to you directly since I am not collecting any personal identifiers such as your name. [Pause]. Great! Thank you again for your contribution to this research.

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How old are you as of your most recent birthday? _____
2. What sex were you assigned at birth? (e.g. on your birth certificate)
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other (please specify): _____
3. How do you identify in terms of gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other (please specify): _____
4. What is your sexual orientation?
 - a. Straight
 - b. Gay
 - c. Lesbian
 - d. Bisexual
 - e. Other (please specify): _____
5. What is your race/ethnicity? Choose all that apply.
 - a. White
 - b. Black/African American
 - c. Asian
 - d. Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
 - e. American Indian/Alaska Native
 - f. Latinx
 - g. Other (please specify): _____
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Less than high school
 - b. High school diploma/GED
 - c. Some college
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Some graduate study
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Professional Doctoral Degree (J.D., MD, etc.)
 - h. Doctor of Philosophy
7. What geographic region of the United States are you originally from?
 - a. West
 - b. Northeast
 - c. South
 - d. Midwest
 - e. If from outside the U.S., please specify: _____
8. What region do you live in now?

- a. West
 - b. Northeast
 - c. South
 - d. Midwest
9. How would you currently characterize yourself in terms of social class?
- a. Upper class
 - b. Upper-middle-class
 - c. Middle-class
 - d. Lower-middle-class
 - e. Working-class
 - f. Lower-class
10. How would you characterize your family growing up in terms of social class?
- a. Upper class
 - b. Upper-middle-class
 - c. Middle-class
 - d. Lower-middle-class
 - e. Working-class
 - f. Lower-class
11. What is your current annual income?
- a. Less than \$25,000
 - b. \$25,000-\$49,999
 - c. \$50,000-\$74,999
 - d. \$75,000-\$99,999
 - e. \$100,000
12. What is your current occupation? _____
13. What political party do you most identify with?
- a. Democrat
 - b. Republican
 - c. Other (please specify): _____
14. How would you characterize yourself in terms of political ideology?
- a. Very liberal
 - b. Liberal
 - c. Moderate
 - d. Conservative
 - e. Very conservative
 - f. Other (please specify): _____

APPENDIX C: TABLE 1

Table 1: Sample Demographic Distribution (N=36)

Age	Sex	Gender	Sex. Orientation	Race/Ethnicity
22-24: 10	Male: 8	Male: 8	Straight: 26	Black alone: 30
25-27: 10	Female: 28	Female: 28	Bisexual: 4	Black+: 6
28-30: 7			Pansexual: 2	
31-33: 5			Queer: 4	
34-35: 4				

Education	SIC Family	SIC Current	Income in USD	Occupation
Voc/Trade: 1	Uppermid: 5	Uppermid: 5	<25K: 16	Manager/
Some College: 3	Middle: 12	Middle: 7	25K-<50K: 8	Professional: 9
Bachelors: 6	Lowermid: 5	Lowermid: 14	50K-<75K: 8	Serv/Trade: 3
Some Grad: 6	Working: 11	Working: 9	75K-<100K: 2	Student: 16
Masters: 17	Lower: 3	Lower: 1	≥100K: 2	Higher ED: 5
PhD: 3		Uppermob: 12		Military: 2
		Downmob: 24		Other: 1

Org. Region	Current Region	Political Party	Pol. Ideology
West: 8	West: 5	Democrat: 28	Radical: 2
Northeast: 14	Northeast: 17	Republican: 0	(V) Progress: 2
South: 6	South: 9	Other: 8	Very Liberal: 11
Midwest: 6	Midwest: 5		Liberal: 13
Outside U.S.: 2	Shift: 13		Moderate: 8

Notes: Age was collected in years and then organized into five categories for inclusion in the table. The questionnaire included separate questions for sex and gender, both of which could be answered with male, female, or other in order to capture intersex, trans, fluid, and nonbinary identities (although none were present). Sexual orientation options included straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other (with specification). For race/ethnicity, “Black alone” refers to monoracial Black people, while “Black+” represents those who identified as both Black and one or more other racial or ethnic categories. The region variables are reflected as measured in the demographic questionnaire. The two respondents who were originally from outside the U.S. originated from Liberia and Spain. “Shift” in region of residence captures the number of respondents who lived in a different region at the time of the interview than where they were born. Education was measured across 8 categories from less than a high school diploma to a doctoral degree; no respondents had less than a high school diploma or GED and none had a professional degree (J.D., MD, etc.). Self-identified class (SIC) was measured across 6 categories from upper to lower-class for both their current status and their family of origin. None of the respondents self-identified as upper class either in childhood or currently. “Uppermob” and “Downmob” capture how many respondents perceive themselves as experiencing upward or downward mobility in relation to their family of origin. Income in USD is listed as measured in the demographic questionnaire. Answers to the open-ended occupation question are collapsed into categories adapted from the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) categories. Political Party is listed as measured in the demographic questionnaire; those in the other category include independents, democratic socialists, and those with no specific party affiliation. Political ideology was measured across 5 categories from very liberal to very conservative. None of the respondents identified as (very) conservative. Those who identified as radical or (very) progressive felt that the five categories provided did not adequately capture their political ideologies.

APPENDIX D: TABLE 2

Table 2: Participant Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Racial/Ethnic Background	Education	Occupation & Income	Political Ideology & Party Identification
Adrienne	25	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	SC	Customer Service, \$25K - <\$50K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Afia	35	Cisgender Female	Pansexual	Black American	PhD	College Professor, \$75K - <\$100K	Radical, Independent
Alexis	30	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democrat
Angie	23	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black/Latinx American	SGS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Very Liberal, Unaffiliated
Ashley	28	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Bernice	31	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	BA/BS	Nonprofit Employee, \$50K - <\$75K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Camille	24	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	SGS	Graduate Student and Domestic Violence Advocate, \$25K - <\$50K	Liberal, Democrat
Carmichael	24	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democratic Socialist

Coco	31	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black, Liberian Immigrant	MA/MS	Public Health Officer, \$50K - <\$75K	Liberal, Democrat
Crystal	29	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democrat
Danielle	24	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Radical, Unaffiliated
Destiny	24	Cisgender Female	Queer	Black American	BA/BS	Artist and Retail Employee, Less than \$25K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Elena	34	Cisgender Female	Pansexual	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student and Educator, \$25K - <\$50K	Moderate, Democrat
Eve	33	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democrat
Harmony	27	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	SGS	Higher Education Administrator, \$50K - <\$75K	Liberal, Democrat
Harper	28	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	BA/BS	US Navy, \$25K - <\$50K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Imani	33	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	PhD	College Professor, \$50K - <\$75K	Liberal, Democrat
Indya	26	Cisgender Female	Queer	Black/Spanish/Arab, Spanish Immigrant	SGS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Very Progressive, Unaffiliated

Jacob	24	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	SGS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democrat
Jocelyn	23	Cisgender Female	Queer	White/Black American, Caribbean Descent	SGS	Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Kamar	29	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Development Officer, \$50K - <\$75K	Moderate, Unaffiliated
Kenneth	27	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	BA/BS	Corporate Sales, \$100,000+	Moderate, Democrat
Kevin	22	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black/White American	SC	Automotive Detailer, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democrat
Maddie	27	Cisgender Female	Queer	Black American, Caribbean Descent	MA/MS	Higher Education Administrator, \$50K - <\$75K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Maia	27	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Policy Associate, \$50K - <\$75K	Progressive, Democrat
Monique	27	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Medical Student, Less than \$25K	Liberal, Democrat
Rachel	28	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	Black/White American	VOC	Homemaker, Less than \$25K	Moderate, Democrat
Riley	25	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	Black American	BA/BS	Retail Manager, \$25K - <\$50K	Moderate, Democrat

Shakisha	34	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Career Planning Specialist, \$25K - <\$50K	Liberal, Democrat
Shawn	27	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	BA/BS	Caretaker, \$25K - <\$50K	Liberal, Democrat
Shay	34	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	PhD	Psychologist, \$100,000+	Moderate, Democrat
Sherryl	33	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Army Lieutenant, Educator, and Graduate Student, \$75K - <\$100K	Very Liberal, Unaffiliated
Sierra	24	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Graduate Student, \$25K - <\$50K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Steven	33	Cisgender Male	Straight	Black American	MA/MS	Higher Education Administrator, \$50K - <\$75K	Moderate, Democrat
Sunday	27	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	Black American	MA/MS	Higher Education Administrator and Graduate Student, Less than \$25K	Very Liberal, Democrat
Zahra	24	Cisgender Female	Straight	Black/Asian American	SC	Undergraduate Student, Less than \$25K	Moderate, Democrat/ Independent

Notes: This is an abbreviated summary of participants' demographic characteristics. For the education variable, SC refers to some college, SGS refers to some graduate study, VOC refers to vocational/technical education, BA/BS refers to any bachelor's degree, and MA/MS refers to any master's level degree.

APPENDIX E: TABLE 3

Table 3: Participant Descriptions

Name	Description
Adrienne	A 25-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a middle-class family in the Midwestern region of the U.S. At the time of the interview she was an undergraduate student at a university in the Northeast, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 in a customer service job. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.
Afia	A 35-year-old pansexual woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had earned a PhD, identified as upper-middle-class, and was making \$75,000-100,000 as a professor at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as radical and is registered as an Independent.
Alexis	A 30-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeast. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a PhD student at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
Angie	A 23-year-old straight, biracial woman of Black and Latinx heritage. She was raised in a working-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had obtained a bachelor's degree, identified as working-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate assistant pursuing a master's degree at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as very liberal, but does not identify with a political party.
Ashley	A 28-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family in the Midwestern U.S. At the time of the interview she had achieved a master's degree, identified as working-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate student pursuing a PhD at a university in the Midwest. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.
Bernice	A 31-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in an upper-middle-class family in the Midwest. At the time of the interview she had earned a bachelor's degree, identified as middle-class,

and was making \$50,000-75,000 as an employee at a nonprofit organization in the South. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.

- Camille A 24-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family in the Northeast. At the time of the interview she had completed some graduate study, identified as working-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 as a domestic violence advocate while pursuing graduate school. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Carmichael A 24-year-old straight man who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. He was raised in a middle-class family in the South. At the time of the interview he had earned a master's degree, identified as middle-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate student pursuing a PhD at a university in the Midwest. Politically, he identified as a liberal Democratic Socialist.
- Coco A 31-year-old straight woman who identifies as Black and is of African descent. She was raised in a working-class family in an African country and came to the U.S. for college. At the time of the interview she had completed a master's degree, was living in the Northeastern U.S., identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 in the public health sector. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Crystal A 29-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family in the South. At the time of the interview she had achieved a master's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate student pursuing her PhD at a university in the South. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Danielle A 24-year-old bisexual woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family in the South. At the time of the interview, she had achieved a master's degree, identified as working-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a PhD student at a university in the South. Politically, she identifies as radical and does not identify with a political party.
- Destiny A 24-year-old queer woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family in the Midwest. At the time of the interview she had earned a bachelor's degree, identified as lower-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as an artist and part-time retail employee in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.
- Elena A 34-year-old pansexual woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a lower-middle-class family in the South. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as lower-

middle-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 working as an educator in the South while pursuing a PhD. Politically, she identifies as a moderate Democrat.

- Eve A 33-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview she had completed a master's degree, identified as working-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a PhD student. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Harmony A 27-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a lower-middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had completed some graduate study, identified as middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 as a higher education professional at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Harper A 28-year-old straight man who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. He was raised in an upper-middle-class family in the South. At the time of the interview he had earned a bachelor's degree, identified as working-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 in the U.S. Navy, stationed on the West Coast. Politically, he identifies as a very liberal Democrat.
- Imani A 33-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a middle-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview she had earned a PhD, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 as a professor in the South. Politically, she identifies as a liberal democrat.
- Indya A 26-year-old queer, multiracial woman of Black/African American, Spanish, and Arab descent. She grew up in an upper-middle-class family in Spain. At the time of the interview she had completed some graduate study, identified as middle-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate assistant while pursuing a PhD at a university in the Midwest. Politically, she identified as very progressive ideologically while seeing points on both sides of the political aisle.
- Jacob A 24-year-old straight man who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. He was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview he had completed a bachelor's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate assistant pursuing a master's degree at a university in the South. Politically, he identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Jocelyn A 23-year-old queer, biracial woman of white and Afro-Caribbean heritage. She was in a lower-class family in the South. At the time of the interview she identified as lower-middle-class and was making less than \$25,000 as a master's student at a university in the South. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.

- Kamar A 29-year-old straight man who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. He grew up in a middle-class family in the Midwestern U.S. At the time of the interview he had earned a master's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 as a development officer. Politically, he identified as ideologically moderate and was not affiliated with a political party.
- Kenneth A 27-year-old straight man who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. He was raised in a lower-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview he had completed a bachelor's degree and considered himself lower-middle-class despite making over \$100,000 in corporate sales on the West Coast. Politically, he identifies as a moderate Democrat.
- Kevin A 22-year-old straight, biracial man of Black and white descent. He was raised in a middle-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview he had completed some college but was not currently in school, identified as working-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as an automotive detailer on the West Coast. Politically, he identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Maddie A 27-year-old queer woman of Afro-Caribbean descent. She grew up in a lower-middle-class family in the Northeast. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as upper-middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 as a student affairs administrator at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.
- Maia A 27-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a lower-middle-class family in the Northeast. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 working in the policy arena in the Northeast. Politically, she identified as a progressive Democrat.
- Monique A 27-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in an upper-middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had achieved a master's degree, identified as middle-class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a medical school student at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Rachel A 28-year-old bisexual, biracial woman of white and Black descent. She was raised in an upper-middle-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview she had completed vocational school, identified as upper-middle-class, and made less than \$25,000 as a homemaker in the South. Politically, she identifies as a moderate Democrat.

- Riley A 25-year-old bisexual woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had earned a bachelor's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 in a managerial position in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a moderate Democrat.
- Shakisha A 34-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview she had achieved a master's degree, identified as working-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 as a career planning specialist in the South. Politically, she identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Shawn A 27-year-old straight man who identifies exclusively as Black/African American. He was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview he had completed a bachelor's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 as a caretaker in the Northeast. Politically, he identifies as a liberal Democrat.
- Shay A 34-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a lower-middle-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview she had earned a PhD, identified as upper-middle-class, and was making over \$100,000 as a psychologist on the West Coast. Politically, she identifies as a moderate Democrat.
- Sherryl A 33-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as upper-middle-class, and was making \$75,000-100,000 as an educator, U.S. military Lieutenant, and PhD student in the Northeast. Politically, she identified as very liberal in terms of ideology but said she sees points on both sides of the party line.
- Sierra A 24-year-old straight woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a lower-class family in the Midwest. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as middle-class, and was making \$25,000-50,000 as a PhD student at a university in the Midwest. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.
- Steven A 33-year-old straight man who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. He was raised in a middle-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview he had earned a master's degree, identified as lower-middle-class, and was making \$50,000-75,000 as an academic advisor at a university in the Northeast. Politically, he identifies as a moderate Democrat.
- Sunday A 27-year-old bisexual woman who exclusively identifies as Black/African American. She was raised in a working-class family in the Northeastern U.S. At the time of the interview she had earned a master's degree, identified as lower-middle-

class, and was making less than \$25,000 as a graduate assistant pursuing a PhD at a university in the Northeast. Politically, she identifies as a very liberal Democrat.

Zahra A 24-year-old straight, biracial woman of Black and Asian heritage. She was raised in a working-class family on the West Coast. At the time of the interview she was an undergraduate student at a university on the West Coast, making less than \$25,000 per year. Politically, she identifies as a moderate independent who leans more toward the democratic party.

Notes: The descriptions in this table reflect the full set of characteristics of each participant collected by the demographic questionnaire. These include age, sex, gender, sexuality, racial/ethnic background, region of origin, region of current residence, self-identified family class background, current self-identified class status, educational attainment, income, occupation, political ideology, and political party identification.

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