

Black Lives Matter: a Continuing Revolution



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Abstract

This essay seeks to understand the reason as to why people in the 21st century still need to take to the streets in protest to raise awareness for inequalities built into a governmental system. Why a movement such as Black Lives Matter is needed in a developed country such as the United States to acquire cultural and racial awareness. The United States have ended the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow but the notion of colorblindness in the Obama age is shaking the idea of a 'post-racial' era of the United States. Via a reading of Michelle Alexander's view on mass incarceration as the 'New Jim Crow', Keeyanga-Yamahtta Taylor's interpretation of Black Lives Matter, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich's understanding of colorblindness I suggest that the United States needs a movement that lays bare the systemic inequalities of the country because it cannot identify these notions on its own account.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, Mass Incarceration, Colorblindness, Racial Inequalities, Institutionalized Racism, Militarization of the Police.

Preface

I live in a small town, Well, in the southern region of the Netherlands. In my village there is a castle, which is owned by Emerson College in Boston. Twice a year a group of 80 American students come and study at the castle and I often encounter them in the bar where I work. I am one of their first contacts into my hometown as well as the Netherlands and we often have animated conversations about the differences between the Netherlands and the United States. We also talk a lot about racial disparities and how our countries handle these differences. I have learned a lot from these students and these conversations during the years and as I grow older I feel I have to apologize to the American students about how the Dutch people handle different nationalities.

This feeling of unease has also guided my emotions and peaked my interest. Therefore race and racial inequalities have always been at the top of my go-to area whenever I was allowed to choose my own theme for an essay. The concept of slavery and the way the United States dealt with this notion is highly interesting to me. I am a Dutch native and although we were important figures in the slave trade, we as Dutch citizens do not have the same collective memory of slavery as the people of the United States have. Therefore the idea of slavery does not reinvigorate the same negative connotations to (some of) us as it does for American people. Overt and covert racism and racial inequalities are, finally, being put on the agenda of the Netherlands in more overt fashion. As a white female living in the western world I feel it is my responsibility to be open minded and make sure that I am thoughtful towards every belief and race, both in my actions and words.

Introduction

The last couple of years have shown us that racism is still very much present in our modern day societies. Even though we portray ourselves as living in a post-racist society, riots, police killings and even ‘zwarte piet’ show us that we still have a lot to learn and to gain. In the United States black voices gather themselves under the Black Lives Matter movement and many (American) people automatically think back to the Civil Rights Movement. I was greatly interested to learn that a movement such as Black Lives Matter is needed in the 21st century.

My research question will therefore be; To what extent is a movement such as Black Lives Matter still necessary in a developed country such as the United States to acquire cultural and racial awareness.

I will try to answer my research question through extensive use of scholarly written essays and books. To further cement my findings I will also use several articles published online by established authors.

First I will have to look at the persistence of race and racial inequalities in the United States and the perceived color blindness of the nation. To do this I will use the theory of Frederick C. Harris and Robert C Lieberman. In their book *Beyond Discrimination* Harris and Lieberman dedicate several chapters to the color blindness and prevalent racial inequalities in the United States. In the introduction to their book Harris and Lieberman outline the changes and improvements that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's have made in the United States of America but note that these changes and improvements still have not closed the gap between racial and ethnic minorities. “Beneath the surface of racism and discrimination lay another layer of institutions and processes that have made racial inequality persist” (Harris and Lieberman 2). Harris and Lieberman take note of the influence of the election of President Obama and how this election seemed to punctuate the long civil rights struggle and mark the dawn of a new era in American politics in which race would no longer stand as a barrier to opportunity or achievement (Harris and Lieberman 2). Many other scholars seem to agree with Harris and Lieberman on this point. Even though the United States, as a country, has gone through so many changes in its racial domain, these changes have left behind a puzzling, not to say disastrous, residue of inflexibility in patterns of racial inequality. Color blindness in American politics is multilayered and complex according to Harris and Lieberman and the contemporary color-blind racial alliance is composed largely of those who are at best indifferent to claims for substantive racial equality, suggesting that the

transformation of American race politics is far from complete (Harris and Lieberman 4). What is more, some observers use the ‘racism thesis’ to suggest that “even though explicit expressions of racial prejudice are frowned upon, racial stereotypes remain a powerful framing device that can shape social and political behavior and policy debates, often in ways that remain hidden behind a norm of color-blind equality” (Harris and Lieberman 6). Harris and Lieberman are of the opinion that these contemporary racial inequalities pose a dual challenge for social scientists and policy analyst. In addition, racial identity remains to this day a significant predictor of class status and life chances (1).

To shed further light on the Black Lives Matter movement I will use Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor starts her book with a quote by Martin Luther King from his speech ‘A Testament of Hope’ (1969). In this Testament of Hope King says that in these trying circumstances, the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is a fight that is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws – racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of American society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggest that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced (Taylor). Taylor then notes that these words by Martin Luther King show painful continuities between the present and the past that are there to remind us that, in some cases, the past is not yet past. In addition, these words by King could easily describe the emergence of this protest movement (Taylor). What started off as a local struggle of ordinary Black people in Ferguson, who for more than one hundred days “slammed the door shut on deadening passivity” in the pursuit of justice for Brown, snowballed into a national movement against police brutality and daily police killings of unarmed African Americans (Taylor). Taylor also acknowledges that the United States is often referred to as a “color-blind” or “postracial” society, where race may once have been an obstacle to a successful life and that today we are told that race does not matter. That the success of a few, such as President Obama, is upheld as a vindication of the United States color blindness and a testament to the transcendence of its racist past. Where there is bad treatment on the basis of race, it is viewed as the product of lapsed personal behavior and morality, but it is “no longer endemic, or sanctioned by law and custom,” as President Obama suggested in a speech to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act (Taylor).

Political activist, scholar and author Angela Y Davis has collected several essays, interviews and speeches in her book *Freedom is a Constant Struggle; Ferguson, Palestine*

and the Foundations of a Movement that illuminate the connections between struggles against state violence and oppression throughout history and around the world. Davis also notes that the election of the first African American president of the United States shines a new light on the color blindness of America. According to Davis the election of President Barack Obama was widely seen as “heralding the advent of a new, post racial era” (Davis 77). Although racist state violence has always been a consistent factor in the history of African American people living in the United States, this violence has become especially noteworthy during the administration of the first African American president. According to Davis the sheer persistence of police killings of Black youth contradicts the assumption that these are isolated aberrations. As Davis sees this, the killings of young black men like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown by police or vigilantes represent “an uninterrupted stream of racist violence, both official and extralegal, from slave patrols and the Ku Klux Klan to contemporary profiling practices and present-day vigilantes” (Davis 77).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich are also two scholars who have done extensive research on the connection of color blindness and the election of President Barack Obama. In their article they counter the myth that “it is accepted dogma among whites in the United States that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans” (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). A new regime has formed itself called ‘new racism’ and Bonilla-Silva says that the existing racial inequality in the United States is the product of a new racial regime (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich also argue that there are two central ways in which the election of President Barack Obama relates to colorblind racism. Firstly, Obama has become a cultural symbol compatible with colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 198). Obama has become a symbol with a different meaning to white and black people. To black people he became a beacon of hope and a symbol of their possibilities. To white people the election of Obama was compatible with their belief that America was indeed a colorblind nation (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 198). Secondly, Obama has aligned himself with colorblind racism through his own political stand on race and the way he has positioned himself. The speech ‘A More Perfect Union’ voiced Obama’s concern that race was still an issue that the “nation could not afford to ignore” (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 201). However, in that same speech he implied that racism is a “two-way street in his conciliatory reference to a similar anger among working- and middle-class white American” (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 201).

Michelle Alexander is the author of the book *The New Jim Crow; Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander has done extensive research for her book and also

challenges the notion that the election of President Barack Obama has ushered in a new era of colorblindness. She does so through using the War on Drugs as a catalyst for the incarceration rate of black men. Alexander also argues that mass incarceration tends to be “categorized as a criminal justice issue as opposed to a racial justice or civil rights issue (or crisis)” (Alexander 9). Alexander calls this phenomenon of mass incarceration the New Jim Crow of the 21st century. Like Jim Crow, “mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (Alexander 13).

Black Lives matter is a movement that was created in 2012 and therefore a lot of research still needs to be done on this movement. However, some scholars have already devoted their time to this movement and have discussed issues such as their leadership, their bold confrontations with state power, their goal for racial and gender equality, their demands for the immediate end of the murder of black people, and the unnecessary police and state violence. In addition, BLM has also engendered a lot of attention in the media. My thesis will build on their findings and elaborate on the necessity of a movement such as Black Lives matter.

In Chapter 1 I will trace the historical events related to the racial issues confronting the nation. For the purpose of my thesis I have looked at historical events up to the Nixon era and have then made the jump to the Obama administration. This chapter describes the control of African Americans through slavery and the birth of racial tension. This chapter also tries to shed light on the perceived colorblindness of the American nation and how the election of President Barack Obama ushered in an age of colorblind rhetoric. Even though an African-American man is leading the greatest nation on earth the United States is still filled with institutions and processes that have made racial inequality persist.

Chapter 2 turns our attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. The chapter will start off with a confrontational summation of some of the innocent black lives that were taken by policemen. This chapter debunks the notion of ‘All Lives Matter.’ It will do so through explaining the origin of the Black Lives Matter movement, that it is a movement that includes nearly a dozen black-led organizations. The female voice will also shine through in this chapter and the fact that gender equality is just as important as racial equality. In short, this chapter explains the birth of Black Lives matter and how this movement seems to gather speed and importance.

Police violence, the militarization of the police and mass incarceration will be described in some detail in chapter 3. This chapter will do away with the notion of ‘Blue

Lives Matter.’ Police forces over time seem to have transformed into soldiers who need to ‘keep and restore’ the peace. This chapter will give several examples on how the United States militarizes its police forces. Ever since Nixon started his War on Drugs incarceration rates for black men have soared. Once swept into the system a convicted felon is stripped from almost every right and the chances of truly being free are very slim. When convicted offenders are released they end up in a vicious circle. They are discriminated against, legally, for as long as they will live and as a consequence will most likely end up back in prison.

Chapter 1

Racial Inequalities and American “Colorblindness”

America must change because twenty-three million black citizens will no longer live supinely in a wretched past. They have left the valley of despair; they have found strength in struggle. Joined by white allies, they will shake the prison walls until they fall. America must change.

-Martin Luther King Jr. “A Testament of Hope” 1969

To be able to understand today’s racial inequalities and tensions in the United States of America we first have to take a look at history. Then we can try and give an answer as to why in a country as dedicated to and founded on the principles of freedom and equality it is still possible that racism and racial inequalities still seem to permeate through every (state sponsored) institution in the United States of America.

The racial tension we know today stems from the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This trade forcibly brought as many as 388.000 Africans to colonial America and the United States between 1619 and 1865, when Congress abolished slavery nationwide by passing the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (Katel). The Constitution of the United States of America was written seventy-eight years earlier, in 1787. The delegates who gathered to write the Constitution compromised on the issue of slave trade to be able to keep the South in the Union. The North had already banned the trading of slaves in several states and several delegates were adamant to end the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Southerners resisted this ban and the compromise meant that slavery was able to flourish and survive in states where it already existed up to 1808 (Katel, Thomas 502).

At the time of the Civil War (1861-1865), President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 (Schwartz 590), freeing the slaves in Confederate states. In 1865 the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery was ratified and was followed three years later by the 14th Amendment. This Amendment defined anyone who was born in the United States of America as a citizen and entitled to “equal protection of the laws” (Jillson 557).

When Lincoln’s successor, President Andrew Johnson, attempted to create social and political equality in the South he met a lot of white backlash and ultimately the white man won. The post-Civil War system of white domination became known in the 1890s as Jim Crow (Higginbotham 64). Jim Crow is the generic name for all of the laws and practices that enforced segregation of black and white people in the American south from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century (Jillson 448). The governments of

the Southern states in turn adopted laws that allowed for the apprehension and arrest of black people who had no job and their penalty would be forced labor – or more commonly known – slavery (Higginbotham 64).

In 1870 the 15th Amendment was adopted this Amendment prohibited states from limiting or denying the right to vote because of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Congress followed the 15th Amendment up with the Enforcement Act. The Enforcement Act outlined racist violence as a federal crime.

The violence against black people carried on and in the 1870’s the national police tide reallocated against Reconstruction, as Southern white resistance hardened and many Northern politicians grew reluctant to crush opposition (Katel). In 1877, the contested presidential election resulted in a Democratic-Republican deal. “The Democrats accepted Republican Rutherford B. Hayes as the winner, and Hayes pulled federal troops out of Louisiana and South Carolina” (Katel). This specific decision led to the cementation of “white supremacist politicians’ power” throughout the south. States such as Alabama, Florida and Georgia constructed a forced-labor system where thousands of black men had to work, often to their deaths, in mines, steel mills and lumber camps (Blackmon 395-396). According to the Equal Justice Initiative, the end of the Reconstruction took a deadly toll on black people’s lives. Nearly 4,000 blacks were lynched in 12 Southern States between 1877 and 1950 (Equal Justice Initiative 16).

In the early 20th century the United States would see a dramatic shift in its racial geography. African Americans started to relocate to the cities of the South, North, and West of the United States. This exodus of African Americans was precipitated by the collapse of the southern sharecropping system and the mass suburbanization of whites (Hall 1239). The African American men in the cities faced a lot of discrimination in the workforce and thus were plagued by unemployment and poor job security (Canaan 149). Without any job security and a steady income, many black people lived in poverty.

The Great Depression, which started in 1929, set in motion the New Deal programs. These programs were designed to get the United States out of the Great Depression and in an ironic twist helped to uphold racial barriers such as “the barring of African Americans from access to decent jobs, schools, and homes, as well as to the commercialized leisure spaces, such as theaters and dancehalls, that increasingly symbolized making it in America for white ethnics en route to the middle class” (Hall 1240). It was during the New Deal era that reformers, guided by “gendered” and “raced” imagination, built racial and gender inequality into the very foundation of the modern state (Hall 1240). One feature of this systemic

inequality lay in the two-track welfare system, a system of racial rule that structured social politics in the 1930s (Lieberman 37). This two track system was rooted in the principle that a house has a full-time male breadwinner who financially supports the wife and children and a dependent, non-wage earning wife at home (Hall 1241). This excluded people of color, since they were highly discriminated against in the workforce; many African American men were unable to keep a steady job and therefore were not eligible for the chief benefits of the New Deal (Hall 1241).

Acts of the New Deal, legal segregation, police violence, and economic inequalities set the stage for the ‘Classical’ phase of the Civil Rights Movement (Hall 1251). The movement’s activists demanded equality. Integration that was expansive and radical, not an ending or abolition of something that once was – the legal separation of bodies by race – but a process of transforming institutions and building an equitable, democratic, multiracial, and multiethnic society (Hall 1252). The Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968 were the result of the actions of the Civil Rights Movement. These acts meant that discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin was forbidden. No person was to be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefit of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (Jillson 448). The Civil Rights acts were followed up by the voting rights act of 1965 this act prohibited the practices set in place by Jim Crow and sent federal marshals into the southern states to ensure that people of color are able to register and vote as well as participate in local and state elections (Jillson 449).

The challenges that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s faced can best be described in the words of Martin Luther King Jr. He called them the “evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society,” evils that reflected not just the legacy of slavery but also the perpetuation of that legacy during subsequent generations by racialized state policies that wove white privilege into the fabric of American culture and institutions according to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (Hall 1261).

Racial discrimination, sanctioned by law in the South and custom and public policy in the North over much of the twentieth century, continued to cause disparities between Blacks and whites in employment, poverty, housing quality, and access to education (Taylor). In the aftermath of the Black freedom struggles of the 1960s, removing race from the law and shifting attitudes regarding race were supposed to usher in a new period of unfettered Black success and achievement. Politicians no longer felt comfortable to display their racist tendencies due to the efforts of the movement and thus the United States entered an era of post-civil rights “colorblindness” (Taylor). Colorblindness is as slippery as the practices it

supports according to Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich. Jim Crow racism explained minorities' social standing "as the outcome of their imputed biological and moral inferiority" color-blind racism avoids such facile comments (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). Colorblindness rationalizes the status of minorities as "the product market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and their alleged cultural deficiencies for the lack of inclusion" (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending racial oppression in the past, according to some, color-blind racism provides the ideological armor for the 'new racism' regime (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). The colorblindness attitude seemed to help many politicians in rolling back the welfare state. It was now possible for Congress and the courts to strike down any claim of racial harm by African Americans because of the absence of racism from the law (Taylor). It is hard to believe that so soon after the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, the notion of colorblindness made it possible for the elected politicians to covertly show their ingrained racism. The political framework of colorblindness paved the way for politicians to separate Black hardships from the material conditions that activists had worked so hard to expose in the years before (Taylor).

The United States faced a new economic crisis in the early years of the 1970s. Protesters from the Civil Rights Movement demanded infrastructural investments to revive the poor housing situations many black people found themselves in. However, the "booming American economy of the postwar era was grinding to a halt" (Taylor). President Nixon was elected and functioned as a bridge between the civil rights era and a growing period of post racial, colorblind political paradigms. When Nixon got into office he, along with his officials, worked hard to change this new view on racism. Nixon narrowed the definition of racism to the intentions of individual actors while countering the idea of institutional racism by focusing on "freedom of choice" as a way to explain differential outcomes (Taylor). Nixon made it possible for people to believe that if someone was not able to achieve personal success, it was their own fault and not the fault of the system. With all the restrictions built into American society it is not hard to see that black people would, yet again, suffer the most. Nixon set the stage for institutionalized covert racism. He excluded intentional racist language from his speech and with the absence of racist speech, we are expected to infer the absence of racist action (Taylor). Nixon's new focus on "free society" and "choice" was intended to lower social inequality to individual behaviors. It was up to the citizens of the United States to make right or wrong choices but it was the individual, free of any social constraints, who was doing the choosing (Taylor). It is of course much easier to promote the idea of making do with less in the aftermath of the nation's longest economic expansion if the people who were asked to

make do with less were blamed for their own hardships (Taylor).

For the purpose of my thesis I will now make the jump from Nixon to the present day United States. The United States is often referred to these days as a “colorblind” or “post racial” society, where race may once have been an obstacle to a successful life. Today, we are told, race does not matter (Taylor 6). The problem with this is that the eradication of the legal apparatus does not necessarily mean the abolition of racism. Racism persists in a framework that is far more expansive, much vaster than the legal framework (Davis 16).

The words spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King at the beginning of this chapter can easily be transferred to the struggles black Americans face in the United States today. The United States has, as chronicled at the beginning of this chapter, a rather short but rich history – compared to the rest of the world – and sadly that history is also riddled with events many Americans wish to forget. Although this history is tainted by slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation, it has however, become accepted belief among many whites that the election of President Barack Obama proves the idea that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). Eliminating the race factor from ‘day to day life’ paves the way for racial inequalities and these existing racial inequalities in the United States are, according to Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, the product of a new racial regime, which can also be labeled ‘new racism’ (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). Racial oppression is still systemic in America, affecting all people, networks, and institutions (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). Contemporary racial inequalities in the United States are a serious policy problem according to Harris and Lieberman. Nearly half a century after the peak of the civil rights movement, racial identity remains a significant predictor of class status and life chances (Harris and Lieberman 1).

The election of President Barack Obama is used by many, especially white, people to show that the United States has entered a post-racial era. A black man in the White House shows to a lot of people that America has succeeded in ridding itself of all the negativity rooted in its past. It is, however, all false pretense and make-believe. Although many Black individuals have entered economic, social, and political hierarchies, an overwhelming number of Black people are subject to economic, educational, and carceral racism – even to a far greater extent than during the pre-civil rights era (Davis 2). The election of President Barack Obama brought new life into the colorblindness of the United States. Frank Rich is also one of those scholars who believes that the first African American President, “the Magic Negro”, was somehow expected to relieve a nation founded and built on slavery from the toxic burdens of centuries of history (Rich 32). A President must be colorblind according to many

citizens of the United States, even if those people themselves are not. (Rich 32).

Obama's link to the colorblind racism of the United States can be viewed in two ways according to Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich. Firstly Obama has become 'a cultural symbol,' an African American in the White House, something that the nation of the pre-Civil-War era would never have believed possible. And secondly, Obama positions himself in a colorblind rhetoric with his political stand on race (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 198). Obama instilled in many people the idea that if one worked hard enough, success would follow and it was up to the people themselves to create their own successes. People had to work hard and then would eventually see the fruits of their labor. If a black man was able to enter the White House, all roads were open to everyone. Obama became 'the new messiah of the Civil Rights Movement' to many blacks (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 198). For many white people Obama came to represent an Oprah or Tiger Woods figure, a black person who succeeded to 'overcome his blackness' and become successful as well as 'a national hero' (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 198). What many people fail to acknowledge here is the fact that these specific examples of successful people of color came from a solid (wealthy) background, enjoyed proper education or had special talents. If a black person does not come from an affluent milieu, does not have any specific talents or gifts to lift him or her to a higher level, chances to prosper and to break through racial barriers are slim to none.

President Barack Obama also helped in upholding the colorblindness of America via distancing himself from the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and positioning himself in a more 'white' setting (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 199). Obama's tactics were especially comforting to white people they did not see an African American man in the White House because Obama kept reminding the nation that he, too, was half-white (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 199). Barack Obama also did away with separate spheres and a white and black America when he said that "There's no black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America" (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 199). This is what makes the whole notion of colorblindness dangerous in taking race out of the equation it is believed to be common sense that everyone should have the same opportunities and when some people fall behind they have themselves to blame and not American society or (state sponsored) institutions. People of color remain socially and economically disadvantaged compared to whites (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 202).

Frederick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman are also scholars who believe that the election of President Barack Obama has ushered in a new era for the United States, one in which race would no longer stand as a barrier to opportunity or achievement (Harris and

Lieberman 2). Contemporary racial inequalities in the United States pose a dual challenge according to Harris and Lieberman. Nearly half a century after the peak of the civil rights movement, racial identity remains a significant predictor of class status and life chances. African Americans and other minority groups consistently lag behind whites, with severe consequences not only for the well-being of disadvantaged group members but also for the health of American democracy (Harris and Lieberman 1). In spite of everything there are several sources of inequality that still overlap and reinforce one another and heavily disadvantage people of color. These sources of inequality are mainly residency, education, employment, income, and wealth (Harris and Lieberman 1). As the labor-market and income inequality have grown and hardened in recent decades the racial gap has become more acute, not less (Harris and Lieberman 2). Harris and Lieberman are therefore of the opinion that the United States need to move away from the assumption that racial inequality is exclusively the consequence of factors that operate on an individual level (Harris and Lieberman 5). Prejudice is an important factor in this. Prejudice of white people towards black people sustains racial inequality and functions as a dangerous framing device, however, it is far less prevalent as it once was (Harris and Lieberman 6). If these belief systems are not done away with, striving for racial equality is virtually impossible. Mindsets had to change in the past and mindsets have to change now. Again the Western world is slowly coming out of another economic depression and it seems as though with every depression, in the 1920s, the 1970s and now, inequalities become clearer.

The Civil Rights revolution removed the most visible and blatant means of producing and reproducing racial inequality from American society. But beneath the surface of racism and discrimination “lay another layer of institutions and processes that have made racial inequality persist” (Harris and Lieberman 2). What is more is that it is important to understand “colorblindness” as much more than the denial of racism. Colorblindness has become the default setting for how Americans understand how race and racism work. It is repeatedly argued that the absence of racial insult means that racial discrimination is not at play. Colorblindness and “post racial” politics are entrusted in a false assumption that the United States is a place where “hard work makes the difference between those who are successful and those who are not” (Taylor).

False assumptions, systemic racial inequalities and colorblindness have sparked the formation of a new movement; Black Lives Matter (BLM). According to their own website, BLM is “an ideological and political intervention in a world where black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.” (blacklivesmatter) BLM demands the

immediate end of racist violence and the murder of black people at the hands of the state (Rickford 36). Coined in 2013 the movement is gaining momentum and in my next chapter I will clarify the origin of the movement as well as some of their focal points.

Chapter 2

Black Lives Matter and the Effort of Women.

Those who counter the slogan “Black Lives Matter” with what they assume is a more all-embracing slogan, “All Lives Matter”, are often embracing a strategy that glosses over the particular reasons why it is important to insist quite specifically on an end to racist violence... For most of our history the very category “human” has not embraced Black people and people of color. If indeed all lives mattered, we would not need to emphatically proclaim that “Black Lives Matter.”

- **Angela Y. Davis.** Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, And the Foundations of a Movement. 2016.

17-year-old and unarmed Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman on the 26th of February, 2012, after the two had an altercation in a Sanford, Fla., subdivision (Taylor, Sunburn 28). Zimmerman was cleared of all charges. On April 30th, 2014, Milwaukee police officer Christopher Manney fatally shoots Dontre Hamilton, an unarmed 31-year-old African American with a history of mental illness, in a downtown park (Sunburn 28). Trying to come up with an explanation Manney alleged that Dontre Hamilton, who appeared to be homeless, made an effort to grab Manney’s baton during a pat down. Manney then shot Hamilton 14 times in ‘self-defense.’ Manney was ultimately fired in October of that year but was never charged in the shooting (Sunburn 28). Eric Garner, 43 years old, was killed on July 17th, 2014, after being wrestled to the ground by New York City police. NYC police claimed that they tried to arrest Garner after he was illegally selling cigarettes (Sunburn 28). Garner was put in a chokehold and several video’s that were put online show that Garner repeatedly said ‘I can’t breathe.’ Again the officer responsible for Garners death was not indicted. Darren Wilson, a white Ferguson, Mo., police officer, fatally shoots unarmed 18-year old Michael Brown setting off months of unrest in the St. Louis area. Protests erupted nationwide in November when Wilson was not indicted in Brown’s death (Taylor, Sunburn 28). Tamir Rice, 12 is fatally shot and killed in a Cleveland park after police responded to a 911 call reporting a person with a gun. The caller had warned the police that it was possible that the gun may have been a fake, but the officers say they weren’t aware of that (Sunburn 29). Officer Timothy Loehmann shot Rice within seconds of arriving on the scene. Rice’s gun turned out to be a toy. Then there is the example of Walter Scott, a 50-year-old black man, who is shot and killed as he’s apparently fleeing North Charleston officer Michael Slager, 33 (Sunburn 29). Slager, who is white, alleged that Scott

reached for his Taser. A video recorded by a bystander appears to show Scott running away from the police officer as he's shot in the back eight times. The list of names of black people who were killed by police officers goes on and on.

The examples above are cases most commonly known to the general public and people know at least three, if not all, African American men killed at the hands of the police. What can be taken from all the mainstream media coverage of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the victims of police brutality is the simple fact that the most talked about killings all include male victims, Black men and boys. The African American female victim is often times completely ignored and it is this simple fact that is also very important to the founders of BLM (aapf.org). Neglecting to name the female and queer victims also shows that inequalities do not only exist in a society but they also exist within a movement (Ransby 32). Women have been on the receiving end of police violence as much as their male counterparts and can help explain the extent and impact of police brutality. Black women – like Rekia Boyd, Michelle Cusseaux, Tanisha Anderson, Shelly Frey, Sandra Bland, Yvette Smith, Eleanor Bumpurs and others – have also been killed, assaulted, and victimized by the police (Chatelain and Asoka 54, Hooker 2, Taylor). Police also view Black women's lives with skepticism and ultimately as less valuable, making their death and brutalization more likely, not less (Taylor). These examples have urged a growing number of activists within the Black Lives Matter movement to relocate their attention on how police brutality influences black women and others who have always been on the outskirts of the public conversation about race, “such as poor, elderly, gay and trans people”(Chatelain and Asoka 55). This shift in focus also underscores the movement's real triumph, making people aware of these brutalization's and engage supporters in “a vibrant model of democratic participation”(Rickford 36). The BLM movements' website also reiterates this in saying;

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity... How Black women bearing the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families is state violence. How Black queer and trans folks bear a unique burden from a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us, and that is state violence.

Historically speaking, movements for radical justice have often been framed around the question of masculinity. From the abolitionist movement to the civil rights movement, many of the key issues were framed around concerns that racial injustice harmed masculinity (Chatelain and Asoka 55). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor acknowledges the role women play in the BLM movement. She underscores that wherever struggle and organizing have emerged it often had a male face. For cases that develop a national profile a male lawyer or preacher or civil rights leader – such as Al Sharpton or Martin Luther King – is usually the most visible face (Taylor). This all changed after the riots in Ferguson and questions were raised as to why women were able to turn a string of protests into a movement. The fact that the ability of women to turn a string of protests into a movement is questioned is troublesome. Therefore it is very dangerous to do away with the role of black women in this movement. According to Taylor people then do away with the notion that black women have played a lesser role in previous movements (Taylor). Adding to this is that it is important to recognize that while women are organizing on behalf of victims of police brutality and cruelty broadly, they have to constantly remind the larger public that women are among those victims too, they want their names to be heard and recognized as well. Even though these women are putting their own bodies on the line for the movement, they also have to articulate that they too are fighting for all Black lives, including their own (Chatelain and Asoka 55).

The fight to recognize black female voices carries on. President Barack Obama has set up an initiative which is called My Brother's Keeper (Chatelain and Asoka 56, Taylor). This initiative is specifically aimed at young Black and Brown boys and teenagers, whose problems, it says, exceed the capacity of government policy to address. My Brother's Keeper relies on "corporate philanthropic donations, role models, and will power" (Taylor). My Brother's Keeper explicitly excludes Black girls and Black women and shows the sexism that is involved in the whole initiative. To Black women it yet again shows that their lives are not as valuable as Black men's lives; they do not matter. Black Lives Matter activists, by contrast try to articulate why it is so important to include women's voices. They set up an initiative called 'Say Her Name.' This initiative was launched in May 2015 and it documents and analyzes Black women's voices and experiences of police violence and explains what women lose when society ignores them (Chatelain and Asoka 54). Without 'Saying Her Name' leaders, men, and people of the United States fail to see how laws, policies, and the culture that underpin gender inequalities are reinforced by America's racial divide (Chatelain and Asoka 54). 'Say Her Name' ultimately fights the marginalization of the stories of Black women and by organizing vigils, rallies and other events in the name of murdered women and

girls, activists of the BLM try to make this clear to the public (Rickford 39).

Black Lives Matter was essentially born as a twitter hashtag, #blacklivesmatter (Ransby 31, Rickford 34, J. King). The hashtag was created in 2013 by Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi – California and New York-based organizers active in incarceration, immigration and domestic labor campaigns – after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Rickford 34, Chatelain and Asoka 55, J. King). In her article “How Three Friends Turned a Spontaneous Facebook Post into a Global Phenomenon” Jamilah King clarifies the beginning of the BLM movement. She states that Garza, upon hearing the verdict in Trayvon Martin’s case, wrote a so called ‘love note’ in which she said “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” She reeled in her friends Patrice Cullors and Opal Tometi and all three agreed with the statement that “Black Lives Matter was created out of a profound sense of black love” (J. King). The three women worked hard to get the hashtag out into the open and for people to use and recognize it. Colleagues and supporters were encouraged to share stories of why #blacklivesmatter, Jamilah King notes in her article. When Michael Brown was murdered at the hands of Darren Wilson the three women saw their hashtag being taken from social media and put to use in the streets, #blacklivesmatter became synonymous for the protests taking place across the country (J. King). BLM now functions as a common denominator for diverse organizing efforts – short or long term – across the United States. The expression has become synonym for the black outrage against police aggression and racist violence, “the utterance Black Lives Matter has produced a spirited, if decentralized movement” (Rickford 34).

BLM has managed to get rid of the notion that there is a ‘post-racial’ America and succeeded to reorient the entire national conversation on anti-Black racism (Petersen-Smith 2015). BLM is as much of an example of a Unites States-based class struggle as Occupy Wall Street was says Barbara Ransby. It has also done something very rare as Khury Petersen-Smith says in her article “Black Lives Matter; a New Movement Takes Shape.” According to Petersen-Smith BLM is able to escape the control of the ruling establishment and neither police efforts nor the Republicans or the Democrats are able to stop the movement. The ability to stop the movement might be compromised due to the fact that the BLM includes and works closely with nearly a dozen black led organizations. Among these groups are also several new organizations such as Dream Defenders, Black Youth Project 100, Justice League NYC, Million Hoodies, and We Charge Genocide (Ransby 31, Davis 86, Taylor).

Protester and members of the BLM have become very creative in getting the attention of the public. Most of the BLM aficionados have full heartedly embraced “the arena of the

streets” (Rickford 36). A main focus of the BLM movement is occupation of public event or places. They do so by organizing marches, “die-ins” where they lay on the floor/pavement for several minutes to hours, and rallies in multiple cities around the United States. This intrusion of everyday life is chosen by the activists to show the general public “the dramatizing routine attacks” on black lives (Rickford 36). Hashtags such as “Hands up, don’t shoot” and “shut it down” are therefore commonly known throughout the United States. BLM activist hope that these disruptive techniques will help them in spreading out their cause.

The largely female face of today’s BLM movement can easily be explained according to Taylor. Taylor believes that female leadership may have been a direct result of the deeply racist policing Black men have experienced in Ferguson (Taylor). According to the US Census Bureau, while there are 1,128 African American women between the ages of twenty – five and thirty-four living in Ferguson, there are only 577 African American men in this age group. More than 40 percent of Black men in both the 20-24 and 35-54 age groups in Ferguson are ‘missing’ (Taylor). But this is not just limited to Ferguson alone. Due to the racist policing of Black men across the United States nearly 1.5 million Black men are ‘missing’ – brutally taken from society by imprisonment or premature death (Taylor). To give this figure more emphasis and to put it more harshly, more than one out of every six Black men who would have been between the ages of 25-54 and would have roamed the streets today have disappeared from daily life. It is not to say that if these men were present now that things would have been very different but it goes to show how aggressive policing can have an impact on a neighborhood, a community, and even a whole group of people.

Leadership is viewed as important in every movement and opinions vary on how such leadership has to take shape. The issue of leadership in the BLM movement has been discussed by dozens of people and as always opinions shift between a “leader-full” or “leaderless” movement (Davis 85). BLM is a “bottom-up, collaboratively organized movement” (Chatelain and Asoka 59). Nonetheless the general public is often misguided in their opinion that BLM therefore has to be a leaderless movement.

Marcia Chaterlain “hates it” when she hears people call BLM leaderless (Chatelain and Asoka 59). In her opinion a movement cannot achieve anything if it is without a leader. Chatelain poses some good questions to those claiming that the movement is leaderless. Questions such as; “Who is getting the word out?”, “Who is getting the young people on buses ... to lie down in train stations?” “Who is sending the calls for protest?” (Chatelain 60). In Chatelains opinion the leaderless debate is a generational debate (Chatelain 60). The majority of people who criticize today’s movement have seen and lived through the Civil

Rights Movement. This movement had some very powerful leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcom X, male leaders and spokespersons. But what we have seen in the origin of the BLM is that women stood at the birth of BLM and to Chatelain that might be a reason why this movement is seen as leaderless. “Black women have so often been rendered invisible” says Chatelain. Mrs Roza Parks was an important key figure in the Civil Rights Movement as was Ella Baker but their importance in the movement has been simmered down. Although the Civil Rights Movement was one of the greatest achievements for black people it has also done harm to women’s voices. People are of the misguided opinion that charismatic male leaders are a “prerequisite” for social movement, and that is simply not true says Chatelain (Chatelain and Asoka 60).

Angela Y Davis believes that a movement does not need a strong powerful leader and that the United States does not need to “replicate the past” (Davis 85). In her words she reiterates Chatelains view. Davis is also of the opinion that a leadership role should not necessarily have to be a male entitlement. This discussion of male voice and female voice is a discussion that has been around for a long time. Davis is a former member of the Black Panther Party and she says that “struggles around gender” have been going on since the beginning of the twentieth century – “especially in the 1960s and 1970s” (Davis 86). “When black women unite earth-shaking changes occur” (Davis 86).

The confusion about the leadership of the BLM also comes from within the movement itself. BLM sees its own movement as “a decentralized network aiming to build leadership and power of black people” (Taylor). The Occupy movement works as a transcript for the BLM and is a method that makes use of “decentralized and leaderless actions” people in the Occupy movement viewed this as being more democratic and BLM have adopted this way of thinking (Taylor). But this belief of leaderless actions will ultimately bring the movement to a halt according to Taylor. As the BLM grows actions have to be coordinated by someone (or a group of) even though that might not suit the ‘democratic’ principles of the BLM. Thus the question of a leader-full or leaderless movement will be up for debate.

The importance of the female voice cannot be denied. This voice becomes even more valuable in a time when the African American male seems to be disappearing from the streets. To do away with female victims is to silence them even more and to take away their power. BLM as a movement reignites the power of women and shows the general public what women can achieve if everyone works together. The need for women to step up in this movement is a result of the aggressive policing and mass incarceration that will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Militarization of the Police Force and Mass Incarceration.

There will be no end to the cry of ‘Black Lives Matter’ and this movement will not take on the responsibility for crimes it did not commit. Period. We don’t have to say that ‘Blue Lives Matter,’ because neither society nor ‘the system’ has ever suggested otherwise – quite the opposite, in fact.

- **Jamilah Lemieux** Ebony, December 22nd 2014

After the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, people took to the streets and heavy riots ensued. At this point in time the general public quickly learned about the militarization of the police force because the media outlets were filled with images of police in their military garb, military vehicles, and military weapons. These visual images brought the issue of the militarization of the police force and local law enforcement agencies to the fore (Davis 139, Ajilore 1092). What is more is that the images sent into the world of BLM protests in Missouri showed a predominantly white police force pull out their arms against black, mostly unarmed, African American men.

The militarization of the police force is nothing new, however. Michelle Alexander states in her book *The New Jim Crow; Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* that the transformation from “community policing” to “military policing” already took root when Reagan was in office. It all began in 1981 when President Ronald Reagan persuaded Congress to pass the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act (Alexander 77). In sum this meant that the military was encouraged to give local, state, and federal police access to its military bases, intelligence, research, weaponry, and other equipment to outlaw drugs (Alexander 77). The years that followed and the presidents that came along with it only subsidized this military policing even further and all was done under the veil of the war against drugs. President Bush and President Clinton even increased federal spending and the transfer of military equipment, technology, and training to local law enforcement (Alexander 77, Taylor). This was all done under the pretext that these resources should only be used in actions that would help the war on drugs.

Since riots broke out in Ferguson, Missouri, ample evidence can be found all over the internet of how the devices of state violence have been mobilized for an appalling one-sided war (Rickford 40). A ‘one-sided’ war in which it is the police force against the people. Olugbenga Ajilore states in her article that in 2011 alone \$502 million dollars were allocated in acquiring military equipment (Ajilore 1089). And in 2012 the military transferred a record

\$546 million worth of property to local police departments (Taylor). What was purchased by the local law enforcements were items such as assault rifles, grenade launchers and night-vision equipment. However, one of the most striking pieces according to Ajilore was the purchase of a mine-resistant ambush protector (MRAP) (Ajilore 1089). Such machinery is commonly used in war-torn countries. These specific MRAP's were invented in 2000 and were used by the United States military to combat improvised explosives in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq (Ajilore 1089). Surely this purchase should raise questions to almost anyone. Scenarios that can be seen in Iraq with improvised explosives have not yet been seen – and will hopefully never happen – in the United States therefore it is difficult to imagine why any local law enforcement should need such an MRAP.

Merely three months after Ferguson broke out in protest over the murder of Michael Brown, St. Louis police acquired stink weapons to launch at protesters (Tucker). These so called stink weapons are armed with Skunk. Skunk is commonly used as a crowd control “malodorant” and it is mostly used by the Israeli police to combat Palestinian protesters (Khalek). Skunk is released at high pressure form a water cannon, canister or grenade and is a mix of amino acids and baking soda. As the name – Skunk – already suggests it emits an odor – described as a mix of rotting animal carcass, raw sewage and human excrement – that sticks to walls, clothing, hair and skin for days to weeks on end and is impossible to wash away without a special soap that is only accessible to police (Khalek, Tucker). It is even stated in the article of Khalek that local police Agencies in St. Louis have received training from Israeli police officers in how to use these specific Skunk weapons.

CNN has even exposed the U.S. military for using language that is typically used when talking about international adversaries during wartime when referring to the implementation of military personnel to the BLM protests in Ferguson (Syrmopoulos). CNN has done so by using newly released documents through the Freedom of Information Act. These specific documents show how the National Guard's military mission in Ferguson made use of the terms “enemy forces” in combination with “adversaries” in reference to citizens in Ferguson (Syrmopoulos). Interestingly enough, these citizens who were protesting in Ferguson were mostly African American people who were exercising their right to protest and this right is cemented at the core of the First Amendment. After these facts were made public National Guard captain Jon Quinn did his best at damage control in trying to explain that the military did not literally mean “enemy forces”, and what was actually meant and should have been said was “potential threats” (Syrmopoulos). I for one can imagine that many (African) Americans are frightened and startled by this information. These minority people already

strongly believe and feel that their own politicians, people who should have their best interest at heart, see them as enemies of the state. The, mostly African American, protesters in Ferguson and elsewhere are just as much U.S. citizens as their fellow white Americans. The only difference seems to be that African Americans cannot use their constitutional rights without being regarded as an “enemy force.”

From the perspective of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor the police forces in the United States seem to have transformed overtime into soldiers who need to ‘keep and restore’ the peace through harsh and violent tactics (Taylor). This only invigorates the feeling of ‘being at war’ that is created for the police officers and automatically puts them on high alert when patrolling the streets. Add to the equation the existing racial tensions and unspoken racism and the militarization of the police force is a recipe for disaster; with the numerous killings of unarmed black people as a result.

Police violence and the militarization of the police are key factors for the BLM cause. People in this movement fight hard and devote a lot of their time to try and change the United States law enforcement. The police force is now pushing back, however. The state of Louisiana has just acted on its hate crime laws to protect a completely new group; the police itself (Pérez-Peña). At a time when great efforts are under way to lay bare the racist policing and often deadly encounters between African American men and the police force, the people in charge hit back with what many see as a preposterous law. As told by Ernest L. Johnson, president of the Louisiana branch of the N.A.A.C.P, “hate crimes law is based upon a history of discrimination against certain groups of people, and a bill like this just tries to water down that reality, because there is not a history of discrimination against police and firefighters” (Pérez-Peña). It is even said that some police officers have claimed that the ongoing protests of BLM have sparked an increase in attacks against the local law enforcement, although there is hardly any data to support this utterance (Pérez-Peña). Another reason for the implementation of protecting the police officers is given by Jim Bueermann, president of the Police Foundation, who says “Police officers believe that the odds have increased that they will be assaulted, ambushed, and attacked even though the numbers may not support that” (Pérez-Peña). Seen from the perspective of BLM activists and people of color this is a very controversial statement. From their perspective police have done the exact same thing, assaulting and ambushing innocent black people, for years on end. Hate crime laws originated because offences motivated by prejudice were often brushed off and done away with. To protect the people who were discriminated and hated just because they had a different skin color, loved someone of the same gender or believed in something else (Pérez-Peña). With the

new edition of protecting the police force under this law there is zero confusion on whether or not a 'crime' against a cop gets treated very seriously and in doing so the police officers have an even bigger reason to rain down hard on protests.

Central manifestations of structural racism against black people are mass incarceration and police killings that happen on average every twenty-eight hours in the United States (Petersen-Smith). Michelle Alexander has also written extensively on the subject of mass incarceration and how this phenomenon can even be seen as the New Jim Crow of the 21st century. Like Jim Crow, Alexander argues, "mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race" (Alexander 13).

Mass incarceration was born when the American State started to act upon its 'War on Drugs' a war that began at a time when illegal drug use was on the decline (Petersen-Smith, Alexander 6). President Nixon started this so-called war on drugs in 1971 when he called drug abuse and offences "public enemy" number one in the United States (Alexander 48, pbs.org). According to Michelle Alexander, the War on Drugs is one of the leading causes for the explosion of people who are (currently) locked up (Alexander 60). Convictions for drug offenses have risen immensely after the United States government started to act upon its War on Drugs (Alexander 60). To put it all in numbers; drug arrests have tripled since 1980 and at least 31 million (!) people have been incarcerated for drug offenses since the War on Drugs began (Alexander 60).

Over the years since the Black Power struggle the number of prison inmates of the United States has skyrocketed (Petersen-Smith). The United States has only 5 percent of the world's population but it has a staggering amount of 25 percent of the global prison population. The prison population of the United States even rose by 700 percent between the timeframe of 1970 and 2005 (Petersen-Smith). Roughly half of federal prisoners are put behind bars due to drug offenses according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Human Rights Watch reported back in 2000 that, in seven states, black people comprise 80 to 90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison (Alexander 98). In at least 15 states, blacks are incarcerated on drug charges at a rate from twenty to fifty-seven times larger than that of white men. If taken nationwide the incarceration rate of blacks "dwarfs" that of the white population (Alexander 98). To let these numbers sink in even further; black people make up a mere 13 percent of the US population and records have shown that whites are more likely to use illegal drugs and distribute drugs (Petersen-Smith, Alexander 7, 98).

The American system works in such a way that when a person is incarcerated they are

stripped of almost every right they have. The chances of getting out of prison “in short order are slim, at best” (Alexander 89). The American prison system gives drug offenders a much longer sentence than those of violent criminals (Alexander 89). Killing someone can give you 25 to life with a chance of parole; getting arrested for illegal drug use could hold you behind bars for your entire life. These mandatory sentencing laws are often justified as being necessary to keep “violent criminals” off the streets, nevertheless those penalties are often reserved for the people who get arrested on drug offenses and those who are guilty of nonviolent crimes (Alexander 91). One would assume that these mandatory laws were preserved for those who actually kill, abuse and rape innocent people, yet the black population of the United States seems to be getting the wrong end of the stick.

If a person is lucky enough to get out of prison after a drug arrest he or she is ushered into a parallel universe where discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal (Alexander 94). Every person who is labeled a felon starts its second-class citizenship.

“There is little hope of escape once branded as a felon. Barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to “check the box” indicating a felony conviction on employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of professions, people whose only crime is drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs for recreational use find themselves locked out of the mainstream society and economy – permanently” (Alexander 94).

It is not surprising then that once a convicted felon is lucky enough to get out of jail he or she will fall back into illegal activities. These ‘felons’ probably have families back home to support and to support someone in their daily life money is needed. But what if you are barred from almost every possibility to legally obtain money? Chances are that these just released convicts obtain their money through illegal activities. They thus find themselves in a vicious circle created and implemented by the United States government itself.

BLM strives very hard to end the brutal police violence and mass incarceration of black people in the United States. A parallel can be drawn between the BLM and the Black Panther Party (BPP). These specific points of police violence and mass incarceration closely mirror some of the points the BPP strove for in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The BPP was an organization that recapitulated nineteenth-century abolitionist agendas and it is undeniable that their points resonate in the agenda of the twenty-first century BLM movement in some way, shape or form (Davis 73). The BPP set up a Ten-Point program to convey their

intentions. One of these points that now resonates through in the BLM is point seven; “we want an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people, other people of color, and all oppressed people inside the United States” (Davis 73), and point eight. “We want an immediate end to all wars of aggression” (Davis 73). Although the War on Drugs had not officially begun in 1966 when the BPP launched its 10-point program it was visible on the streets that police officers had a special eye out for people of color.

As a movement BLM has already overcome a great deal. The biggest marker of the strength of the BLM was the confrontation between the movement and the police in Ferguson in August 2014. At that point in time it was almost irrefutable that the United States stood at the beginning of a new chapter in the Black struggle (Petersen-Smith). The United States government amassed new tactics in trying to win the ‘war’ on the streets via militarizing their police forces or changing laws in such a way that mostly black people carry the biggest burden.

What the protesters in the 1950s and 1960s did not have and the BLM now does have is social media. Major media outlets often influence peoples view on information intake and guide people’s way of thinking and opinion forming. Stanley Nelson’s documentary *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* shows how the Black Panthers printed their own newspaper that included their Ten-Point program and other information they wanted to share with the public. They sold this newspaper for only twenty-five cents. However, newspapers are easily destroyed and it is not very hard to end the distribution of newspapers. Furthermore, people had to manually distribute these newspapers or sell them in the streets. The advantages social media gives to the BLM is the fact that it is almost unstoppable. Once something is posted on the internet it is very difficult to eliminate. In addition, the images brought into the world of the Ferguson riots and protests showed very clearly how the police decided to act and strike down the protests. What the BLM movement is faced with now is the question of how to expand on their strategies in demanding a change in United States society.

Conclusion

From Moment to Movement.

Equality, freedom and democracy are principles that are very important to every citizen in the United States. Values that were so important that they were written into the Constitution of the United States. After the United States has gone through decades of struggle it seems that these ideologies still do not apply to every citizen and it lead me to the following research question;

To what extent is a movement such as Black Lives Matter still necessary in a developed country such as the United States to acquire cultural and racial awareness?

The ink on the Constitution of the United States was not even dry and the first debates already started on what to do with African-American people. This debate about a specific group of people has been carried on through several decades – in a different form but not less troublesome – into the 21st century.

Although the practice of Jim Crow has officially been put to an end after the Civil Rights Movement, they are visible in day to day life. In a time where the majority of the Americans loudly condemn overt acts of racism it is still a given that people of color remain economically and socially disadvantaged when compared to their white counterparts (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 202). This disadvantage black people face has been explained through the notion of colorblindness. This regime that is also known as ‘new racism’ can also help the public to understand the massive amount of support president Obama received when he was voted into office (Bonilla-Silva 202).

The election of President Barack Obama had a different meaning for white people than it had for black people. Many white people believed that when an African-American man was voted into office the United States automatically entered a post-racial society. “A new, ‘Post-Racial’ political era in America” was about to begin in 2008 (Taylor). President Obama proved to be a president who was able to put white voters at ease through advocating universality. An African-American president who does mention that the United States has to work hard on diminishing inequalities and do away with discrimination but at the same time voices the idea that black people are accountable for their own circumstances (Bonilla-Silva 202).

“By demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and

discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny” (Obama 2008).

To blame black people for their own circumstances is to deny institutionalized racism. In his ‘A More Perfect Union’ speech, given in March 2008, Obama once again eloquently voiced what can be seen as the nation’s darkest sin yet he failed to connect this dark sin to the crimes committed by American institutions of the present. It is perfectly acceptable to say that fathers must spend time with their children, educate them, and teach them what life and the world has to offer. But people in the United States must not forget that many African-American children grow up without a father (or a mother!) figure because chances are high that he or she is incarcerated due to racist policing and the ‘War on Drugs’ (Taylor, Alexander 60). Racism is able to thrive in the streets of America when police officers ‘stop-and-frisk’ and when black people are still disadvantaged when it comes to residency, education, employment, income, and wealth (Taylor, Harris and Lieberman 2). Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* vividly describes the destruction that mass incarceration has on the lives of black people. Harsh and unjust sentencing, being prevented from voting, and one in four of black men (in the age group twenty to twenty-nine) under the control of the criminal justice system must show the United States that a “Postracial” era is a myth due to the “disparities throughout the criminal justice system” (Taylor, Davis 89).

The seeming resistance of United States institutions to do away with colorblind rhetoric, the election of an African-American president and the refusal to face the facts by American law enforcements combined paved the way for a movement such as BLM. As a country the United States advocates equality, freedom, and democracy but fails to systemically include their own black citizens.

Police brutality and violence, the mass incarceration of (innocent) black people, and the failure to recognize the female voice in the black struggle are all important issues to the BLM movement. They have found strength in numbers and are actively taking to the streets to further their cause. Black Lives Matter has become a shout to unite people “to identify the places in which black life is cut short, may it be in highly publicized instances of police brutality or through the slow suffocation of black communities facing poverty and economic inequality” (Chatelain and Asoka, 59). Although BLM as a movement is still very young and has important features to address within its own movement (such as the role of leadership), it is a movement that advocates for the rights of black people. It is making the general public aware of the systemic inequalities built into the American society and the colorblind rhetoric

that seems to keep it in its place.

The United States has shown the world that it needs a movement such as BLM to attain cultural and racial awareness. A developed nation that systemically disadvantages its African-American citizens through institutions set in place by the government is not able to change on its own account. A movement, in this case BLM, is needed to shake the foundations of the United States. The BLM movement is needed to make the public and the government aware of the systemic inequalities black people face. The BLM movement is needed to show a nation that is led by an African-American President that the United States has not entered a 'post-racial' era but is still in the midst of a racial era. In a time where the slogan 'Black Lives Matter' is countered with the slogan 'All Lives Matter' citizens of the United States exhibit their inability to understand racist violence and institutionalized racism. And when racist violence and institutionalized racism are not recognized and done away with, a developed country such as the United States needs a movement that points out these specific shortcomings.

Institutionalized racism in the United States and the BLM movement still need further research. BLM and its advocates and supporters have many other focus points than those listed in this thesis. If I had included them all my thesis would have spread out over at least 75 pages and therefore I chose to focus only on the specific points addressed in this thesis. I have identified the importance of female voice but during my research I frequently came across the significance of the queer, lesbian and trans voice and how these voices were often overlooked. This is yet another way to show the necessity of a movement such as BLM and could be an interesting theme to conduct further research on. I would like to think that I have taken my responsibility in creating awareness for racial inequality and that my thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion of racial equality and awareness. I would also like to believe that one day it is possible to live in a world where everyone is truly equal no matter what your belief, race or gender is.

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