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Black Lives Matter in Historical Perspective

Megan Ming Francis¹ and Leah Wright-Rigueur²

¹Departments of Political Science and Law, Societies & Justice, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98115, USA; email: meganmf@uw.edu

²SNF Agora Institute and the Department of History, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218, USA; email: lwright62@jhu.edu

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Abstract

This review examines the Black Lives Matter movement. Despite a growing body of literature focused on explaining the formation and activities of the present Black Lives Matter movement, less attention is given to the historical antecedents. What are earlier Black-led movements centered on ending state-sanctioned violence? This article situates Black Lives Matter in a much longer lens and examines the long struggle to protect Black lives from state-sanctioned violence. We draw from existing research to provide a historical genealogy of the movement that traces the beginnings of a movement to protect Black lives to the work of Ida B. Wells and follows it up to the work of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the urban rebellions that have followed.

INTRODUCTION

For more than three straight months during the spring and summer of 2020, thousands of protests and rebellions exploded across the country. More than 20 million people, of all races, from large cities to rural locales, marched and protested in a defiant display of public mourning and righteous rage, demanding accountability for the brazen murder of countless Black people at the hands of law enforcement (Buchanan et al. 2020). Their voices, their bodies, and their imaginations have awakened a sleepy nation to the crisis of democracy and the urgency of addressing deeply entrenched racial injustice.

At the peak of the summer 2020 protests, public opinion shifted dramatically on the side of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. A CNN (2020) poll showed that 84% of Americans believe racism is a “big problem” in our society. According to a *Guardian*/Opinium Research poll, 89% of respondents said that “police violence was a problem” and 65% considered it serious (Opinium Res. 2020). And a Pew survey reported that 67% of Americans across racial groups expressed support for the “Black Lives Matter movement” (Pew Res. Cent. 2020). This was in stark contrast to previous years, in which many Americans regularly debated the usefulness of the phrase Black Lives Matter. Perhaps the most important recent shift: Black protestors’ calls to reimagine justice, defund the police, and reinvest in community programs—all of which were once considered radical ideas—have made their way into the mainstream of American public thought and action.

The significance of the BLM movement is undeniable. The movement, formed in 2013 after the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter went viral on social media, has now become the largest mass movement for racial justice in US history. The movement has transformed public understanding of the criminal punishment system, shifted the lexicon of justice, and amplified the liberatory imaginations of Black people. For the purposes of this article, it is important to emphasize that the dramatic protests that took place during 2020 were not solely about policing or the criminal punishment system. Violent policing was certainly the spark, but the tinder was the multiple systems that have failed Black people and rendered their lives disposable (Cohen 2010).

This review examines the literature surrounding the historic BLM movement, the emergence of which has shaken the foundations of the domestic and global order. Numerous firsthand accounts from activists on the ground document the origins of the movement and its growth over the years (Carruthers 2019, Cullors & Bandele 2018, Garza 2020, Hagopian & Jones 2020, Mckesson 2018). Black journalists have provided valuable accountings of the intersection between movement activists and state authorities during key moments of struggle (Cobb 2016, Lowery 2016). Leading academics have contributed deeply researched analyses that situate the BLM movement alongside interlocking struggles to end structural racism, sexism, and capitalism (Camp & Heatherton 2016; Chua 2020; Davis 2017; Francis 2018; Johnson 2018; Lebron 2017; Lindsey 2015; Nelson 2016; Nunnally 2018; Ransby 2018; Rickford 2016; Soss & Weaver 2017; Taylor 2016, 2018; Thompson 2017; Threadcraft 2017; Thurston 2018; Woodley 2021). Finally, a growing body of legal scholarship examines the impact of BLM on lawyering and the practice of legal scholarship (Akbar 2018, Akbar et al. 2021, Bell 2017, Crenshaw et al. 2015, Lawrence 2015, McLeod 2018, Simonson 2021).

In this article, we focus less on examining the current iteration of the BLM movement and more on explicating the longer history of Black people organizing against state-sanctioned violence. As historic as the 2020 BLM protests have been, the issues highlighted therein are not new. The murder of Breonna Taylor in her private home while she was sleeping and the public-spectacle murder of George Floyd are not aberrations from a normal-functioning criminal punishment system. A central component of the Black freedom struggle has been the protection of Black lives from vigilante and state violence. State-sanctioned violence, Black people have

articulated over and over again, is a constant. And yet, many scholarly accounts in the social sciences have overlooked the fight to protect Black lives in their overarching analysis of American political and legal institutions. Instead, scholars have often positioned *de jure* segregation (most often exemplified in the battle over segregated schools) as the central symbol of white supremacy; however, the key marker of white supremacy has always been the wanton exercise of violence by the state and by individuals protected by the state.

Of course, generations of Black activists have been forced to contend with the specter of racial violence as they have engaged in movement building. Numerous historical studies emphasize the persistence of white violence in undercutting civil rights gains (Anderson 2016, Balto 2019, Biondi 2003, Du Bois 1935, Foner 1988, Haley 2016, Hill 2016, Johnson 2020, LeFlouria 2015, Muhammad 2010). For political theorists, it is the violence of white democracy and an excavation of the struggles that will never render Black people as full citizens (Hooker 2016, Makalani 2017, Rogers 2014). We follow the lead of this important scholarship in documenting the impact of white violence on Black life and on US democracy. In addition, our aim is to account for how Black people have organized over time to contest state-sanctioned violence.

The history of Black protest reveals that the American state does not hold a monopoly on the use of force and that violent state projects can be transformed from the bottom up. Previous research has detailed the centrality of the antilynching fight to the origins of the Black freedom struggle (Francis 2014, Giddings 2008, Sullivan 2009, Wells 1969, Zangrando 1980). Another body of established research from political and legal historians focuses on Black urban rebellions in the 1960s in response to failed civil rights promises and increasing police violence (Hinton 2021, Horne 1995, McLaughlin 2014, Mumford 2007, Sugrue 1996, Thompson 2001). Although the antilynching struggle and the urban rebellions of the 1960s are not often situated along the same narrative arc, we understand these earlier battles focused on state-sanctioned violence as part of the historical genealogy of today's BLM movement. Specifically, research focused on key periods of Black resistance provides a longer lens through which to understand how Black people on the margins of society imagined a safer world and fought against considerable odds to protect their lives from state violence.

This article expands the aperture of how to understand the long fight to protect Black lives from state-sanctioned violence by bringing together research that has often existed on the margins of larger disciplines. Similar to the battle to desegregate public schools, the struggle has been frustratingly long, but unlike the school desegregation battle, the fight to protect Black lives from vigilante and state violence has often been submerged. Judging by the number of special issue journals and research grants that center on the protests emanating from the BLM protests of 2020, there will be a tremendous growth of social science scholarship on the BLM movement ecosystem. Yet, scholars would be wise to remember and engage with the existing research foundations of the contemporary movement; as we argue in this article, it is impossible to understand the protests and rebellions of 2020 without understanding what happened in 2015, 1992, 1968, 1964, 1919, 1909, and 1892.

The massive racial justice protests of 2020 matter both on their own and because they were shaped profoundly by what came before them. For instance, the fight around defunding the police did not suddenly emerge after the killing of George Floyd; it was built on a longer history of prisoner activism, largely unknown to the broader American public. Similarly, the present manifestation of the BLM movement cannot be understood without taking a much longer view. This article is not a comprehensive overview of all of the historical antecedents to the contemporary movement; it is, however, a critical highlight piece, illuminating a key number of foundational touch points. The long Black freedom struggle developed the political language, strategies, and organizing infrastructure that provided the backdrop for the present moment. In what follows,

we describe this longer view by focusing on the formative period of the movement at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century: Ida B. Wells's antilynching crusade and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) campaign against lynching and mob violence. The article then transitions toward the mid-1960s, during which the movement developed a specific articulation about police as perpetrators of anti-Black violence through the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). But it is not just agenda setting; the 1960s provides a lesson about movement strategy in revealing the importance of decentralized leaders and the limits of reform tactics. Finally, we turn our attention to the formation of the contemporary BLM movement.

AGENDA SETTING: IDA B. WELLS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Throughout Reconstruction, and especially afterward, African Americans faced a regime of racial terror (Du Bois 1935, Feimster 2009, Foner 1988, Ifill 2007, Litwack 1979). Frustrated with the promises of the Reconstruction amendments, many white people banded together and used lynchings and mobs to enforce a post-emancipation racial order that protected white supremacy. The same period that marked the granting of legal citizenship rights to African Americans is also known for the highest number of lynchings of African Americans in history (Eckberg 2006, table Ec251–53). The Equal Justice Initiative, which has collected the most comprehensive data, reported the grim finding that between 1877 and 1950, there were 4,084 African American lynching victims (Equal Justice Initiat. 2017). The killing of Black people and the absence of consequences for white perpetrators were the most effective way to undermine the promises of Emancipation. In 1900, civil rights icon Ida B. Wells spoke at a gathering in Chicago and delivered a stinging indictment: “Our country’s national crime is lynching.” Wells would know best, as she was the first person to highlight the injustice of lynching and the loss of Black life on a national scale.

Black feminists have long argued that scholarship pay closer attention to the organizing praxes that were developed and incubated by Black women in the civil rights movement. This work has proved instrumental in understanding the decentralized leadership structure of the BLM movement by drawing our attention to the similarities between people like Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors and the feminist organization The Combahee River Collective and freedom fighters such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer (Jackson 2020, Ransby 2018, Taylor 2018, Woodley 2021). This work details, as Garza (2020) has stated explicitly, effective leadership styles and lessons about power building from the margins. But the influence of Black women on the contemporary BLM movement extends in many different directions. In this section, we center Ida B. Wells's innovative work in raising the issue of white vigilante and state-sanctioned violence and placing it at the crux of American democracy. Wells's agenda-setting work around racial violence continues to resonate in the contemporary BLM movement.

Wells's antilynching activism laid the groundwork for all future campaigns against lynching and racial violence in the United States. Wells's activism began in 1892 while she was living in Memphis and editing *Free Speech*, a newspaper in which she discussed controversial issues of local and national significance. In this year, racial tensions would climax over competition in the African American section of town between an established white grocery store and, across the street, the newly opened, African American-owned People's Grocery Company. The success of the People's Grocery Company embittered many white residents, who viewed its success as a threat to the racial power dynamics in Memphis. At the beginning of March, a group of whites (including law enforcement) pretended they were looking for criminals harbored at the People's Grocery and violently attacked the store. Aware of the threat, the People's Grocery had armed men keeping watch, and they fired on the white men, wounding three and killing none. Afterward, more than 100 African American men in Memphis were dragged from their homes and thrown into jail. On

March 9, a mob of 75 white men disguised in black masks dragged three of Wells's closest friends, who were the owners of the People's Grocery Company, from jail and savagely lynched them in a railroad yard (Bay 2009; Giddings 2008; Schechter 2001; Wells 1969, 1970).

The lynchings of her three friends marked a transformative moment in Wells's life. The lynchings created numerous unanswered questions for Wells, because they were contrary to the accepted belief that lynchings were punishment for rape. Her three friends were not charged with that crime—if lynchings were not always the response to rape, what other reasons existed for lynching African Americans? Wells's inquiry led her to conclude that concerns about economic competition between the white grocer and her friends' grocery store were the real reason behind the brutal lynching. After the lynching, Wells (1970, pp. 51–52) conveyed their economic underpinnings:

The mob took possession of the People's Grocery Company, helping themselves to food and drink, and destroyed what they could not eat or steal. The creditors had the place closed and a few days later what remained of the stock was sold at an auction. Thus, with the aid of the city and county authorities and the daily papers, that white grocer had indeed put an end to this rival Negro grocer as well as to his business.

For Wells, lynching was intricately linked to the protection of white economic power. It was an unofficial tool of the state to thwart Black economic advancement. Understanding lynching as a tool of state economic repression, Wells encouraged Black residents of Memphis to leave—taking with them their labor and capital. The linking of anti-Black violence to the system of capitalism is a central relationship that Black radical activists would take up and place at the center of their visions of liberation in the 1960s and 1970s (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967) and especially in the Movement 4 Black Lives (M4BL 2016, 2020).

Despite threats on her life in Memphis owing to her activism and reporting, Wells, convinced that a lot of power lay in the media, moved to New York, where she continued writing, this time for T. Thomas Fortune's *New York Age*, an African American weekly newspaper with a substantial white following. For her first article, Wells drew on the full extent of the material collected from her lynching investigations. On June 25, 1892, it became the first published exposé of lynching in the United States. Wells reported on facts she gathered, giving names, dates, and places of many lynchings for the accused crime of rape. The *New York Age* placed the article on its front page, printed 10,000 copies, and distributed them across the country. Wells's facts made clear that lynching was not a response to rape or to a greater level of criminality among African Americans. Lynching, Wells (1970, p. 64) determined, was “an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized.” The resulting conclusion was not hard to draw: If lynching was not a response to African American criminality but instead a tool to maintain white economic power, then it was unjust (Wells 1969, 1970).

Wells was the first person to risk her life, time after time, while conducting dangerous lynching investigations. Wells's work highlights the importance of the process of knowledge production—the need for Black freedom fighters to collect data and write their own stories (Bay 2009, Giddings 2008, Schechter 2001, Wells 1970). She did not rely on the white press to get important stories out. Wells ardently believed that data collection and the keeping of records of Black death were central to holding the state accountable.

How is the information (quantitative and qualitative) produced and disseminated of which movements stake a claim against the state? This tradition of record keeping has been resurrected in the present movement. Before the BLM movement began, there was no comprehensive record of the number of people killed by police. In response, national and international news organizations began to collect data in 2014: The *Guardian* in the United Kingdom produced “The Counted,”

and the *Washington Post* produced its own database of people who have been fatally shot by on-duty police, called “Fatal Force.” Meanwhile, Mapping Police Violence, a Black-led nonprofit organization, began collecting its own data. Its database is the most comprehensive and includes cases in which individuals were killed through use of chokehold, taser, or other means. The results from all three databases have been instrumental in raising public awareness about the problem of police violence.

When Wells began her activism, the protection of Black lives from lynching and mob violence was not considered a central mobilizing issue for Black people. Wells’s investigations and writings about lynchings dramatically shifted the frame of how to understand the violent spectacle. Wells named the unjust violence and called it out for being a tool of white supremacy—thereby providing the political language for Black people to articulate the harm they endured and the government’s responsibility to remedy it. Finally, it is Wells who effectively situated lynching at the crux of American democracy: To protect the voting, education, and workplace rights of African Americans, the senseless killings of African Americans had to stop.

CREATING AN OPPORTUNITY: THE NAACP’S ANTI-LYNCHING CAMPAIGN

Influenced by Wells’s activism, the NAACP was formed in 1909 and led the largest movement in history against lynching and racist mob violence (Francis 2014). The original NAACP platform in 1909 (the NAACP Papers) stated, “We regard with grave concern the attempt manifest South and North to deny black men the right to work and to enforce this demand with violence and bloodshed.” Seven years later, state-sanctioned violence remained high on the list of the NAACP’s concerns. When concern was raised at a meeting that the NAACP’s agenda was too narrowly focused on the issue of racial violence, Roy Nash, an African American who was part of the NAACP’s leadership, attempted to explain the organization’s focus: “All he [the American Negro] wanted was a chance to live without a rope around his neck” (Kellogg 1973, p. 134). It was a sobering but fundamental reminder that if the protection of Black lives were not secured, all other civil rights were meaningless. As the NAACP saw it, before the organization could appropriately address other problematic areas of civil rights, such as voting, labor, and housing, it was necessary to focus on ending lynching and mob violence so that African Americans could live. Safety, the protection of violence from the state, was considered a precursor to all the other important battles the organization would eventually wage.

During the first phase of the movement, the NAACP organized mass demonstrations in the streets and launched an extensive public education campaign to reach the “heart and conscience of the American people.” Founding member of the NAACP and Director of Publicity W.E.B. Du Bois was insistent on the power of the press. *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, was a powerful in-house publicity tool used to inform the American public about the state of African Americans and NAACP policy. Du Bois used *The Crisis* as a platform for agitation and with incisive candor launched attacks on the US government for denying democracy to African Americans and for doing nothing about the evil of lynching.

Du Bois’s words were buoyed by organized protests across the country. A pinnacle moment of protest came after a violent massacre of Black people in East St. Louis in July 1917, in which white people murdered more than 100 Black people and burned the Black section of town to the ground (Lumpkins 2008, Rudwick 1964). In response, the NAACP organized a public protest aimed at raising awareness about the violence inflicted on Black communities across the nation. And on July 28, 1917, more than 10,000 African Americans silently marched to the sound of muffled drums down Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest mob violence. Dressed in all white, close to 800 African American children held hands in the front. Police estimated that an

additional 10,000 African Americans lined up along Fifth Avenue in solidarity. Dubbed the Silent Protest Parade, it was, at the time, the largest mass demonstration of African Americans (Kellogg 1973, Sullivan 2009).

But it was not just about changing hearts and minds; the NAACP knew a lot of power lay in politics and felt it necessary to combine public advocacy with work on an antilynching bill in Congress. The NAACP organized massive letter-writing campaigns, James Weldon Johnson lobbied individual members of Congress, and the bill passed the House of Representatives in a historic vote in 1922. The antilynching bill would not make it out of committee in the Senate. And yet despite this policy loss, the landscape of the fight for Black lives was changed forever. Contrary to how some might view the lessons from this congressional battle, it was not that organizers should steer clear of Congress but that they should organize in ways that perhaps do not make logical sense at the time. The fact that the bill passed the House of Representatives was a tremendous success. That it died in the Senate was a huge disappointment, but it proved instructive of the lobbying prowess of James Weldon Johnson and the organizing capacities of the Black masses. It also whet an appetite for more; African Americans did not get all they wanted, but the House passage was a sign that some national politicians could be moved (Francis 2014, Zangrando 1980). Finally, this battle provided a sense of awareness about the possibilities and limitations of passing federal legislation where the perceived beneficiaries were Black people. In other words, this battle helped to pave a way for future civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

The NAACP's influence was displayed most prominently in the legal effort behind the landmark Supreme Court criminal procedure decision *Moore v. Dempsey* (1923), which marked the first time the federal government interfered in state criminal court proceedings (Francis 2014). The question before the Supreme Court was whether the presence of a mob in a courtroom violated the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In a decision written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the African American defendants and declared that a fair trial means that the courtroom is not dominated by a white mob. Through this ruling, the Supreme Court made history by breaking from an established tradition of federalism and shifted (ever so slightly) the federal government's position on state-sanctioned violence. With this case, the Supreme Court finally moved the federal government from a rut of frustrating symbolic rhetoric to substantive legal guarantees.

Once the NAACP secured this decision from the Supreme Court, a new precedent was established, and the Supreme Court entered a new era of jurisprudence no longer bound by strict deference to state courts. After *Moore v. Dempsey*, the Supreme Court made clear it was no longer willing to take a hands-off policy regarding the blatant racism that existed in Southern courtrooms. The NAACP was rightfully jubilant after this Supreme Court decision, but it is important to remember that this was a process win; it was not a justice win per se. However, from the NAACP's perspective, legal victories—even if they did not immediately end racial violence—were tools that could be leveraged inside broader and longer fights for justice. Court cases, although sometimes slow and narrow in impact, were imperative to diminish the power of the violent state. *Moore v. Dempsey* made it harder, at least procedurally, to conduct Jim Crow trials—thereby providing needed safeguards to protect Black lives. Overall, during the years of the NAACP's campaign against racial violence between 1909 and 1930, the rates of lynching and mob violence decreased dramatically.

The NAACP's battle against racial violence is particularly critical to understand for what it tells us about the process and time horizons of radical Black-led social movements. Many of us have been trained to understand the BLM movement through the lens of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but this would be insufficient. The NAACP's antilynching organizing displays the importance of building a mass movement of people focused on the protection of Black lives to creating new political and legal openings.

BLACK LIVES AND EARLY RIGHTS MOBILIZATION

The activism of Ida B. Wells and the NAACP helps to explain the emergence of the protection of Black lives as the pinnacle issue in the early Black freedom struggle. This work also showcases the importance of the strategies of knowledge production, grassroots organizing, and rights claiming that have been highlighted in other studies of social movements and legal mobilization. Understanding the broader context of how social movement actors mobilize the law in the service of larger movement goals is at the center of scholarship focused on rights claiming (Epp 1998, Lovell 2012, McCann 1994, Scheingold 1974). This work emphasizes the adversarial nature of the legal system and how it might sometimes be a useful place to contest for power (Galanter 1974, Kagan 2003). Legal mobilization scholars point to the need for marginalized groups to engage across multiple venues and to use a range of different tactics simultaneously, such as rallies, media campaigns, policy making, and litigation (Chua 2014, McCann 1994, McCann & Lovell 2020, Morris 1984, Polletta 2000). The focus on strategies outside formal law is important, as the field of critical race theory has long argued that the exercise of racial power is “systemic and ingrained” in legal institutions, discourse, and society (Bell 1972; Crenshaw et al. 1995, p. xiv). Indeed, from a very early stage, Black organizers who focused on the protection of Black lives understood how law could be deployed as a resource—especially the language of rights (e.g., the right to be free from mob domination, the right to be free from state-sanctioned violence, the right to due process in Jim Crow courtrooms)—but there were significant limitations, and grassroots organizing needed to apply pressure on multiple different fronts to contest for power.

THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND DECENTRALIZED LEADERSHIP

The NAACP’s organizing work around racial violence displays a significant ability to innovate. The organization and its leaders combined public protest with organizing inside of formal political institutions. This kind of connection between widespread public protest and congressional legislation to protect Black lives would become a leading strategy of Black organizations during the heyday of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, as exemplified through organizations including the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It would also become the hallmark of the MFDP, a group that the broader scholarship has studiously overlooked in terms of understanding the connection between protest, politics, and policy. In the case of the MFDP (and by extension the SNCC), the grassroots group used the idea of enfranchisement and voting to protest the antidemocratic nature of American political institutions, including local politicians and local police. Organizations like the MFDP argued that egalitarian democracy was connected to dismantling the anti-Black state and its enablers, and that the most revolutionary way to dismantle the totalitarian state was to protest for the right to vote and for equal and fair political representation. Ultimately, the MFDP’s actions not only helped to produce groundbreaking legislation in the form of the 1965 Voting Rights Act but also transformed the political landscape of Black America, particularly in the South.

The MFDP’s organizing story starts, in many ways, with Ella Baker and the NAACP. Baker’s work as a field organizer for the NAACP in the 1930s proved instrumental in assisting with the establishment of a significant number of civil rights organizations in the 1960s, including the MFDP. Founded in April of 1964 in Mississippi by Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Robert Moses, the MFDP proved especially potent at highlighting the political power of Black voices as a means of conveying the reality of state illegitimacy. As Ransby (2003, pp. 330–33) writes, Baker, Hamer, and Moses created the MFDP with the goal of offering “some of the most oppressed sections of the

black community” a protest vehicle and voice “of their own.” The founders envisioned the MFDP as an “independent political organization” that could be employed to “extract concessions” from white people and “confront them in the most direct way possible to acknowledge the legitimacy of the grievances and claims” of Black people (Ransby 2003, pp. 330–33). In this respect, the MFDP was created as a “parallel institution” to the racially exclusionary “all-white state Democratic Party in Mississippi” (Sanders 2016, p. 30). Through voter registration initiatives, freedom schools and educational sessions, and broader political action and protest, the MFDP attempted to “radically change the oppressive” lives of Black people not only in Mississippi but also throughout the country. Importantly, the MFDP connected the racist and exclusionary tactics of political institutions to acts of policing; in other words, the MFDP understood police as the enforcers of racial inequality and perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence. Thus, the MFDP saw voter registration as a radical act of Black freedom in that enfranchisement directly rejected and challenged the antidemocratic boundaries of policing, while exposing the anti-Black violence that defined the police as a political institution. As Carson (1995) argues, the leaders of the MFDP understood that politics and political representation therefore provided a broad opportunity to expose and dismantle a totalitarian regime. Black people, Carson (1995) notes, “knew they were in a police state” and thus realized that “politics provided the avenue for educating their children, providing homes and jobs for their families, and literally making over the whole climate,” for themselves, if not the entire nation.

Exploring the MFDP’s political activism reveals the ways in which the organization consistently exposed the injustices of state-sanctioned violence and repression against Black people. In a summer 1964 call-to-rally pamphlet, MFDP leaders emphasized that the organization’s protests centered on revealing the brutal nature of the “racist, police state” and its murderous attacks and effects on the “rights and liberties of the nation’s Black citizens” (Emerg. Comm. Support MFDP 1964). In yet another MFDP call to action, organizational leaders, including Fannie Lou Hamer, highlighted recent incidents of violence, including the murders of James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—three civil rights workers brutally murdered while registering Black people to vote in Mississippi—as vivid evidence of the long and systemic denial of basic rights and freedoms enabled by the state and its political agents. Such actions, the MFDP declared, made the racist state and its enforcers fundamentally illegitimate. Consequently, MFDP leaders declared that Black enfranchisement was the only legitimate course corrective; in the words of one MFDP chairman, “We have paid in blood for the right to participate in the political process” (MFDP 1964). Hamer (1964) expounded on this sentiment in a December 1964 speech, wherein she argued that she was deeply critical of democracy in America, as it existed, while simultaneously being hopeful about using Black political protest to push for a more just society:

Not only do we need a change in the state of Mississippi, but we need a change here in Harlem. And it’s time for every American citizen to wake up because now the whole world is looking at this American society. . . . And quit saying that we are free in America when I know we are not free. You are not free in Harlem. The people are not free in Chicago. . . . They are not free in Philadelphia. . . . and when you get it over with all the way around, some of the places [are] a Mississippi in disguise. And we want a change.

As scholars have highlighted, the MFDP and Hamer directed this challenge toward white supremacy and anti-Black violence throughout the country. Moreover, although the MFDP distinguished between geographical regions, the organization and its leadership also observed that anti-Black violence was universal. In this respect, the cause that the MFDP was fighting for was universal: Black people living free lives, with dignity and free of violence (Blaine 2021, Carson 1995, Payne 1996, Williams 2015).

The MFDP also protested using the judicial system as a point of entry. In particular, public testimonies and depositions proved a vital component of the organization’s protest strategy. The

story of Hamer testifying in front of the credentials committee to the 1964 Democratic National Convention is well known in the scholarship; less well known are the stories of various civil rights workers, activists, and even parents that worked on behalf of the MFDP (Brooks 2020, Dittmer 1994, Draper 2016, Hamlin 2012). In July of 1965, for instance, the parents of several civil rights workers testified in front of the Senate Judiciary subcommittee about their teenaged and adult children's experience with law enforcement in the South. They reported that in Jackson, Mississippi, for example, more than 850 voter registration workers had been falsely jailed for "parading without a permit"; in still another testimony, they recounted more than "100 beatings" by police officers that resulted in serious injury and hospitalization. In yet another case, a parent recounted how groups of educators working for a Freedom School had witnessed a school being burned to the ground while local firemen watched and local police made no effort to investigate or pursue any suspects (SNCC 1965d).

The MFDP also pursued a broad legal strategy designed to delay racially exclusionary elections and integrate newly registered Black voters into the voter rolls for upcoming elections. Those and other leaders within the MFDP were met with force and violence, both from Molotov cocktail-throwing white residents and from increased "police harassment and intimidation" (SNCC 1965c). In spite of increased violence from white citizens and formal political institutions, the MFDP kept pushing for increased voter registration. By May of 1965, the MFDP had collected more than 400 depositions in Mississippi alone from local Black citizens and civil rights workers, in an attempt to document the "patterns of intimidation and terror suffered" by African Americans seeking to exercise their constitutional right to vote. The depositions offered horrific accounts that exposed the anti-Black and undemocratic character of the state; for instance, in one deposition, a volunteer testified that anonymous assailants bombed her home after she assisted out-of-state civil rights workers and attempted to register to vote. Yet another man testified that after he was arrested for registering people to vote, police officers "threatened him with castration while he was in custody at the jail." As Congress debated the efficacy of a national voting rights bill, the MFDP collected more than 15,000 pages of evidence documenting violence and terror experienced by African Americans on a day-to-day basis. In turn, they used this information as part of the organization's legal strategy to lobby Congress for progressive voting rights legislation, while simultaneously using the group's documentation to motivate Black people to register to vote on a local and state level (SNCC 1965b).

As MFDP members wrote in May of 1965, "The problem of voteless [sic] citizens and police brutality and the violation of the rights of Negroes in the South are closely related and are a national disgrace and one the Congress of the United States has direct responsibility for correcting." In other words, by linking their protest, politics, and policy on a local and federal level, members of the MFDP argued that they were solving for both the national and local problem. Ultimately, the MFDP called upon Congress to do three things to ensure that all citizens would be "free from violence and oppression" and "free to participate in the political processes of the nation." First, the MFDP called for voter legislation that included provisions for holding new and fair elections; the organization argued that new elections were needed given that the masses of Black people had been deprived of their right to vote. The only means by which to reject the "official and totalitarian violence" that had "crushed" Black people across the nation was to hold new elections wherein Black citizens could vote and therefore elect figures "responsible to the total population." Second, the organization argued that an intrinsic part of a free and fair democracy was to unseat Mississippi representatives, given that they had won their seats through undemocratic and racially exclusionary means. Finally, the MFDP demanded that Congress and President Lyndon Johnson enforce democracy for all people, including African Americans. In short, a democratic nation was one in which Black people had the right to "peacefully assemble" and "petition their government

for the redress of grievances”; without these provisions, the MFDP warned, “democracy in the true sense” would ultimately “fail” (SNCC 1965a).

In August 1965, surrounded by more than 800 civil rights figures, activists, and policy makers, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, declaring, “Today what is perhaps the last of the legal barriers is tumbling.” For millions of citizens, this was a hard-earned accomplishment in the larger fight for Black freedom. At the same time, it is important to note that several provisions pushed by civil rights organizations did not end up in the Voting Rights Act. Indeed, for the MFDP, this meant losing the organization’s fight to unseat the racially exclusive Mississippi congressmen. Upon finding out, Hamer wept, declaring, “I’m not crying for myself today but I’m crying for America today. . . I cry that the Constitution of the United States. . . applies only to white people” (*Nashville Tennessean* 1965). Though Hamer’s words were specific to the MFDP seating of democratic representatives, they also can be applied more generally to the shortcomings of legislation as exhibited via the Voting Rights Act.

Though the Voting Rights Act of 1965 corrected significant wrongs, it did not address significant inequalities and inequities built into the broader system of racial discrimination and injustice. Consequently, just five days after the 1965 Voting Rights Act was signed into law, Watts (the predominately Black section of Los Angeles) erupted into full-blown rebellion after an incident of police brutality. After six days of upheaval, the picture was grim: 34 people dead, 1,000 residents injured, 15,000 National Guardsmen deployed, and \$40 million in property damage. Importantly, Watts was not an isolated incident. Over the course of the next few years, nearly 2,000 violent rebellions occurred across the country. The rebellions of the 1960s resulted from a potent mixture of long-simmering community issues over police brutality, racial inequality, segregation, and discrimination. They were a crucial reminder that despite the utopian pronouncements that came with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the fight for Black freedom was far from complete (Hinton 2021, Horne 1995, McLaughlin 2014, Mumford 2007, Natl. Adv. Comm. Civ. Disord. 1968, Risen 2009, Sugrue 1996, Thompson 2001, Wright-Rigueur 2015).

Speaking on the chaotic uprisings of the 1960s, the writer James Baldwin (1968) argued that ultimately, “riots” were rooted in the functional illegitimacy of the state apparatus, particularly in the lives of Black people. “The federal government,” Baldwin observed, “has come to be, in the eyes” of Black people, “a myth” that shows no signs “of understanding what the root of the problem really is, what the dangers really are.” Consequently, urban rebellions could be traced to the failures of the state. Black freedom and democracy, Baldwin (1968; see also Woodward 1965) concluded, necessitated that “the people of this country. . . give up something. If they don’t give it up, it will be taken from them.”

FORMATION OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

Racial violence does not suddenly occur and strike at certain moments—it is a foundational and institutional component of American politics and society. Despite noteworthy civil rights victories, Black people continue to live with the threat and possibility of private violence and state terror in the United States. For the most part, the incredible violence of slavery, the pogrom of lynchings after Reconstruction, and the extralegal killings during the Jim Crow era are treated as aberrational features of American political development. These were brief periods the United States had to get through—demons the country had to overcome. The traditional narrative largely assumes that these moments were not institutional and certainly not enduring. Yet one need only look at the last decade of unarmed Black men and women killed at the hands of the police to understand the continued and historically consistent unmaterring of Black lives.

Anti-Black violence has not ceased, and therefore Black people have not stopped organizing. The purpose of past and contemporary protest movements for Black Lives is to illuminate a public

narrative that exposes the failures of the state and the true nature of American democracy. For millions of Americans who finally listened in the aftermath of the gruesome killing of George Floyd, much of this story came as a surprise; indeed, for many—scholars included—that shock was rooted in an ahistorical understanding of liberal democracy. This revelation reinforces our argument that the contemporary iteration of struggle must be understood within a longer and broader context. For instance, the widespread BLM protests of 2020 were built on protests from 2013 (the year that a jury acquitted George Zimmerman for killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin), 2014 (the Ferguson rebellion in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown), and 2015 (after the police killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore).

The 2013 phase of the BLM movement is important for its establishment of three central themes: rejection of respectability politics, use of social media as an organizing vehicle, and the centering of Black feminist politics (Bonilla & Rosa 2015, Cullors & Bandele 2018, Garza 2020, Jackson 2016, Ransby 2018, Tillery 2019, Woodley 2021). Most accounts of the BLM movement begin with the 2013 formation of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Enraged at Zimmerman's acquittal, Garza (2020) wrote "a love letter to black people" on Facebook in which she stated, "I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. Stop giving up on black life. Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter." Garza's friend Patrisse Cullors, sharing the message, used the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, and the resulting phrase went viral across various social media platforms. The phrase tapped into the precarity of Black life in the United States, and for many it became an acute means of affirming Black people's humanity and calling attention to a system that consistently denied justice to Black people—even in President Barack Obama's America. As movement historian Ransby (2018, pp. 1–2) observed, "The powerful phrase has resonated as a moral challenge, and as a slap in the face, to the distorting and deceptive language of colorblindness and postracialism that gained traction in the United States after voters elected the country's first African American president in November 2008."

The formation of the BLM movement during Obama's tenure as president marked a pivotal break with the dominant strain of Black politics, as it challenged the liberal civil rights reform project that dressing well, working hard, and disagreeing politely would entitle Black people to the full rights of citizenship.

If 2013 was the spark, Ferguson marked the explosive next phase of the movement. In 2014, Darren Wilson, a Ferguson police officer, shot Michael Brown in the front of his body six times. When asked in the grand jury the reason for firing so many shots, Officer Wilson explained, "At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him." Wilson continued, "The only way" he could describe Brown's "intense aggressive face" was that it looked like "a demon." Despite being in possession of a deadly weapon and being a mere one inch shorter than Brown, Wilson testified that he feared for his life. The grand jury voted not to indict Wilson.

Many people, astounded that Wilson would face no repercussions for the killing of a young Black teenager, were outraged and drew comparisons to Zimmerman's acquittal just one year earlier. Protests erupted in Ferguson; people took to the streets chanting the phrases "Black Lives Matter" and "Hands Up Don't Shoot." Making an already tense situation worse, police met protestors and demonstrators with aggressive force and resistance, wearing military-grade tactical gear and arriving in tanks (Lowery 2016). Police treated Ferguson like a war zone and its Black citizens like enemy combatants, tear-gassing and violently attacking Black citizens (Balko 2014). Protests quickly spread across the country to cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Thousands of people took to the streets in mass protest, many

carrying signs that read “Black Lives Matter” as a counter to the seeming disposability of Black lives at the hands of law enforcement.

Ferguson solidified that BLM was not simply a hashtag or a moment—it was a global movement that was tapping into something important about the vulnerability of Black life. The protests in Ferguson provided the training ground and organizing space for several key organizations (Campaign Zero, Millennial Activists United, Hands Up United) and leaders (Tef Poe, Brittany Packnett, Johnetta Elzie, and Cori Bush, to name a few). Finally, signaling the growing reach of the movement, after the protests in Ferguson, President Barack Obama sat down with BLM movement leaders at the White House to discuss the future of civil rights and policing. The grievances of BLM protesters had been heard by the most powerful political figure in the country.

The meeting at the White House was largely symbolic; it did little to change the realities on the ground for Black people as violent policing continued. Yet, the growth of the movement meant that previous injustices would not be so easy to sweep under the rug. BLM chapters formed in different cities and towns across the country, and activists began to coordinate messaging and strategy. In 2015, more than 50 different Black-led organizations convened, and the Movement 4 Black Lives (M4BL), an umbrella organization for the groups (some directly and others loosely connected with BLM), was launched (Ransby 2018). The following year, the M4BL developed a detailed policy platform called the “Vision for Black Lives,” in which the call to invest/divest was very clear:

We demand investments in the education, health and safety of Black people, instead of investments in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people. We want investments in Black communities, determined by Black communities, and divestment from exploitative forces including prisons, fossil fuels, police, surveillance and exploitative corporations.

And in 2020, the M4BL stated in no uncertain terms, “The Time Has Come to Defund the Police.”

As the founders of #BlackLivesMatter have underscored repeatedly, the movement is not focused solely on the convictions of a few bad-apple police officers—it is centered on a more expansive goal of upending the numerous manifestations of structural racism in our society: “State violence is bigger than police terrorism. Although police terrorism plays a specific role on behalf of the state, it is not the totality of what state violence looks like or feels like in our communities” (Garza 2015).

The call to examine the way violence is embedded in and continues to be exacted on Black communities through the normal operation of political and legal institutions is central to the mission articulated by BLM activists (M4BL 2016, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In the short time since the inception of the BLM movement, its impact on US politics has been “undeniable” (Taylor 2016). The BLM movement has shaken the foundations of how citizens understand their relationship to government and, in a few cases, shifted the actions of political elites. Through an institutional focus, BLM activists have drawn attention to the way discriminatory policing practices are intertwined with persisting housing segregation, racialized welfare state policies, and political reforms that criminalize poverty. In doing so, these protests have underscored the fragility of Black citizenship and the utter failure of American democracy for Black people—not just in the present but over the long *durée* of American history.

Historically, Black protest has served as a kind of testimony to the nation’s most vulnerable, in its ability to expose the bankruptcy of a country that has failed repeatedly at offering equal justice and equality for all of its citizens. Ida B. Wells knew, the NAACP knew, the MFDP knew, and

today's courageous protesters know: The system is not made to protect Black lives, and the only way Black people will survive is if they organize and create the conditions in which they can live. We have argued that the BLM movement cannot be explained properly without reference to this longer history. Accounts of BLM must account for the persisting pattern of Black death via violent white mobs, lynchings, and reckless law enforcement. Scholarship that focuses exclusively on the post-2013 manifestation of the BLM movement falters precisely because these accounts cannot explain the origins of the problem and the depths of anger and frustration of Black protesters.

Liberal democracy in the United States has often tried to hide anti-Black violence. The contradiction that state-sanctioned Black death creates is often too much for the liberal state to reconcile. Therefore, the challenge confronting Black activists, across time, who organize around state-sanctioned violence is to make visible that violence. The work of Ida B. Wells, the early NAACP, and the MFDP was centered around different strategies to hold the United States accountable for anti-Black violence. In doing so, the work of these freedom fighters and movements has provided an important organizing archive for current activists to draw upon and for scholars to attend to.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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