

THE IMPACT OF BLACK LIVES MATTER ON BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF BLACK LIVES MATTER ON BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

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George Mason University, 2017

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This thesis analyzes the impact the social movement Black Lives Matter has had on Black college students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) versus Black college students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). HBCUs differ from PWIs primarily due to the racial context through which HBCUs were established. While social movements have played an important role in the history and experiences of students at each type of university, there is not much literature on the differential impact social movements have had on the experiences of Black students who attend them. My primary research question addresses this gap by asking: How do recent social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter affect the experiences of Black students who attend an HBCU versus a PWI, and specifically those who attend the HBCU Morgan State University and the PWI Johns Hopkins University? This research also sought to look into the different ways the social movement has impacted the everyday lives of the students attending these universities.

INTRODUCTION RACE AND THE UNIVERSITY

I really just want to be care free
Not the feeling of being content with where you are
At equilibrium
Accepting reality
As much as that feeling is necessary,
It's not what I mean.

I mean the feeling of being able to walk out my house at 9:17pm without the fear that a man will harass me

Knowing our Mothers,
Sisters,
Daughters
Aren't getting targeted, perished, or monopolized for anything other than the fact that they are queens.

Knowing our Fathers,
Sons,
Brothers
Aren't getting targeted and killed while they scream "DON'T SHOOT ME!"

That's what I mean when I say care free
We out here dying, bodies lying in front of our babies!
There's a problem! No more maybes!
We're screaming Black Lives Matter begging for our lives
Not your demise!

Look me in my eyes and tell me you don't see it!
Kiss the bullets flying and tell me that cop ain't mean it!

And then you get surprised when our anger becomes convenient,
Paralyzed, can't find the line between what feels right and what's needed

What's needed?

Change?
Well you tell me how long we gotta wait.
You tell me how much time we have to waste.
How many days we gotta wake
To a brother shot and killed by a cop without a case
Or a sister disappearing off the block without a trace

Like you think we traded in our shackles to have a gun in our face
How we supposed to be care free in this place?

United we stand, divided we fall.
One nation, under God
With Liberty and Justice for All.

-LauraJeanne

The social construct of race in the U.S. is one that shapes many aspects of American life. The U.S. has a long history of discrimination based on race where people of color, and specifically Black people have been at the receiving end of this discrimination. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation all subjugated people categorized as Black to horrors that attempted to disavow their humanity. This history of the social construct of race, along with its structural support —racial discrimination, has left its mark on U.S. society. While this is the case, discrimination of Black people throughout history has simultaneously supported a history of struggle to end this discrimination based on race as well as gender and sexuality. The poem that opens this thesis is one written in 2016 by a 19-year-old Black woman attending college in New York. While her poem expresses her reality and the current reality of many Black people in the U.S., where their lives can be compromised simply because they are Black, it also represents the resistance against this reality. The social movement Black Lives Matter that she references continues the tradition of challenging the violence and discrimination

enacted on Black bodies. Her poem also speaks to the specific issue of police brutality, which overwhelmingly targets Black people in the same way racist laws of slavery and Jim Crow did. *The Guardian* reported, “young black men were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers in 2015” (Swaine et al. 2015). They went on to state, “despite making up only 2% of the total US population, African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 comprised more than 15% of all deaths logged this year by an ongoing investigation into the use of deadly force by police. Their rate of police-involved deaths was five times higher than for white men of the same age” (Swaine et al. 2015).

The social movement Black Lives Matter was formed in response to police brutality and excessive force aimed at Black people. The influence of Black Lives Matter has been far-reaching, and like social movements of the past it includes college students. But how exactly might this movement that challenges the current relationship between law enforcement and Black communities impact Black college students like the one who wrote the opening poem or the ones who are nine times more likely to be killed by police officers? More intricately, how might Black Lives Matter impact Black college students who attend Historically Black Colleges Institutions (HBCUs), versus Black college students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)? Black college students have a rich history of involvement in social movements, and the institution of higher education provides a unique environment for this engagement. Black Lives Matter has had a significant impact on my experiences as a Black female college student attending a

PWI which led me to questions about how these experiences may differ for other Black students, and specifically other Black students who attend HBCUs.

The racial history of these two types of universities is vital to the context of my research in that it continues to play an important role in higher education today. The main distinction between the two universities is centered on how and why they were formed. According to the Encyclopedia of African American Education, a PWI is an institution whose student population is comprised of fifty percent or more White students (Brown and Dancy 2010, 524-527). PWIs are also understood in the context of race relations and education in the United States, where prior to 1954 segregation based on race was legal (Brown and Dancy 2010). This history, containing deeply embedded racial discrimination in the United States education system, stemming from the era of slavery, and infused in both the social and political aspects of the country, created both the conditions and the spaces for HBCUs. The first HBCU was founded in 1837, and HBCUs eventually became a place of education and a part of the nation's cultural history (Lovett 2011). In terms of culture, HBCUs provided a place for Black students, along with other students of color, to create community centered on higher education. They produced teachers, pastors, and important community leaders (Lovett 2011, Cathcart 2014). While this education was not available to all Black people for mainly socioeconomic reasons, it did create spaces for Black professionals and academics to prosper within society. HBCUs also produced key figures in Black history and culture such as Ida B. Wells, and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (Lovett 2011). These influential leaders of Black society

went on to create and play important roles in significant historical organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

While the accomplishments and the importance of HBCUs to Black history and culture should not in any way be downplayed, it is important to keep them in a cultural and societal context. For example, compared to public PWIs, public HBCUs have been underfunded at both the state and national level virtually since their inception¹. Morgan State University has recently been involved in a lawsuit against the Maryland Higher Education Commission, claiming it has historically received both unequal program opportunities, and less funding compared to the states' PWIs (Arnett 2015, Beamon 2012). Along with the disparity in funding and resources, while black students have often been able to easily find community while attending HBCUs, this has not always been the case for Black students at PWIs (Harper and Quaye 2007, Lovett 2011). These historical and cultural distinctions are echoed in the campus climates of HBCUs and PWIs today, and are precisely the differences that this study questions regarding the impact of social movements on the experience of students attending the two universities involved in this analysis.

I chose Morgan State University and Johns Hopkins University because they are both located in the city of Baltimore, MD, which was the focal point for recent events surrounding social movements involving police brutality and reform. Baltimore became the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement when Freddie Grey, a twenty-five-year -

¹ According to the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 51 out of the 100 HBCUs are public institutions (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics).

old man died while in police custody in late April 2015 (Sherman, et al. n.d.). His death sparked large protests and unrest in Baltimore, not far from both Johns Hopkins University and Morgan State University. Students attending both universities participated in some of these protests, supporting the social movement and expressing their reactions to the events that occurred (Kelderman 2015). The “International Business Times” reported, “Youth protests continued Wednesday [April 29th, 2015], when students from Johns Hopkins University, Goucher College, Towson University and Morgan State gathered on Johns Hopkins' Homewood campus... Protesters reached City Hall Wednesday just before 6:30 p.m. and held a three-minute moment of silence” (Glum 2015). In addition to protesting, students from both universities also aided in cleaning the city and distributing resources to protestors as well as those affected by the civil unrest that occurred on Monday April 27th 2015 (Sherman et al. 2015, Kelderman 2015).

This thesis focuses on two different types of universities, and asks whether the experience of a group of students differs in the context of a specific social movement. The analysis of social movements in relation to higher education is not new, and neither is the analysis of Black students’ experiences at HBCUs and PWIs. What this research attempts to do, however, is to merge these two fairly well studied areas into a contemporary look at how the specific social movement Black Lives Matter is impacting the experiences of Black students at the two different types of institutions.

My primary research question is: How do recent social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter affect the experiences of Black students who attend an HBCU versus a PWI, and specifically those who attend Morgan State University and Johns Hopkins

University? This research looks into the different ways the social movement has impacted the everyday lives of the students, as well as their future goals and experiences as a whole while attending the two different types of universities. I have placed their experiences in the current context of the social movement that Baltimore City has been involved in surrounding police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. Through focusing on the impact of the Black Lives Matter social movement, the overarching question this research aims to address is: What are the differences in experiences for students who attend a HBCU and students who attend a PWI in light of the Black Lives Matter movement and civil unrest? Within this question I will address the following: How have the events of the social movement affected the activities students participated in, both on campus and around the city of Baltimore? What, if any effect has the movement had on students' sense of self and or wellbeing on their respective campuses, and how they physically navigate their campuses? This inquiry will involve the impact the social movement has had on them academically, socially, and emotionally to gain a view of their lived experiences as college students at either an HBCU or PWI.

In order to address these questions, the first chapter of the thesis will focus on the empirical literature and theoretical paradigms that both inform and frame this research. The empirical literature includes discourses surrounding social movements and higher education, while the theoretical framework includes social movements and intersectionality, as well as interpretive anthropology. The second chapter will highlight my interviews with two students, one who attends a PWI, and one who attends an HBCU.

The final chapter of this thesis will situate the conversations I had with the students in the context of the aforementioned theoretical paradigms.

CHAPTER 1: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND RITUALS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Background

Social Movements

In the U.S., along with many other areas around the globe, social movements have played, and continue to play, an important role in politics, the economy, social structures, culture and society. Their impacts can be far reaching, on an international scale, or they can be community centered, aimed at very focused and specific changes (Snow et al. 2008). Change, however, is the ultimate goal of social movements, and most often this change is a revolutionary one in that it entails an impactful transformation taking place at some level (Brodkin 2005). Social movements serve as a vehicle through which this change can occur by utilizing various instruments such as protest, boycotts, and civil disobedience (Snow et al. 2008). In *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, the authors summarize various definitions of social movements to conclude that they can be defined as, “collective or joint action; change-oriented goals or claims; some extra- or non-institutional collective action; some degree of organization; and some degree of temporal continuity” (Snow et al. 2008, 6). Social movements serve as a type of collective action, and at some points can shift forms and change into interest groups or political parties (Snow et al. 2008). This being the case however, the line is not always a

definitive one between institutional collectives and non-institutional collectives with regards to social movements and other forms of collective action or behavior. The authors argue that social movements can develop in different ways, which may lead to various forms of collective action, such as community organizing, protesting, and civil disobedience. (Snow et al. 2008).

In the first chapter of *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* the authors describe social movements as, “challenges to institutional, organizational, or cultural authority, or systems of authority” (Snow et al. 2008, 11). Understanding social movements in this context allows for a broad perspective on what is considered to be a social movement, and how various collective actions can be analyzed as such. Many major historical movements fall into this perspective of social movements. On this point the authors state,

While one might quibble with *Time*'s estimation of Gandhi's influence, the more important point is that some of the major events and figures of the past century, as well as earlier, are bound up with social movements. And that is particularly true today, as social movements and the activities with which they are associated have become an increasingly conspicuous feature of the social landscape (2008, 3-4)

Social movements both organize and demonstrate in various spaces including public places such as courthouses and city centers, as well as in the 21st century on the Internet and in social media. One of the prominent spaces in which social movements take place is on college campuses. The next section discusses the empirical literature surrounding college students in relation to social movements.

College students

The relationship between social movements and college students is a strong one, which can be traced back to early centers of higher education in the U.S. College students interact with social movements in two prominent ways. The first involves the impact of education on students who are involved in social movements, and the second is the utilization of colleges/universities as spaces where students can collectively get involved in and interact with social movements. Fligstein and McAdam, two of the leading social movement theorists, note that universities educate those who are involved in social movements and they go on to state, “people who are highly credentialed [college educated] work for political parties, social movement organizations, governments, firms and nonprofits...their role in these various spheres of social life is to facilitate and coordinate various forms of collective fields and start new ones” (2012, 80).

Fligstein and McAdams also touch on the second prominent way social movements and college students interact, and that is not only through facilitating and coordinating, but also being actively involved with social movements on and in relation to college/university campuses—through on the ground protests, lobbying, organizing, and activism. College students themselves are situated within the institution of higher education, which plays an important role in their activity with social movements that often challenge institutions. Michel Foucault argues that social institutions such as colleges and universities are, “intimately grounded in a pervasive economy of discourses of power” (Erickson and Murphy 2013, 146). The discourse of power Foucault refers to means that students function within an institution sustained by various levels of individuals with power over others, such as teachers and administrators having power

over students. When discussing college students and their relationship to social movements, the relationship the students have within the institution of higher education, as well as the relationship social movements have as challenging institutions are important to keep in mind. While the interaction between some college students and social movements is one of protesting injustices in society at large, the colleges and universities may, and often times do create the context for students to mobilize around issues within the institution of higher education itself. In other words, college students and university spaces have played and continue to play various roles in social movements.

Shefner, Dahms, Jones, and Jalata (2014) argue that university students have been at the “vortex” of many past movements as well as ongoing protests. They give examples such as that of students in Wisconsin joining with workers to protest against unnecessary stripping of public sector rights, as well as students in Chile and elsewhere responding to tuition increases (Shefner et al. 2014). They also point out the ways in which students have been involved with movements when they state, “most recently, Brazilian students have participated in the emerging challenge to Brazilian state policies that are prioritizing the burnishing of Brazil’s image before the world over social need such as affordable transportation” (Shefner et al. 2014). College students also played a prominent role in the Civil Rights Movement, which is one of, if not the largest social movement to take place in the history of the U.S.

The Civil Rights Movement peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, and the involvement of students was crucial to its success (Rogers 2012). Ibram H. Rogers, a leading

contributor to the historical analysis of Black college students' involvement in social movements, notes the ways in which college students, and particularly Black students organized around equality (2012). These students' involvement mainly included those attending HBCUs. For example, some of the first students to protest segregation by staging "sit-ins" at local diners were students attending Morgan State University (then Morgan State College) (Vise 2011). Students attending HBCUs also created organizations such as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which played extremely important roles in the Civil Rights Movement—from staging "sit-ins" like the students at Morgan State, to registering Black citizens to vote in hostile regions (Rogers 2012). While the Civil Rights Movement focused on specific aspects of equality, peace, and rights, the Black Lives Matter social movement that my research focuses on is developing its own history and a broad set of objectives. These objectives vary from ending police brutality to reforming the U.S. justice system as a whole. The next section will discuss the Black Lives Matter movement specifically in relation to how it developed and what it aims to accomplish.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter social movement has various aspects that separate it from past large-scale social movements that have been covered in the media. Manning argues that many social movements stem from people who have the unfortunate reality of being at the bottom of society (2000). The Black Lives Matter movement originated as a response to the violence enacted on Black bodies (Devichand and Wendling 2016). The Black Lives Matter social movement began with a small group of activists using the

phrase as a hash tag on social media. In “Black Lives Matter: The Story of a Slogan” a *BBC World Service* report the authors state, “The slogan was coined after a jury acquitted a Florida neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, of the murder of black teenager Trayvon Martin. It was a polarizing decision, and young activists were so upset about the verdict that their heartfelt Facebook posts and tweets became the basis of a grassroots movement. But it was events in Ferguson, Missouri which turned those words into a worldwide rallying cry” (Devichand and Wendling 2016). The decision in the Trayvon Martin case was made in the summer of July 2013, and the events in Ferguson, Missouri occurred in 2014 (Alvarez and Buckley 2013). The Black Lives Matter movement captured headlines worldwide in response to the lack of an indictment of Police Officer Darren Wilson for the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown (Buchanan et al. 2014). The Mike Brown incident, along with others similar in nature, sparked nationwide protests. In April 2015, Baltimore City was the center of these protests against police brutality in response to the death of Freddie Gray, who sustained lethal injuries while in police custody (Almukhtar et al. 2015). The protests that occurred escalated to civil unrest, which along with the police response and media coverage captured the attention of the nation.

In a *New York Times* report titled “Where Black Lives Matter Goes from Here” (2015), Alex Altman and Daniel White point out the achievements that the movement has made, such as a taskforce on policing, criminal justice reform bills, and campaigns being held with Black Lives Matter activists. They also state, “according to a Pew Research Center poll released in August [2015], 59% of respondents said the U.S. must do more to

achieve racial equality, a 13-point jump in a single year” (2015, 22). Two years later, in his farewell address, president Barack Obama addressed the myth of a “post-racial America” when he stated, “race remains a potent, and often divisive force in our society” (Shear and Alcindor 2017). These reports are evidence of the influence the Black Lives Matter movement has had on people in the U.S. Altman and White also reported that the movement broadly addresses power structures, and issues from policing Black bodies to prison reform (2015). The power structures that the movement addresses are focused on that of U.S. society, however the movement itself does not conform to typical social movement power structures where a few people speak for the whole movement. Altman and White note, “the movement comprises a broad coalition. Many of its followers are women; many are gay; some are transgender; some aren't black. It has no formal leadership and no shortage of leaders” (2015, 24). The abundance of leadership in the movement speaks to both its reach and its impact. Social media has allowed groups to form both online and in local communities. Many organizations have taken up the movement in support and activism, and others have been formed in the wake of Black Lives Matter.

The movement seeks to call attention to the fact that Black people’s lives are just as valuable as others. The history of state sanctioned violence towards Black bodies in the U.S. is one that began when the country was founded, and while horrors such as slavery and segregation based on race are no longer legal, this history still lingers in the present day race relations in U.S. society. So much so that the Black Lives Matter movement is not unfounded in calling attention to specific issues surrounding race.

Through the declaration “Black lives matter”, which also serves as the name of the movement, those who support it are making what should be an obvious statement. However, the rates that Black people are subject to excessive force, incarcerated, and being killed by law enforcement make both the declaration “Black lives matter”, and the movement itself a necessity. The next section will build on the background of social movements, college students, and Black Lives Matter to look at the theoretical frameworks that shape the study.

Theoretical Frameworks and Relevance

This research draws on theoretical foundations in (a) interpretive anthropology, (b) social movements, and (c) feminist theories of intersectionality. While each of these theories can stand on their own, the context of my thesis will require fluidity between them.

Interpretive Anthropology

Interpretive anthropology falls under the umbrella of sociocultural anthropology. Panourgiá, an anthropologist who focuses on interpretive anthropology notes, “interpretive anthropology brought under consideration the intellectual developments outside of the sphere of anthropology (primarily in linguistics, philosophy, and literature) that participated in the figurations by which local systems of meaning were placed under anthropological analysis” (2012). Interpretive anthropology is closely tied to Clifford Geertz and his use of “thick description” regarding culture (Panourgiá 2012). “Thick description” is a key concept in interpretive anthropology because it places interpretations within their cultural meaning, which allows deeper, more in-depth

understanding. In conjunction with a focus on cultural meaning, other key concepts related to interpretive anthropology include the use and relevance of symbols and text. Panourgiá highlights this when she states, “interpretive anthropology is ‘very practice oriented,’ considering human acts as non-written texts, ‘texts [which] are performed’” (E. Neni K Panourgia and Marcus 2008) (2012). Interpretive anthropology approaches culture as texts, and seeks to understand the meaning that shapes the cultures at hand. This meaning is understood by those within the culture and then interpreted by the anthropologists who study the culture, and in turn its meanings (Panourgiá 2012).

The relevance of interpretive anthropology is twofold, it highlights the importance of cultural meaning in rituals of higher education, and it highlights the importance of community influences on behavior. The first point regarding rituals of higher education is relevant to this study due to the impact they have on campus culture and the development of cultural meaning. Kathleen Manning, an anthropologist who focuses on rituals of higher education states, “this ability [ritual] to communicate extraordinary meaning creates a medium to express the uncommon and remarkable dimensions of campus culture” (2000,3). Both campus culture and cultural meaning are integral to my inquiry of the effects the Black Lives Matter social movements is having on students’ experiences at the two different types of universities because they shape the college experience.

Interpretive anthropology also emphasizes community influences on behavior. Manning argues, “human communities are dynamic, complex, and ever changing environments, revealed through analysis of cultural events.” Manning goes on, “from the interpretive anthropology perspective participants’ behavior can be viewed in the context

of the past, present, and future of the individual community” (2000, 2-3). This perspective of complex and dynamic environments, along with behavioral contexts of the past, present, and future, lends itself to my research because of my particular focus on the influence social movements have on the experience of college students. Specifically, the social movement Black Lives Matter playing out in the same city that the universities are located creates an amplified “dynamic, complex and ever changing environment” (Manning 2000, 2-3). This environment, coupled with the cultural history that plays an important role in the distinction between an HBCU and a PWI, further emphasizes the relevance and usefulness of interpretive anthropology to the analysis of this research.

Social Movement Theory

The rituals that are focal points in interpretive anthropology, not only emphasize campus culture, but also the second foundational focus of this research, social movements. Students participating in protests and social movements can also be categorized as a form of ritual in higher education. The history of social movement theory is multidisciplinary, and scholars who study the topic today still do so in a largely multidisciplinary framework (Morris and Mueller 1992). Different theorists approach social movement theory by looking at structure, culture, strategy, identity, semiotics, and natural sciences (Morris and Mueller 1992). Social movements are studied as collective action. Marc Edelman notes, “theories of collective action have undergone a number of paradigm shifts, from ‘mass behavior’ to ‘resource mobilization,’ ‘political process,’ and ‘new social movements’” (2001, 285).

In the context of this thesis, social movement theory will be approached from an anthropological perspective. When discussing the study of social movements in anthropology, Karen Brodtkin states,

We can think of three big and interrelated questions as organizing the study of social movements. The first is the question of revolutionary subjectivity or agency; that is, who will be the revolutionaries, or change-makers? The second concerns what it takes to carry out successful change, or what works and what does not? And third is the question of revolutionary alternatives, or what does utopia look like (2005,303).

These three questions emphasize the fact that social movements can be situated on a large scale; they are aimed at influencing and eventually changing an entire society (Brodtkin 2005) This point is important to the context of my research specifically in that it provides the space for a unique intersection between social movements and the college experience. By enlisting “revolutionary subjectivity”, what social movements entail, and “revolutionary alternatives” as foundational aspects of studying social movements from an anthropological approach, my analysis will be better equipped to incorporate the recent social movement Black Lives Matter (Brodtkin 2005,303-313).

Black Feminist Theory of Intersectionality

Along with interpretive anthropology, and the study of social movements, the final theoretical foundation that I draw upon is feminist theory. Within feminist theory, my analysis will rely specifically on Black feminist theory in respect to power, politics, privilege, and oppression. An organizing principle of Black feminist theory is that of intersectionality (Nicholson 1997). This concept understands race, gender, sexuality, class and other identities as fundamentally important to one’s lived experience (Crenshaw 1991). This specifically relates to my study because in order to understand participants’

experiences, identities such as race, gender, and institutional affiliation are all imperative to both the student's stories and my analysis. The intersection of their identities cannot be separated from their experiences.

Along with intersectionality, Black feminist theory also organizes itself around politics, power, privilege, and oppression. This form of feminism emerged from the lack of recognition women of color were receiving in the Women's Movement (Nicholson 1997). Black feminist theory comes together with my research in that it not only opens the door for examining how politics, power, privilege, and oppression work to possibly influence the experience of students at their respective universities regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, but also the ways in which race, gender, and class play important roles in the answers to the questions this research poses surrounding social movement, types of universities, and experience. Black feminism recognizes that multiple intersecting identities lead to various experiences, or events being experienced in various ways (Nicholson 1997). Incorporating Black feminism as a theoretical foundation will not only allow this research to respect the various identities of the participants involved, but it will also consider them integral to the analysis of the impact the Black Lives Matter Movement has had on the experiences of students who attend an HBCU verses a PWI.

A Black Subconscious

Group experiences and the potential for a shared cultural sub-consciousness on a macro level is argued within Black feminist theory. Elizabeth Alexander discusses the possibility of shared Black sub-conscious memories and experiences, explicitly

surrounding the history of violence towards Black bodies in the United States, in “‘Can you be Black and Look at This?’ Reading of the Rodney King Videos” (1994). Alexander argues, “the bottom line here is that different groups pose sometimes-subconscious collective memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition, however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience” (1994, 80). This argument of collective memories provides additional space for analysis when comparing the impact of the recent social movements on Black students who attend HBCUs and Black students who attend PWIs. Both the empirical literature, and the theoretical frameworks listed above will be used to address the question: how do recent social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter, affect the college experiences of Black students who attend an HBCU versus a PWI, and specifically those who attend Morgan State University and Johns Hopkins University?

CHAPTER 2: THE STUDENTS

My personal experience in college contributed to my interest in the impact the social movement Black Lives Matter has had on Black college students who attend HBCUs versus those who attend PWIs. As a Black college student I know the Black Lives Matter movement has impacted multiple aspects of my college experience at a PWI, yet there is little dialogue on campus surrounding this and how a Black student's experience at a PWI such as my own may differ from a Black student's experience at an HBCU. Attending a PWI, there were times when the Black Lives Matter movement directly influenced my life. I participated in a die-in in the middle of campus, and attended events held by our Black Student Alliance on the movement. I distinctly remember feeling compelled to incorporate the Black Lives Matter movement and the discussion surrounding police brutality and violence towards Black people into a final English paper. I also recall awkward experiences with friends and fellow students who did not understand the overwhelming feeling of sorrow and anger I had following the verdict not to indict Police Officer Darren Wilson for the death of Michael Brown, or being the only one in my group of friends following reports of the protests in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Grey. My experience with the movement led me to question how other Black students may be experiencing it in other institutional contexts.

Recruitment

It was surprisingly difficult to recruit students to interview. I had a short six question survey that I initially posted on social media with the hope that students would find the topic interesting, take the survey, and if qualified, allow me to interview them. I actually thought within a few days I would reach my intended goal of about five to ten interested potential participants from each university. Unfortunately, this was far from the case.

After receiving IRB approval from George Mason University, the survey was distributed to students at both universities to gain a broad understanding of how students identify racially and culturally as well as which university they attend. Additionally, the survey was utilized as a screening tool to determine whether or not the students were interested in being interviewed. The surveys were created using Google Forms, and were distributed to students attending Morgan State University and Johns Hopkins University.

In order for participants to qualify to be interviewed, they were required to be at least 18 years old, identify as Black, and have been enrolled at least part-time at either Johns Hopkins University or Morgan State University between Fall 2014 and the Spring 2016 semester. Due to the nature of my research, I utilized snowball sampling and convenience sampling to spread the word. In addition, on-site solicitation took place at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland where I distributed flyers to students with information on taking the survey.

The survey contained six questions, the first of which acknowledged consent. The remaining questions were 2) “Have you been enrolled at least part-time at either Johns Hopkins University or Morgan State University between Fall 2014 and the current semester, Spring 2016?” 3) “Do you identify as Black?” 4) “What is your gender?” 5) “Are you willing to participate in an interview regarding the impact the Black Lives Matter social movement has had on your college experience?” 6) “If you answered yes to the previous question, please provide your email address below.” These questions were intended to screen participants, as well as solicit email addresses of participants who were interested in being interviewed for the study.

In order to recruit students to take the survey I posted the link to the survey on Twitter and Facebook, and I also attempted to make contact via student listservs at the two universities participating in the study. I sought approval from specific student groups on Twitter and Facebook to post the recruitment message on their pages. Some of these social media groups included Johns Hopkins University Black Student Union (Facebook), and MSUPoets (Twitter). Most of the time these requests came up empty. I sent email after email to presidents, and vice presidents of student organizations, as well as emails to specific academic departments and student centers. In return I received very few responses, however, the responses that I did receive were positive and I was told they would pass my survey along. Although there were a few times when I was told my survey would be passed along and shared this did not result in individuals actually taking my survey. This was quite discouraging, and confusing at the same time. Weeks went by where only one person had taken my survey, and they did not wish to be contacted for an

interview. Whenever I would explain what I was interested in, and why I wanted to interview students at these specific schools, I received great feedback, and most people (including students at the respective schools) seemed interested and supportive. This interest however did not translate into students actually taking my survey, or when they did take my survey they did not want to be interviewed. I was learning firsthand the struggles of conducting anthropological research.

When doing anthropological work, often times we deal with forms of the abstract, whether it be notions of community, race, space, culture, or other forms of intangible things that carry very tangible meaning. Through my research and more specifically my struggles with data collection, I learned that there are unique challenges that come along with studying that which occurs in both abstract spaces, as well as on the streets, in the news, and in the lives of those it touches. I highlight these struggles because they were not only part of the research process, but I realized they played an integral part in the story and analysis as a whole. The fact that it was so difficult for me to find students who were willing to be interviewed, speaks to methodological aspects of anthropology, but it also speaks directly to what this research is seeking to understand.

There are two main factors that have contributed to the difficulty I have experience with data collection. The first is the fact that Black Lives Matter is a social movement that operates simultaneously in geographic, and non-geographic spaces. It is both abstract and tangible at the same time. This is because Black Lives Matter is a social movement that originated online via social media, and continues to operate very heavily in the realm of cyber space. At the same time however, Black Lives Matter has been the

slogan for large protests, and forms of civil disobedience. It has been at the center of political debates, and primetime news stories. Black Lives Matter has also been the catalyst for, and taken up by, various organizations including those run by university students. However, the main thing that Black Lives Matter has accomplished is to bring the world's attention to the violence that continues to be enacted on Black bodies in the United States by the police force, as well as the justice system. These are the aspects of the online social movement that make it tangible and allow it to simultaneously straddle the world of cyber space, and people's everyday lives. They are also aspects of the movement that contributed to the challenges I faced. I was seeking to conduct in person interviews based on a social moment that developed and continues to function largely online.

I also ran into difficulties when it came to community. While I have participated in the movement through posting #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter and other social media outlets (Instagram), I was not a member of any particular cyber community formed in support of Black Lives Matter. Similarly, I was as a student at George Mason University, and not the school included in my research, hence, I was not a member of those communities either.

After social media and emails to numerous student's organizations and departments did not yield any students who were willing to be interviewed, I decided I would need to go to the universities in person to solicit students to participate. I traveled to Baltimore on a Saturday around noon in late April 2016 with the intention of interviewing at least one student and leaving some flyers for others who may be

interested at Morgan State University. I was a little nervous, but I was also excited that I would finally get some participants to interview. This feeling left as soon as I approached campus and realized there were not many students out and about. My nervousness turned to anxiety, and my excitement turned to an overwhelming feeling of being an outsider. The campus seemed empty, so empty in fact that the entrance to the visitor's parking garage was closed and when the security guard left his post I drove in through the exit in order to park my car.

My bad luck that began with parking continued throughout my time on campus. Because I was not a student and I did not know any students, I could not go into the library, or the small student event that was going on in the student center without a student I.D. I was however able to pass out some flyers with information on taking the survey to the few students that I saw walking around campus, but none of them were interested in being interviewed. After little luck with soliciting students and leaving flyers I decided to head back to Virginia. I made my way out of the closed visitor parking garage, and attempted not to make eye contact with the security guard who was back at his post. While my anxiety left on the drive back, the feeling that I did not belong lingered. I realized that I felt like an outsider because I was one. I did not know anyone at the university, and more importantly I was not a part of the community. I realized that I would have to make some kind of connection with the students if I expected them allow me to interview them.

I was finally able to make these connections I had been seeking when I got my first participant. I was hanging out outside of the bookstore on Johns Hopkin's main

campus during the summer 2016 semester. I started up a conversation with two students who ended up taking my survey on the spot, and one of them left an email for an interview with me. The second student I interviewed a few months later learned about my study through my older brother passing my survey along to a friend of a friend who attended Morgan State University.

What Black Lives Matter means to Black Students

The spring semester had come and gone, and the blistering summer heat had arrived. I drove to Baltimore around 9am on a Saturday morning in late July, to meet with my first participant. Rachel² was a rising senior taking summer classes. She was in her early twenties, and had just moved off campus into an apartment close by for the summer. We met in the school book store/coffee shop. Given the struggles I had in recruiting participants I was both extremely excited and nervous at the same time. Rachel on the other hand had a quiet demeanor, yet was very welcoming and open, which helped ease my nerves and made our interview flow. Before I knew it our hour was over and Rachel had shared so much more than I was expecting in terms of her experience at the PWI she attended and the impact Black Lives Matter has had on that experience.

Rachel began by telling me that although Johns Hopkins University is a well-known school for academics, she was not totally sold on attending until she went to an orientation-like event for students of color. This convinced her that Johns Hopkins

² The excerpts from my conversations with both students have been slightly altered when needed for ease of reading, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the students.

University was the school she would like to attend for the next four years. After telling me a little about herself and why she chose JHU, Rachel began telling me what she knew about the Black Lives Matter movement:

Rachel: I initially started hearing about it when the riots occurred down here in Baltimore.

EH: Okay,

Rachel: At first I didn't really understand the whole movement Black Lives Matter, but as I listened to the news and as I listened to the things a lot of people on campus were saying I was like this is actually a really cool movement. It has a meaning to it, it's not just "oh Black Lives Matter" it's not just someone being extreme and just saying, "this has to occur." It's something that needs to be told to the society, basically. I remember when I first heard the term I was like "Eh" it was almost like the "every life matters" kinda [sic] thing. It was just a misconception of what they're trying to say, and I realized that that's how a lot of people are coming across when they hear Black Lives Matter [sic]. They have that like, "well every life matters". I realized that when I went back home and my uncle was asking me about the whole "what do you feel about this?" and I had to explain it to him and he was like "that's actually a really, like a better explanation than what I've been hearing from a lot of people I've been talking to", and if you can get that point across...

EH: mhm

Rachel: Which is unfortunate that you have to kind of explain it in a way that people are like "oh that makes sense." Like they're not going to immediately hear it, but at that moment I was like "wow", people really don't understand what we're trying to say when we say "Black Lives Matter."

Rachel pointed out that initially she did not understand the Black Lives Matter movement, and she felt that others around her on campus also did not initially understand the meaning behind the movement either. After learning more she realized its importance and what the movement stood for. She then began to understand the "revolutionary alternatives," as Brodtkin would describe it of Black Lives Matter (2005, 303-313). Rachel saw what those in the movement were pointing out, that there are problems with

police brutality, specifically when it comes to police using excessive force with black people. She explained to me that the issues Black Lives Matter are bringing to light are issues that need to end, and Black Lives Matter is calling for a change in that regard. Through understanding that the movement was not saying that all lives do not matter, but that black lives do matter, Rachel realized that the movement is pointing out an issue specifically dealing with race, and how black people are valued in our country. The revolutionary alternatives of the movement became apparent once the issues of police brutality towards black people were understood.

What Rachel knew about Black Lives Matter and how she experienced it as a student was heavily impacted by her feelings that the people around her, mainly other students, did not understand it, respect it, or care to understand it. Eric, the second student I interviewed, however, had a different experience when it came to Black Lives Matter. I met with Eric about a month after Rachel's interview in the student center of Morgan State University. He was a rising senior in his early twenties and at the time was on summer break. Eric was fairly involved on campus through his membership in student organizations and similarly to Rachel, he was very open with his thoughts and feelings throughout the interview. Like with Rachel we began our conversation with Eric telling me what he knows about the Black Lives Matter movement.

Eric: Umm okay, well I know it was started by I want to say 3 trans women and, it's pretty much just a way of us trying explain to people that our lives do matter, and we shouldn't be treated the way that we are because of the color of our skin. And people, trying to get people to understand that just because black people aren't being called niggahs anymore or getting hung, and this that and the third, doesn't mean that racism doesn't exist and doesn't mean... There are clearly by products of like very horrible racism that we used to deal with, and now it may not

be relatively as horrible, but it's still bad and it's still shitty when it comes to the fact that we're still human. And that's something that I think the Black Lives Matter movement is really trying to get across to people in America, that we deserve the same dignity as non-black people. Mainly white people because of course every other ethnic minority experiences some sort of discrimination racism, etc., but it's very easily debatable that it's not to the degree of what black people have faced, and continue to face.

When I asked Eric what he knew about the movement he seemed to have an understanding of it both in its present tense concerning police brutality towards Black people, as well as how it is situated in the history on racism in the U.S. Throughout our conversation Eric often referred to the long lasting repercussions of slavery in the U.S. At times he would also tie this aspect of history into his discussion of present day experiences he has had, such as what he knew about the Black Lives Matter movement, and its impact on his life. One of the first questions that I asked each student was, “What do you know about Black Lives Matter?” The differences between their answers correlate to the types of universities they attend. Rachel’s understanding of the movement was heavily shaped by the lack of understanding by those around her. Eric’s response however, was less shaped by those on his campus, and more so by his understanding of the history of racism in the U.S.

Eric recalled first encountering Black Lives Matter on social media in 2014, in the context of Michael Brown’s killing by police officer Darren Wilson, and the protests that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri. Eric explained throughout our conversation that he has been outspoken about issues surrounding race prior to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly when he was in high school. However, the movement did have a

significant impact on him. The majority of instances Eric discussed with me surrounding the movement dealt with interactions on social media, and how those interactions correlated to his experience with the movement.

Social Media

The social movement Black Lives Matter cannot be discussed without also discussing social media. Similarly, Eric's experience with Black Lives Matter cannot be discussed without social media. One of Eric's first encounters with the movement came from his participation in the hashtag Black Lives Matter (#BlackLivesMatter). He also explained various instances where he participated in conversations, hashtags, and at times confrontations surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. One time in particular he noted that he participated in a social media trend on Twitter tied to the Black Lives Matter movement involving the way black people were being portrayed in the media.

Eric: Oh yeah, and yeah yeah I remember. I actually participated in one of the hashtags. I think it was like you put up a nice looking picture, like you look respectable quote unquote then one [a picture] of you looking like you are doing something wrong, and probably not showing you in the best light, and you ask which picture they would show if they gunned me down and something like that. So I did that I got like 2,000 retweets on my page because it was one [a picture] of me when I graduated from basic training, on one half, and the other half was me with one of my neck gaiters on. It's like a type of thing that you put on your face in the Army to protect from the cold, it's like \$3. I had one of those, an Adventure Time hats, and I had a BB gun. So I put up those two pictures, and asked which one would they show if they gunned me down or something like that. So yeah. As a journalism major we have come to the knowledge that Twitter is technically a news source, and that is where I got my news that day, Twitter.

This trend showed up on social media as a response to the ways in which main stream media was portraying black people who were killed by police officers. Instead of showing pictures of black people in a positive light, such as in a graduation cap and gown, there were pictures of them such as half of the picture Eric described of himself, holding a BB gun with his face partially covered. This trend on social media called attention to the way black people were being portrayed, particularly in incidences where Black Lives Matter challenged the use of excessive and often fatal force from police officers against black people. Eric went on to explain that he not only participated in trends related to the Black Lives Matter movement such as the picture comparison, but he also interacted with other people on social media regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. He often referred to interactions such as tweets, and comments on tweets and Facebook when he referred to the impact Black Lives Matter has had on his everyday life.

EH: So is this like... Kind of explain to me what kind of interactions you are having with people.

Eric: The thing is, the interactions that I was having with people that were problematic were mainly on social media. Because a lot of these people didn't have the balls to say what they were saying on social media in person. I'll bring up another Black Lives Matter movement example. So when Darren Wilson, they decided not to press charges on him, or he was acquitted I can't remember exactly what happened. I just remember it was right before Thanksgiving, and I was in my room on Twitter. I saw that, and so there was a video that came from Ferguson of people stomping on an American flag. And so one of my now former friends said something about, "don't you dare disrespect the flag people die for" whatever whatever, and if there's one pet peeve I really have its civilians trying to speak on behalf of soldiers or other service members, me being one. So I'm like we are obligated to uphold the Constitution. In the Constitution you're allowed to step on the flag, you're allowed to burn the flag, it is an act of protest. I'm not going to get mad at somebody doing that because I understand where they're coming from. Would I do it?

Probably not. I'll burn a Confederate flag any day. Would I burn an American flag? Probably not. In fact, I don't think I ever will, but I'm not going to want to fight somebody for doing so. Anyone who was to fight, or attack, or even threatened to kill somebody who is stepping on the American flag, you are now a domestic terrorist, and I am technically obligated to take you out. And so I said that, and so he starts poppin off [sic] about his parents being service members whatever whatever then he blocked me.

EH: On Twitter?

Eric: On Twitter, then he tweeted "if the purge was real best believe I would be coming for his ass." ... And I mean it was just stuff like that, and again most of these problematic interactions don't happen in person.

Eric spoke up on social media about the right Black Lives Matter demonstrators have to stomp on the U.S. flag as a form of protest. Not only did he understand the feelings and emotion that fueled the act, he also felt that as a soldier it was his job to defend the right the Black Lives Matter protestor had to protest in that way.

The interaction as a whole was not a pleasant one, yet it represents a trend regarding the types of interactions Eric had surrounding Black Lives Matter.

While Rachel did not mention the role social media played in her experience with Black Lives Matter, she often mentioned the role that a lack of understanding by others played, and this lack of understanding can also be seen in Eric's discussion of social media. He often noted the "problematic interactions" on social media stemmed from people being either against the Black Lives Matter movement, or more often simply not understanding it. The sense that people around the students, either virtually or physically, either did or did not understand Black Lives Matter directly affected how both students interacted with the movement, as well as the role the movement had on their lives as Black college students.

Impact at school, and on campus

I asked both students explicitly if they felt the movement impacted their lives as students, and both Eric and Rachel expressed that it did in different ways. Rachel became more interested in both the movement, and issues surrounding Black people in the U.S. Eric noticed a change in the way his professors taught his classes, as well as his interest in journalism. While Rachel described that learning about the movement sparked her interest in issues surrounding police brutality against Black people in the U.S., much of her experience surrounding the movement was specifically influenced by her attendance at a PWI in Baltimore, Maryland. As a black woman on campus Rachel felt a certain connection to the cause Black Lives Matter was fighting for. She explained to me that she grew up in a predominantly white community, so from a young age she was aware of her race. This being the case however, she described how being a black woman at the PWI she attended specifically during the Black Live's Matter movement made her more aware of her race in a way that was not necessarily a positive one. The lack of understanding that some of her fellow students had surrounding the issues Black Lives Matter was bringing to light made her question what these students' thought of her as a black woman and student. When I asked her about the impact the movement has had on her experience she described what it was like being on campus, and in Baltimore during the civil unrest surrounding the death of Freddy Grey at the hands of the police in April 2015.

Rachel: The Freddie Grey whole situation was really sad because a lot of people on campus didn't really know why Baltimore City had a curfew or why people were rioting. They really just thought that "oh you guys are being irrational, like what's the point of this?" It was almost like "people die every day, cops are bad." That mentality where it's like "this isn't the first time, why is this a problem now?"

EH: And you experienced that on campus?

Rachel: Yea, and I was like, that shouldn't be how we are thinking about things. If someone passes it's bad. And it's unfortunate many other people had to pass before it got to a point where we're like "this is enough." But at the same time we have to start somewhere.

EH: Yea

Rachel: And I don't think people on my campus, even some minorities, I don't think they really understood that this is a point where it's too much. It's not cool, it's not something that we can continue to live passively with.

EH: How did that make you feel when you were navigating, dealing with this? The curfew and all that?

Rachel: In the beginning like I said I didn't know about the movement. Then as time continued I was like [pause] why can't you see it now? ...But at the same time I knew it's going to take people time, but some people were just like "I don't understand why you have to separate?" And I was like, it's not were separating, it's just we're trying to bring light to a matter, and nobody's understanding that. So dealing with that especially as the riots went on was just hard because a lot of people didn't realize the severity of the situation. We didn't have curfew just because. We had a curfew because of the riots, but it wasn't like "oh everyone's being punished because of a few people."

Rachel went on to explain that some students went as far as to use the city's curfew as an opportunity to party and have a good time.

Rachel: And some people on campus were like, "oh this is like a party. Time to go party." Some people went out on a Friday night and because the curfew lasted until I think 6am or around that time, they would go to [the party] before the curfew and then it was the whole idea, "oh were gunna [sic] have a Curfew Party blah blah blah" I was like, I don't think you understand what this is. This isn't a time to just party out and enjoy yourself, this is serious. People are basically putting their lives at risk for a matter that they believe. And you're just going to sit there and like...

EH: So that was like a thing, like having a curfew party?

Rachel: Having a curfew party, and I was like, "great this is where I go to [school]".

Rachel viewed her fellow students attending "curfew parties" not only as a lack of understanding on their part, but also as a lack of respect for the situation that was unfolding in Baltimore. The curfew parties reinforced two feelings Rachel expressed to

me in our conversation. The first was her feeling that there are real issues surrounding race in the U.S. and particularly surrounding police brutality. The second was that these issues are compounded by a lack of understanding surrounding how black people are specifically vulnerable to these issues surrounding race and policing. Rachel also explained that there were people on her campus that understood the movement, and some students were very active in the movement and outspoken about it on campus. The presence of these students on campus helped Rachel with navigating a campus as a minority where she felt the cause Black Lives Matter was advocating for was not a priority. Rachel's experience with the movement on campus differed from that of Eric mainly regarding the number of students and professors Eric was surrounded by who did understand the movement and engaged in dialogue about Black Lives Matter.

Attending an HBCU, Eric felt the movement had a direct effect on his education in the classroom as well as on campus. He notes that the Black Lives Matter movement sparked conversation with students on his campus and other campus he visited. Eric told me he gained a new understanding of issues surrounding Black people, as well as the role he can play with his writing and journalism.

EH: So do you feel that the Black Lives Matter movement has affected your college experience? In any way?

Eric: It has I think. For one it's brought a bunch more dialogues to the table that I've had with people at Morgan or people from other schools about what exactly the Black Lives Matter movement means, what is the, I guess the state of Black America? I kind of hate putting it into those terms but at the same time we are a collective nonetheless. I think it kind of made me come to terms with where I stand on acknowledging and fighting forms of oppression. Like I am not one of those I'ma be in the streets and protest all day type people [sic]. I never have been, probably I don't know if I ever will be, but I am a journalist and I know that there are ways that I can get our message across through writing sometimes through

radio and photography too because I dabble in those, but mainly writing. and it's also changed the way that we've been talking in a lot of our classes as well. I remember my first day of my COM 102 class, or one of the first..

EH: at Morgan?

Eric: Yes, at Morgan. One of the first days of that class my professor was like "in order for us to get our stories heard we have to infiltrate the system first"...

EH: So that was something that your professors zoomed in on?

Eric: Oh I guess, I think it might have lit a new fire in them. In making us good journalists, because the quality of your work is only as good as the effort you put in it, and likewise the quality of students to produce can only be as good as how much passion and effort you put into making those students good. I believe that our professors found a new inspiration with this movement.

Eric also points out that the movement impacted how his professors taught his classes. He specifically described how his journalism professors focused on making sure he and his fellow students understood the importance of journalism and how they report of topics such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Eric:...But that part of it, the Michael Brown killing, and all of the news after and how the news media dealt with them afterwards all brought a new sense of teaching and mentorship from our professors. They're like hey you need to know what is and isn't relevant in a story, you need to know how to properly word what you're saying, and what you're writing because words do matter...

Along with noticing a change in his professors, Eric pointed out that there was a certain level of understanding from those on his campus regarding the movement. I asked him if he felt that Morgan being an HBCU impacted the level of understanding surrounding what the movement stood for and some of the issues Black Live's Matter was bringing attention to. Eric noted that although his school is an HBCU the students who attend are

not all Black, but regardless of their race he still felt a shared sense of understanding when it came to the movement as well as racism as a whole.

Eric: well most people at HBCUs have a very good understanding of 1) what racism is, 2) what type of racism we deal with, and 3) the fact that once we leave this place it's just going to happen.

EH: So this campus, the fact that it's an HBCU is that like a driving factor?

Eric: ...Us being at an HBCU is kind of a driving factor, the fact that black livelihood is at the forefront, we never have to question our validity on this campus. We never have to worry about under-representation in any way shape or form. We definitely don't have to worry about professors treating us differently because of the color of our skin. And I know plenty of people at other schools have to deal with professors who think less of them or who expect less of them because they are Black. Our lives matter here [chuckles] that's really what it comes down to. Like the school cares about the academic and societal enrichment of black people.

Both Eric and Rachel described how the movement impacted their lives on and off campus. Attending a PWI Rachel did not have the same experiences with her fellow students and professors that Eric did at an HBCU however, the movement did spark similar interests in both students when it came to race, and learning more about issues surrounding Black people in the U.S. The next chapter will build on the interviews I conducted with Rachel and Eric for analysis of how the movement has impacted their experiences at an HBCU verses a PWI.

CHAPTER 3: HBCU VS. PWI

The purpose of this thesis was to question whether the experience of Black students attending a PWI and an HBCU differs in the context of the social movement Black Lives Matter as well as to inquire about the influences the movement has on Black students who attend these two different types of universities. The students I interviewed, Eric who attends an HBCU and Rachel a PWI, experienced Black Lives Matter in distinctly different ways, both of which I argue are due to their attendance at a PWI or an HBCU. The aspects of Eric's experience with the movement that he highlighted during our conversation centered around social media, including confrontations he had on social media with those who did not agree with Black Lives Matter. The fact that he chose to highlight those aspects of his experience with the movement infer that they stood out to him. On the same note however, Eric described that many of his fellow students on campus not only understood the movement, but they also agreed with it and supported it. Eric also described a general understanding and support of the movement that went beyond just his fellow students to encompass the administration and specifically some of the professors that taught his classes. This collective support for the movement that Eric experienced with his school displays why social media played such a large impact on how Black Lives Matter impacted his daily life as a student. Specifically, Eric was in a

physical environment that had a mutual understanding of Black Lives Matter. His experiences with those who did not understand or agree with the movement particularly stuck out to him, and not surprisingly, occurred online where the movement largely functioned.

Rachel's experience with Black Lives Matter is also largely attributed to her attendance at a PWI. During our conversation, Rachel expressed how she experienced the movement through the lack of understanding by those around her. This led to a more internalized experience with the movement, and one that was more situated within the context of the institution she attended. Rachel's experience differed from Eric's more tangible experiences with the movement. Rachel's internalization of the movement is set in the fact that she experienced it in the context of her being a minority Black female student at a PWI where she felt a number of her fellow students did not understand Black Lives Matter. Rachel expressed that this lack of understanding manifested itself in various ways, some of which Rachel felt was disrespectful to her and the movement as a whole. Rachel explained that she already felt like a minority on campus, but, she became hyper aware of her Blackness when she realized that those around her did not understand what Black Lives Matter stands for. Rachel connected the movement to an overall view of the issues surrounding race in the U.S. Therefore, when a fellow student did not understand the movement, in some ways Rachel questioned whether or not that student understood the struggles Black people face outside of the context of the movement, and further questioned how that student viewed or understood Rachel as a Black woman.

Social movements

The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements defines social movements as, “collective or joint action; change-oriented goals or claims; some extra- or non-institutional collective action; some degree of organization; and some degree of temporal continuity” (Snow et al. 2008, 6). Throughout my conversations with Rachel and Eric, aspects of this definition continually arose in regards to Black Lives Matter. While their interactions with the movement were shaped differently, and occurred in different contexts, both students highlighted the ways Black Lives Matter functions as a social movement. For example, Eric engaged in “some degree of temporal continuity” through his participation in Black Lives Matter hashtags on Twitter, as well as posting messages on social media supporting various aspects of the movement.

The definition of social movements is also relevant to my conversations with Eric and Rachel in that it touches on similar aspects to what Brodtkin describes as key components to studying social movements and anthropology. Particularly, Brodtkin argues that “revolutionaries, or change makers” are key aspects for analyzing social movements from an anthropological perspective (2005, 303). Eric and Rachel’s explanation of what they knew about the movement displayed that in the case of Black Lives Matter, there are not necessarily any individual revolutionaries or any individual people who are the change makers for the movement. Black Lives Matter does not have any one organization that leads the movement. However, a combination of social media, including tweets and hashtags, as well as news media, and a collection of both individuals and organizations all make up the change makers. This collective of individuals and organizations also allows people like Eric to participate in the movement via social

media, and defend the movement on the internet, as well as advocate for the issues the movement supports. The presence Black Lives Matter has on social media creates a space where people can engage with the movement wherever they have access to the internet. Eric was not only engaging in community with thousands of people around the country when he participated in the trending Black Lives Matter hashtags on Twitter, the conversation, and at times arguments that Eric had defending aspects of the Black Lives Matter movement contributed to how the movement affected his life, and his experience at an HBCU. Eric's interactions with those who did not support the movement shed light on the ways in which he experienced the movement on campus at a HBCU. All of the negative experiences Eric had when it came to the Black Lives Matter movement involved conversation and at time arguments with people on social media who did not agree with Eric's support of the movement or his action in calling attention to the issues the movement sought attention for. These interactions allowed him to experience push back against the movement that he did not necessarily experience at Morgan State University.

Rachel's experience with push back came in the form of a lack of understanding from some of her fellow students at Johns Hopkins University. Rachel explained to me that while she did not participate in any direct protests with Black Lives Matter, she did support it and found herself trying to understand why some of her fellow students did not understand the importance behind the movement. The fact that Rachel's understanding and experience with the movement is so rooted in the perspectives of those around her demonstrates the impact that community, and campus culture can have on a student's

experience. This understanding of the movement as having a connection with how some of her fellow students understand the movement also represents the role that rituals of higher education play in the understanding of the movement, and how that understanding can vary.

Rituals of higher education

Kathleen Manning describes rituals of higher education as being closely tied with both community and socialization (2000,3). Social movements also involve a certain level of community through people collectively advocating for change in various ways. Rachel's description of Black Lives Matter, as well as how it affected her depicts the community aspects of both social movements, and rituals of higher education. Attending parties can often serve as a socialization mechanism for some college students, as well as a form of community gathering. Rachel also experienced parties as a form of community at her school, which added to her anger when she found out the some of her fellow students were participating in parties when the city was placed on a curfew. In a way Rachel found her fellow students coming together to have fun during a time of turmoil for both the city of Baltimore and as extremely disrespectful. These curfew parties that Rachel described to me fall into this category of rituals of higher education. While city wide curfews due to civil unrest and protests are not a regular occurrence, college students throwing parties in general are. The students who participated in this specific ritual that during the citywide curfew may have viewed it as a time to relax, have fun, and gather with friends. Rachel however did not view the curfew parties in the same light.

She took them as a disrespectful gesture towards the Black Lives Matter movement and specifically disrespectful to those who were participating in the protests. While Rachel knew that many of her fellow students did not understand the magnitude of what was happening in the same way she did, the fact that her fellow students were using the time to party made her feel uncomfortable, and ashamed of her school. This situation demonstrates how some rituals associated with community in a university setting can have different significance to different students. Particularly in Rachel's case where she was a minority at her school.

Black feminist theory

While Eric and Rachel's experiences with Black Lives Matter differed, the movement itself had similar lasting influences on them. Not only did both students become more interested in the movement, both students were also upset with the current state of race relations in the U.S., particularly surrounding police brutality. The similar influence that the movement had on the students who attended an HBCU and a PWI can be understood in some ways as a shared cultural sub-consciousness. Elizabeth Alexander contemplates the possibility of group trauma leading to a collective identity when she discusses the discusses the beating of Rodney King, a Black man by police officers in 1991,

What do black people say to each other to describe their relationship to their racial group, when that relationship is crucially forged by incidents of physical and psychic violence which boil down to the "fact" of abject blackness? Put another way, how does an incident like [Rodney] King's beating consolidate group affiliations by making blackness an unavoidable, irreducible sign which despite

its abjection leaves creative space for group self-definition and self-knowledge?
(Alexander 1994, 77)

While Eric and Rachel attended different types of universities, as Black students the movement impacted them in a shared way. Their identity as Black played a pivotal role in how they experienced a social movement that aims to end police brutality toward people of color. Rachel also discussed that as a Black women attending a PWI, she has been disappointed with the lack of Black female professors in her program. She identified with students across the country who have petitioned their universities to hire more professors of color, often under the umbrella of the Black Lives Matter movement. The multiple identities that both Eric and Rachel have, played an important role in relation to the influence the Black Lives Matter movement has had on their college experiences.

CONCLUSION YES, WE MATTER

My conversations with students took place a little over a year after Freddie Grey's death, and the subsequent civil unrest in Baltimore. Since then those supporting Black Lives Matter have continued to rally, protest, pray, and work together for change in our police departments, justice system, and our nation. The movement has made great strides specifically in staging large scale protests that gain attention of the media and politicians. Many lawyers, local community members, and organizations have successfully moved issues of violence against people of color onto the radar of the country's leaders at community, state, and national levels. Black students across the country have also made a significant impact on the movement. Along with participating in protests, supporting their communities, and social media activism, Black students have also organized under Black Lives Matter to petition their schools to hire more professors of color and to hold the schools they attend accountable for the wellbeing of all of their students, including students of color. Black student in universities across the country continue to navigate a reality that tells them yes you are getting your education, but yes you are also more likely to be shot by the police or incarcerated than a white person. Yes, black people who look just like you are dying at the hands of our law enforcement, and yes you are still expected

to go to class whether that be on a campus where most of the students do not understand the Black Lives Matter movement, or on one where students do.

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BIOGRAPHY

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