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How Twitter users #sayhername: Discursive framing of gender justice in Black Lives Matter

Darcy Besch

Iowa State University

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How Twitter users #sayhername: Discursive framing of gender justice in Black Lives Matter

by

Darcy Besch

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Sociology

Program of Study Committee:
Ann Oberhauser, Major Professor
Kyle Burgason
Daniel Krier

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2018

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore gendered language in the BLM dialogue on Twitter. Specifically, I ask how the discourse on Twitter reflects and contributes to gendered power relations or dynamics in the BLM movement. The analysis includes samples of tweets about BLM from 2014 to 2015. Feminist critical discourse analysis that draws from intersectionality and social movement framing reveal that the dialogue on Twitter is primarily androcentric in nature. A small number of tweets were more gender-inclusive. This study contributes to the literature on discursive opportunity structure by examining the ways in which regular social media users can affect the shape and framing of a movement online. I examine how Black women are included or excluded from the BLM discourse, and how that might affect the social support they receive.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Three Black women established the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in response to police brutality against Black people. Specifically, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi began to organize after a neighborhood watch guard killed a 17-year-old Black boy named Trayvon Martin. George Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges. Activists continued to organize in response to multiple other cases of police killings and brutality against Black people. Police have committed violence against Black people of all genders, however, the cases of police violence that have received the most media attention include male victims. I argue that this focus on men could prevent women from being recognized as potential victims in the movement. Failure to understand the ways in which women are uniquely victimized by police could prevent the BLM movement from developing effective solutions for mitigating police violence against Black women.

Drawing from intersectional feminist critique, Crenshaw et al. (2015) claimed the BLM movement failed to adequately address state violence against Black women. This report, “Say Her Name,” published by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), tells the stories of Black women who have suffered or been killed at the hands of state violence. Given the lack of attention to female victims of state violence, they created the hashtag #SayHerName to encourage all BLM adherents to bear witness to female victims of police brutality and extend an intersectional lens to BLM activism. The report asks citizens to say, speak, or type the names of female victims of state violence so they will not be forgotten.

The purpose of this study is to explore how discourse on racialized social movements may exclude marginalized groups of people, particularly women. For this study, I analyze the discourse on social media about gender in the BLM movement. Theories of social movement
framing and intersectionality inform a critical discourse analysis of tweets about BLM. This work will improve the literature on intersectionality in social movements by introducing the concept of discursive opportunity structure, and how that affects the choices activists make about how to make the movement more inclusive of all Black people.

This research is guided by three research objectives. First, I examine how the BLM discourse reflects and contributes to gendered power relations or dynamics. Second, I seek to find what other forms of oppression are included in the BLM discourse. Lastly, I make suggestions about how a feminist analysis of BLM discourse raise awareness and reduce violence against Black women.

Black feminist literature explores the ways in which Black women have been subject to violence as well as the ways they have resisted that violence. For example, Ritchie (2017) argues that contemporary violence against Black women is an enduring historical legacy of violence enacted upon them since slavery, yet they continue to resist and organize against this anti-Black violence. In 1977, the Black Combahee River Collective (2014) rebelled against female separatism, which was popular among feminist movements at the time, and explicitly stated that they stood with progressive men. There is also evidence that Black women created organizations throughout history to protest lynchings and develop protective legislation (B. Williams 2015). Despite this rich Black feminist tradition and the immense amount of activist work Black women have done, however, the majority of attention in Black social movements is given to male victims of violence and to male activists.

The BLM movement has been connected to social media since its inception. Garza, Khan-Cullors, and Tometi started the movement with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. In a
“love letter to Black people” on Facebook, Garza wrote “I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter […] Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter” (Lowery 2017). The hashtag rapidly spread through social media sites such as Twitter to support Black lives and protest state violence against Black people. This study will explore the discourse, or the way that language is used in writing and in speech (Wodak and Fairclough 1997), on #BlackLivesMatter with a critical feminist lens.

The body of literature on BLM on social media is relatively new. From popular accessible reports by the Pew Research Center (Anderson and Hitlin 2016), studies of rhetoric (Langford and Speight 2015), qualitative textual analyses (Carney 2016; Ray et al. 2017), to large scale network and content analyses (Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2016), the work on BLM is growing and interdisciplinary in nature. Analyses of gender, however, are largely absent in this research. Freelon et al (2016) point to the overrepresentation of men among top BLM Twitter users, with only one woman among the top ten Twitter users during their study period. Recent scholarship has begun to address the need for more intersectional studies of BLM that include gender in their analyses. Stout et al (2017) used an intersectional framework in their study of how political representatives use or abstain from using various social justice hashtags based on their identities. Brown et al (2017) conducted a quantitative content analysis on tweets containing the hashtag #SayHerName. Ince, Rojas, and Davis (2017) studied how Twitter users interacted with BLM movement discourse, making the claim that “average citizens” can interact with and contribute to the discourse in a movement directly via social media.

Intersectional theory informs this study by attending to race and gender simultaneously, as well as other categories of identity. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term
intersectionality in her article, “Mapping the Margins”, to describe the ways in which violence against Black women is shaped simultaneously by both sexism and racism. Crenshaw explains that both antiracist agendas and feminist agendas marginalize Black women’s needs by focusing on only one kind of oppression at a time. Her piece addresses Black women’s experiences with both domestic violence and rape, and gaps in responses to such instances of violence. In these cases, Black women were systematically excluded from support services they needed as survivors of violence.

Although Crenshaw first used the term “intersectionality”, other Black feminists have theorized similar ideas. In 1977, the Black Combahee River Collective (2014) wrote about the inextricable and simultaneous experience of racism, sexism, and classism, building upon their mothers’ and grandmothers’ work. Collins (2009) described popular stereotypes called “controlling images” in mainstream discourse that justified Black women’s continued oppression. Although Crenshaw (1991) theorized intersectionality, Black women have displayed awareness of their inextricable positions as Black people and as women.

This research is grounded in the sociological literature on social movement frames and framing processes. Work on social movement framing describes movement actors’ process of meaning construction and particularly their development of collective action frames, which are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford and Snow 2000:614). I focus primarily on discursive framing processes taking place in social media posts on BLM. Discursive processes in the framing literature are the communication acts, whether spoken, written, or otherwise, that are related to movement activities. Benford and Snow (2000) have identified discursive framing processes that include presenting a set of
events and experiences together in a way that makes sense and is compelling to an audience, and highlighting some specific events as more relevant than others.

The field of critical discourse analysis was inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, who analyzed the relationship between discourse and power/knowledge (Foucault 1980). Critical discourse analysis examines discourse as a social practice, where the discourse has a dialectic relationship between the discursive event and the context in which it occurs (Wodak and Fairclough 1997). This means that the discourse shapes and is shaped by situations and social structures. Discourse analysis can reproduce the status quo or can transform power relations (Wodak and Fairclough 1997). Such an understanding of discourse allows for an analysis of power, both as it constrains language use and as language use can change discourse.

Benford and Snow (2000) argue that the goal of such framing is to make movement frames resonate, or cohere with the audience’s pre-existing ideas. Focusing on resonance alone, however, forgets that most social movements want to make social change and upset dominant forms of thought (Ferree 2003). These discursive framing processes take place in a given discursive field. Ferree (2003) argues that discursive opportunity structure affects how politically acceptable a given set of ideas is in a certain time and place. My work will critically analyze how Twitter users navigate the BLM discourse with gender in the given discursive opportunity structure.

The data for this research are comprised of samples of tweets that include the phrase “blacklivesmatter” or “Black lives matter” from June 2014 to May 2015, before the #SayHerName report was published. I drew samples from three different weeks during the study period. The samples were drawn from a week when a man was killed by police, a
woman was killed by police, and no one was killed. I conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis to explore how social media users interact with the BLM movement frames, specifically looking at the discourse on gender. A critical feminist approach is appropriate for this study of social media because scholarship on BLM on social media has paid little attention to how gender is constructed and maintained in this domain.

By systematically studying gender in BLM tweets, this thesis will add to the work on intersectionality in racialized social movements. My work will shed light on the ways in which regular social media users interact with social movement frames in a given discursive opportunity structure. Results could inform activists about how this discourse functions. It will also illustrate to social media users that the small choices they make in tweets can collectively shape a movement. Lastly, looking at BLM with a feminist lens, this thesis will shed light on how conversations about violence against Black women function. The goal is to bring more awareness to disparities, develop solutions, and ultimately bring an end to violence against Black women.

Despite calls to #SayHerName and extensive conversations about Black women’s marginalization in the BLM movement, few empirical studies of the broad BLM movement on social media explore gender with a critical feminist lens. The BLM movement and accompanying research need to address Black women’s concerns. Empirical feminist analyses of the BLM discourse contribute to the needed intersectional research on BLM. The way that conversations about gender and racial injustices are framed could contribute significantly to Black women’s victimization being overlooked or ignored.

This thesis is organized into six sections. Following the introduction is a review of the literature on hashtags and social media as a potential site of resistance for marginalized
populations. The chapter on the theoretical framework will begin with a description of intersectionality as a standpoint feminist theory rooted in Black feminist thought. Thereafter I explore the development of social movement framing theory and an important critique of resonance without an understanding of how some ideas are less politically appealing by in a given time and place. After the theory section, I detail my methods on the retrieval of tweets, sampling design, and critical discourse analysis. My results and analysis section is organized by what resonated and what was radical in discourse on BLM. Lastly, the conclusion will detail this study’s contributions and limitations, as well as suggestions for future research, and commentary on the relationship among academics and activists in the BLM movement.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized into three sections. It begins with a review of the literature on hashtags, followed by an exploration of how social media has been a site of resistance for marginalized populations. I also discuss Twitter’s demographics at the time of my study are given, and I define so-called “Black Twitter.” The literature review ends with a focus on the work that has explored the connection between BLM and feminism.

Significance of Hashtags

Hashtags were created on Twitter. Tweets or posts are the focal point of Twitter, as opposed to the profile or network on other social media sites (Brock 2012). At the time of the study period, tweets could contain up to 140 characters. Hashtags are typed using the pound sign (#) followed by a word or phrase, as in #BlackLivesMatter. Hashtags allow users to locate or index their tweets in a given conversation (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Ince et al. 2017). Further, hashtags “can connect content, structure conversation, and introduce meaning to a discursive field” (Ince et al. 2017). Hashtags are searchable, which makes it easy for users to make use of a database of tweets, and to see relationships that would otherwise not be visible (Zappavigna 2011). In this way, hashtags have an organizational function, to group tweets that are alike together and to make them easily accessible. Social media users can search BLM and find tweets about it easily.

Hashtags are a site of meaning construction. Twitter users are able to performatively frame what their tweets are “really about” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015), and so tweeting (and other microblogging activities) should be recognized as a semiotic activity, where Twitter users are constructing meaning with language (Zappavigna 2011). This process of meaning
making is important, and Zappavigna (2011) argues that social media scholars need to understand “the nature of what is being negotiated with language within particular patterns of social processes” (Zappavigna 2011:804).

Twitter users can express personal evaluation on a given topic and invite a large audience to share in the values they present (Zappavigna 2011). Bonilla Rosa (2015) argue that while hashtags “offer a limited, partial, and filtered view of a social world”, they are still worthwhile as sites of analysis if they are understood as “entry points into larger and more complex worlds”. The BLM hashtag is an invitation to a large audience to participate in this discussion. In their study of the BLM hashtag, Ince et al (2017) argued that average citizens can interact with and contribute to movement discourse directly on social media. They can share movement content and talk about it with one another. They can also contact movement leaders directly and debate the movement’s legitimacy. All of these actions “affect how a frame emerges and shapes the growth of a movement” (Ince et al. 2017:1817). The Twitter application’s accessibility on a phone or computer makes it easier for people to participate in the discussion, particularly otherwise marginalized people without significant resources.

**Social Media as a Site of Resistance and “Black Twitter”**

Social media present a potential site of resistance, where marginalized populations can tell their stories without having to go through traditional mass media gatekeepers. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue “[w]hereas in most mainstream media contexts, the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities” (2015:6). In other words, on social media people of color and other marginalized groups can tell their own stories about themselves and their experiences,
without the restrictive oversight of media gatekeepers. Jackson and Welles (2016) present an example of this in their study of #Ferguson on Twitter when individuals from many marginalized groups (African Americans, youth, and women) shaped the debate surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown.

Feminists have also taken advantage of social media platforms, as with the hashtag #WhyIStayed as a movement to protest domestic violence and stand in solidarity with survivors of such violence. Clark (2016) argues that #WhyIStayed and other similar hashtag protests have allowed more intersectional feminist movements, due to the absence of “exclusionary membership practices of organizations” (801) and institutional gatekeepers. Black feminists on Twitter also engage in critical discussions about gender, fusing citizen journalism with social justice and technology to bring attention to violence against Black women that is not usually addressed by national media (S. Williams 2015).

Demographics of users vary significantly on various social media platforms. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) warn against understanding Twitter as an unproblematicized public sphere, and instead acknowledge the complexity of who uses Twitter and how they use it. A Pew Research Center study at the time of my dataset found that 23 percent of online adult users and 28 percent of Black internet users are on Twitter (Duggan 2015), which means that Black people are overrepresented on Twitter among online adult users. Urban internet users are more likely than suburban or rural internet users to use Twitter. Twitter is also more popular among young people, where “30% of online adults under 50 use Twitter, compared with 11% of online adults ages 50 and older” (Duggan 2015:14). Lastly, “38% of Twitter users login daily, 21% weekly, 40% less often” (Duggan 2015:15).
In Olteanu et al.’s (2016) study of the demographics of tweets containing “black lives matter” from the first tweet until October 2015, the researchers found that users who tweet the most were white and African-American adults aged 18-64. More young African American adults (aged 18-29) are using the hashtag than whites of the same age. They also found that young women (aged 18-29) tweet more than their male counterparts, whereas older men (30 years and older) tweet more than their female counterparts about the movement (Olteanu et al 2016). In sum, this means that young Black women were overrepresented among users tweeting about BLM at the time of my study.

Discourses about BLM have increased significantly since the movement’s inception. Anderson and Hitlin’s (2016) study from the Pew Research Center of race-related tweets from January 2015 to March 2016 finds that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was used 12 million times from July 12, 2013 to March 31, 2016. Users tweeted the hashtag to display solidarity with BLM around 40% of the time, and to criticize BLM around 11% of the time (Anderson and Hitlin 2016:). Ince et al (2017) also note that most users discussing #BlackLivesMatter during their study period were likely to express approval of the movement. Beyond merely expressing approval, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue that the hashtag can be a site of resistance where Black people can revalue their own bodies, by documenting, contesting, and transforming their daily experiences, both online and offline.

As the hashtag grew more popular, counter-movement hashtags began to appear (Carney 2016; Ince et al. 2017). In particular, the #AllLivesMatter hashtag developed as a colorblind protest of the BLM movement. Carney argues that contestation over #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter “came to eclipse any conversation about class, gender, sexuality, or any other ways in which oppression occurs within the nation. As the
signs became reified, they came to stand for a debate about the value of Black male lives in relation to “all” (read: unmarked, white, middle class, male) lives” (Carney 2016:194). Although the resistance with #AllLivesMatter (ALM) is important, my efforts in this thesis will focus on the discourse among those who support BLM. Considering ALM is beyond the scope of this study.

Black discourse is popular and visible on Twitter. Hashtags associated with Black American cultures are overrepresented in Twitter’s “trending topics”, which is a list of the items tweeted about the most (Florini 2013). Journalists, bloggers, and outsiders broadly speaking have been able to see and comment on this Black discourse, and this has sparked conversations about the existence of “Black Twitter” (Brock 2012; Florini 2013).

Naming this group “Black Twitter”, however, is problematic. Brock (2012) holds that Black Twitter was recognized for having unique group characteristics by insiders and outsiders, although it is not representative of all Black online users. Black Twitter does not exist as a monolith, but rather as a group of Black Twitter users who share “similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices” (Florini 2013:225). It is better to understand Black Twitter as “a ‘public group of specific Twitter users’ rather than [as] a ‘Black online public’” (Brock 2012:545).

Although it is important to avoid overgeneralizations about Black Twitter, discussing the performance of racial identity on Black Twitter is relevant to this analysis. Florini argues that using the phrase “Black Twitter” helps avoid “subsuming Black users within a generic and generalized user – one generally presumed to be white” (2013:225). Florini (2013) also argues that performing race where it could be hidden is an act of resistance to erasure and further marginalization.
To properly investigate tweets about BLM as a process of meaning construction through language, it is important to understand how such language is used by the population of interest. Signifyin’ is a linguistic performance practice in Black American oral traditions that communicates multiple meanings simultaneously, and uses wordplay and misdirection (Florini 2013). Although it is frequently understood as only including misdirection or insult, Brock argues that signifyin’ is also an “articulation of a shared worldview, where recognition of the forms plus participation in the wordplay signals membership in the Black community” (2012:533). Florini holds that signifyin’ is an important “performance of Black cultural identity because it indexes the genre’s previous instantiations, and the sociocultural contexts in which it was cultivated and practiced […] Generations of Black Americans have used signifyin’ as a space for the expression of Black cultural knowledge, as a vehicle for social critique, and as a means of creating group solidarity” (Florini 2013:224).

Signifyin’ as a linguistic performance is also used on Twitter. Florini (2013) argues that signifyin’ is an important marker of racial identity on Twitter as users draw upon Black oral traditions, shared knowledge, and experiences in their performances. Twitter, with its focus on fast-paced discussion among connected users, is amenable to this style of discourse that values “invention, delivery, ritual, and audience participation” (Brock 2012:545). Hashtags allow participants to engage in a near-real time communal commentary on current events (Brock 2012). Signifyin’ on Twitter is frequently, though not always, performed in Black Vernacular English in such a way that indicates how the text would be spoken aloud, making use of nonstandard spellings, phonetic pronunciations, and slang (Florini 2013). Many users have found ways to describe their gestures, expressions, and movements in Twitter exchanges by typing out the gesture to replace the physical movement on Twitter.
(Florini 2013). The tweets used in the present study might not always use perfect grammar in standard English, but that does not mean they are unworthy of study.

**BLM and Feminism**

The BLM movement was founded by three Black women and builds upon a rich history of Black women organizing social movements. Britni Williams (2015) details Black women’s organizing in anti-lynching movements in the early 1900s. In addition, Robnett (1996) illustrates Black women’s bridging leadership roles as integral to the civil rights movement. Overall there is growing recognition of the different kinds of leadership that Black women assume, beyond the single charismatic, usually male leader (Cohen and Jackson 2015).

As noted earlier, the African American Policy Forum’s (2015) report “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women” acknowledges this history of Black women’s activism. In this report, Crenshaw et al (2015) argue that Black women have played an active role in resisting anti-Black state violence throughout history by working on the Underground Railroad, in the anti-lynching movement, the Civil Rights movement, Black Power movement, and the modern BLM movement. However, Black women’s current victimization by police is overlooked in the BLM movement’s demands, and instead “Black women leaders are often asked to speak only about their fears of losing their sons, brothers, partners, and comrades” (Crenshaw et al. 2015:7).

The BLM movement cannot be feminist without an interrogation of state violence against Black women. The Say Her Name report noted that there were several unjust police killings of Black women alongside Black men, and that these women’s deaths were also met
with a lack of meaningful accountability, similarly to those of Black men. According to Crenshaw et al (2015:1), “[n]one of these killings of Black women, nor the lack of accountability for them, have been widely elevated as exemplars of the systemic police brutality that is currently the focal point of mass protest and policy reform efforts.” The report authors argue that the BLM movement has developed a clear frame to make sense of how boys and men are killed by the police, but Black women’s experiences of police brutality – both when they are identical to Black men’s and when they are distinctly gendered – are absent from this frame (Crenshaw et al. 2015). Many other feminists also critique the limited notion of focusing on Black men as the sole victims of state violence (Carney 2016; Chatelain and Asoka 2015; Cohen and Jackson 2015; Collins 2015; Hutchinson 2015; Lindsey 2015). Further, those with a vested interest in improving the lives of Black women argue that definitions of state violence should be broadened to include women’s victimization (Chatelain and Asoka 2015; Cohen and Jackson 2015; Crenshaw et al. 2015).

Hutchinson (2015:23) holds that movement actors must recognize that Black lives matter “intersectionally – as female, queer, trans, poor, and disproportionately segregated”, and she critiques mainstream feminism for not viewing state violence as a critical issue. Lindsey (2015) argues that we should affirm the specific experiences that Black men and boys have with state violence without relegating more marginalized people – such as Black women and girls, trans and queer people – to the periphery of activism against and reporting of anti-Black violence. Lindsey also claims that knowing the names and stories of Black women, trans and queer people can aid in conversations about how gender and sexuality affect mobilization for racial justice (Lindsey 2015).
CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is organized into three sections. The first section describes intersectionality as a Black feminist standpoint theory that includes a connection to praxis and activism. The second section describes the origins of social movement framing theory. In particular, I focus on a critique of resonance in framing theory, and describe discursive opportunity structure as a remedy. In the final section, I will explain why I utilize intersectionality and discursive opportunity structure together, and how they improve upon the existing literature.

Intersectionality

Intersectional theory is rooted in Black feminist praxis. The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was a group of Black lesbian socialist feminists in the 1970s. The Collective understood systems of oppression as interlocking, and focused on racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist oppression simultaneously (Collective 2014). Their activist work, inspired by the work of their mothers and grandmothers, grounded the theory. The concept of intersectionality explains the phenomenon by which various categories of identity are “not [..] unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but […] reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015:2). Intersectional theory acknowledges that such categories of identity are better understood in relation to one another, rather than in isolation (Collins 2015). According to Collins, these mutually constructing categories of identity have a dialectic relationship with systems of power. These systems are organized by material inequalities and social experiences that are distinctive for “[i]ndividuals and groups differentially placed within these systems of power” (p 14). Intersectionality, then, explores
not only the interconnectedness of categories of identity, but the relationship these categories have to pre-existing systems of oppression.

Intersectionality is a standpoint theory that was constructed by Black women to make sense of their lived experiences. The Collective (2014:271) wrote in their manifesto that “contemporary black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters”. The Collective (2014) were disillusioned by liberation movements that were either solely antiracist or antisexist. They understood that they could not separate gender, race, and class because they experienced them simultaneously. Historical examples of white men raping Black women to politically repress Black people were given to support their position. Historical Black women leaders like Anna Julia Cooper and Ida Wells-Barnett also had a political awareness of the interconnectedness of racial and sexist oppression in subordinating Black women, in issues like eugenics and lynching (Collins 2015). Although these women were not academics, they developed this knowledge from their own standpoints as Black women in that time and space.

Crenshaw (1991) is often cited as having created the theory of intersectionality because she coined the phrase. Although she was building upon previous work on the interlocking nature social identities, narratives about the emergence of the theory in academia make it sound as if Crenshaw discovered the concept and this understanding did not previously exist (Collins 2015). Based on the discussion about the Collective and others, it is more accurate to say that Crenshaw’s famous article moved the theory into academia.

Academic Black feminists who have theorized intersectionality keep gender at the core of their analyses. King (1988) described intersectionality as a multiple jeopardy that
requires multiple consciousnesses for liberation, with feminism being an important part of that consciousness. Crenshaw (1991) theorized along similar lines that women of color are placed within two marginalized groups that often work toward conflicting goals, and their energy is split across those two groups.

Although intersectionality has an explicit feminist grounding, it does not exclude men from its analysis. The Combahee River Collective organized during a time when lesbian separatism was posited as a way to protect women from sexist men. The CRC critiqued sexism but rejected lesbian separatism. They argued that this kind of separatism could only be a solution for gender oppression, when they simultaneously faced sexism, racism, and classism. Rejecting biological determinism, or the idea that men were “naturally” prone to violence and aggression, and members of the Collective instead focused on the problematic behaviors and attitudes men had been socialized to adopt. These Black women worked with Black men against racism and simultaneously struggled with Black men about sexism.

Intersectionality as a theory posits that Black women are people and are therefore deserving of human rights. In their activism against multiple oppressions, the Combahee River Collective fought for Black women to be treated as fully human. This means they did not want to be treated as less than nor as superhuman. They believed that all Black women are inherently valuable, and that their liberation is necessary, not as a means to an end, but because they are people who deserve autonomy. King (1988) argues that intersectional scholarly discourse in some ways portrays Black women solely as victims, describing their choices as determined by the dynamics of the oppression they experience. She argues, however, that Black feminism posits Black women as subjects that are powerful and independent in their own right.
Social Movement Framing

Social movement framing theory on collective action frames and framing processes focuses on cultural aspects of social movements and describes movement actors’ process of meaning construction. Further elaboration of the theory has pointed to constraints placed on the ways some ideas can be framed. Power relations affect how a particular frame resonates (or does not resonate), as I will describe in Ferree’s (2003) critique of the framing literature below. Social movement actors have to make choices about tradeoffs in framing their movement demands. They balance to what extent they should appeal to broader elite audiences, knowing that they may have to sacrifice some of their principles.

Snow et al (1986) first introduced the social movement framing perspective as a way to connect social psychological perspectives to resource mobilization theories about collective action at the time. Snow et al (1986) argue that an individual’s participation in a movement cannot be guaranteed, given a set of grievances and a social movement organization to address those grievances. They argue that the SMO must take steps, what they call frame alignment processes, to make their values and goals align with that of the individual to encourage participation. Movement participation was not determined by merely the amount of resources an SMO had. Instead they argued that frame alignment was a necessary condition for movement participation.

Further work elaborated the terms “frames”, or a product, and “framing”, or a dynamic process. Movement actors construct collective action frames, which are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford and Snow 2000). These collective action
frames work to achieve three primary tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing. Diagnostic framing refers to identifying the “source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents,” (Benford and Snow 2000:616). Prognostic framing refers to developing solutions or plans of attack to solve the problem. Motivational framing refers to providing reasons for action as a “call to arms” and constructing vocabularies to embolden adherents in their activism. The framing perspective is flexible in its ability to address both static and dynamic aspects of social movements. This is evident in the way its core term can be used as both a verb and a noun. The verb, framing, focuses on processes, whereas the noun, frame, focuses on products or artifacts (Snow et al. 2014).

Discursive processes in the framing literature are the communication acts, whether spoken or written or otherwise, that are related to movement activities. Benford and Snow (2000) have identified two main discursive processes: frame articulation and frame amplification. Frame articulation refers to presenting a set of events and experiences together in a way that makes sense and is compelling to an audience. The goal of frame articulation is to organize events and experiences into some kind of narrative that sheds new light on the situation. Frame amplification refers to the process of highlighting some specific events as more relevant than others. This often takes the form of giving a name that refers to the whole movement. As with #SayHerName, violence against Black women is seen as important, and worthy of attention. The goal of these discursive framing processes is to resonate with the given audience and inspire them to act.

Social movement framing activity is worthy of study because it has been tied to movement outcomes. The ability of a SMO to develop coherent diagnostic and prognostic frames is important because it has been tied to outcomes. Cress and Snow found in their
study of homeless SMOs that framing came closest to constituting a necessary condition for achieving desired outcomes. They found that “the attainment of movement goals is strongly facilitated by viable organizations that are skilled at diagnostic and prognostic framing” (Cress and Snow 2000:1099). They found that the development of “articulate and coherent diagnostic and prognostic frames […] are no less important to movement outcome attainment efforts than organizational structure, tactical considerations, and political context” (Cress and Snow 2000:1100).

An understanding of how collective action frames are developed is complicated further when we focus on resonance, or how much a frame coheres with what an audience already thinks. According to Benford and Snow (2000), a frame’s resonance is related to its credibility and salience. A credible frame must be consistent with the SMO’s beliefs, claims, and actions. The frame must be empirically credible, and the people who articulate the frame must be seen as credible. The salience of the frame depends on whether the frame is congruent with the experiences of the target audience, and whether or not the frame has narrative fidelity, or cohere with cultural narratives.

Ferree (2003) argues that Benford and Snow’s focus on resonance as understood above focuses primarily on how objective characteristics of frames cohere with society’s principles and values is problematic. Focus on the resonance of collective action frames as a measure of the frames’ fidelity obscures the fact that whether or not a frame resonates depends upon the cultural context in which it is employed. This understanding of resonance overlooks the importance of mainstream discourse in affecting how a frame resonates.

Social movement framing theory focuses primarily on discourse and communication used to legitimate and inspire collective action. Discourse refers to the way that language is
used in writing and in speech (Wodak and Fairclough 1997). Critical discourse analysts understand discourse as a social practice, where the discourse has a dialectic relationship between the discursive event and the context in which it occurs. This means that the discourse shapes and is shaped by situations and social structures. Further this means that discourse can reproduce the status quo or can transform power relations (Wodak and Fairclough 1997). This understanding of discourse allows for an analysis of power, both as it constrains language use and as language use can change discourse. McIntosh and Cuklanz (2013) argue that what is and is not said acts as evidence for where power is located and how that power is used. This critical focus on the context in which discourse occurs motivates the usage of the discursive opportunity construct in this study.

**Discursive Opportunity Structure**

Social movement scholars developed the concept of discursive opportunity structure to reconcile this conflict between resonance and larger issues of discourse. Early scholars in the framing literature did not take into account how power and the larger discursive context would affect whose frames resonated and whose did not. More recent work has begun to acknowledge this, however.

Ferree’s (2003) article on the feminist framing of abortion debates in the United States and Germany advanced the concept of discursive opportunity structure. In this comparative-historical analysis, mainstream speakers’ and marginalized movement speakers’ discourse was compared. Mainstream speakers are those who have achieved media representation, and therefore some popular influence. The mainstream speakers in the study were observed in newspaper data, as well as in written court decisions and subsequent
legislation. Marginalized speakers were those not present in the mainstream discourse, with less influence. They were represented by spokespeople for abortion-rights organizations.

Women’s autonomy was central to the debate in both countries. Although movement actors in both countries had the same goal – make abortion legal and accessible – activists in the two different countries had to pursue different discursive strategies to appeal to their audiences. This is because the debates were taking place in two different contexts or discursive opportunity structures. Ferree (2003) defines a discursive opportunity structure as “an institutionally anchored gradient of opportunity” (339) which has implications for how politically acceptable a set of ideas is in a given time and place. Feminists in the US appealed to women’s right to privacy and protection from state interference in the liberal individualist discursive opportunity structure. Feminists in Germany, in contrast, focused on the state’s moral responsibility to provide the support women need to have children. By studying a similar frame in different contexts, Ferree could demonstrate how movement adherents’ choices are not determined by the discursive opportunity structure. The goal of the study was to determine what arguments mainstream speakers strategically exclude from their marginalized counterparts’ discourse. This strategy is intended to influence elite and popular discourses.

Ferree (2003) critiques the framing literature for overlooking how power relations affect dominant discourses, which in turn structurally disadvantages certain ideas. Ferree argues that the previous focus in the framing literature on cultural resonance is misguided because movement actors are agents who do not necessarily seek to resonate. Cultural resonance, according to Ferree (2003), is an interaction of a set of ideas with the discursive opportunity structure, where the frame and the gradient of opportunity are mutually
affirming. Radicalism, on the other hand, is where the package of ideas and the discursive opportunity structure are contradictory. Frames are radical when they challenge institutionalized ways of thinking and the power relations embedded in the discourse. She argues that marginalized groups will have the most interest in developing frames that would not resonate with mainstream hegemonic discourse. If movement actors choose to focus on developing frames that resonate, they might have to sacrifice their ideals and the needs of their constituent groups who are marginalized.

McCammon et al (2007) argue that the concept of discursive opportunity structure acts as a useful analytical tool to understand how movements must attentively and meaningfully interact with their environments to be politically effective. They found that activists fighting for women to sit on juries were most successful when they framed their efforts in such a way that considered the discursive and political context. Ultimately, McCannon et al (2007) argue that political opportunities are not always provided to movement actors externally, but they can still create their own opportunities when they act strategically.

Movement actors are agents who understand the tradeoffs they make when they choose to develop frames that are radical according to institutionalized forms of discourse. However, for movement actors who want to disrupt existing power relations and restructure hegemonic ideas, although it may temper the political effectiveness of a social movement in the short term, employing radical frames might be the only way to achieve their movement goals. Additionally, there is evidence that movement artifacts that are radical can affect the

Motivations for Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis examines the ways in which the discourse mirrors existing power relations and how it attempts to shape those relations in the context of the BLM movement. Since multiple forms of oppression occur and interact in the discourse and broader society, I combine social movement framing theory with an intersectional approach to understand how BLM adherents navigate discussions in the given discursive opportunity structure. Although BLM is primarily a movement focused on race-based police brutality and systemic racism, I focus on how BLM adherents on Twitter incorporate gender into their discussion, and what that says about how they understand the importance of gender in the movement.

One might expect for BLM to focus entirely on race, but multiple categories of identity have been folded into the discussion. I focus on race and gender in this first step to acknowledge the history of Black feminist thought and intersectional theory. I want to understand how the discourse shapes who is recognized, both as activists and as victims, when it comes to gender. In this critical discourse analysis, I focus on BLM movement adherents and on what is resonant and radical in Black discourse. By paying attention to what people say and do not say, who are the subjects and objects of a given discussion, this alludes to where power is located.
CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Conversations about BLM on social media have the potential to shape and expand the movement goals. The BLM movement already contains an explicit critique of racial power relations and state violence, but that discourse is negotiated in the BLM hashtag. Social media users could expand the discourse to include a feminist agenda, that is, where people of all genders are equally recognized for their activist work and in their victimization. A feminist critical discourse analysis would reveal the ways in which gendered power relations are embedded in and reproduced by the BLM discourse. I will analyze samples of BLM tweets from early in the movement to investigate how gender is framed in the discourse.

Discourse refers to the social practice of how language is used in writing and in speech (Wodak and Fairclough 1997). Foucault pioneered the study of discourse. He wrote about “regimes of truth” with the understanding that language shapes social reality (Foucault 1980). Wodak (2013:187) defines critical discourse analysis as a critical study of “social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse),” by explicitly analyzing how power relations are embedded in language. Critical discourse analysts argue that the discourse has a dialectic relationship between the discursive event and the context in which it occurs. This means that the discourse shapes and is shaped by situations and social structures. Critical discourse analysis lends insight into how power both constrains and is constrained by language.

This thesis will be a critical discourse analysis of BLM tweets and official website materials. According to Zappavigna (2011), studying the meaning negotiated in a given hashtag is as important as studying networked interactions and frequencies. I will focus primarily on discursive framing processes taking place in social media posts on BLM.
Critical discourse analysis is appropriate to study how Twitter users actively negotiate the meaning around a given hashtag. This method lends insight into my study of how gender is embedded in the language that social media users create, read, and share. Discourse analysis can reveal whose activist work and whose victimization are important to the movement, and how this reality is constructed.

In the discourse, what is and is not said acts as evidence for where power is located and how that power is used (McIntosh and Cuklanz 2013). The acknowledgment or lack thereof of Black women’s activism and victimization can point to whose contribution and lives are considered valuable. According to Wodak and Fairclough (1997), discourse analysis can reproduce the status quo or can transform power relations. Rather than accepting inequitable discourse around gender, given the frequent oversight of Black women’s work and victimization, this study will critically investigate how gender functions in the BLM discourse.

This analysis explores how gendered power dynamics play out in the discursive framing of BLM on social media. The project is based on one primary research question and two secondary questions:

How does the BLM discourse reflect and contribute to gendered power relations or dynamics?

What other forms of oppression does the BLM discourse include?

How could a feminist analysis of BLM discourse raise awareness and reduce violence against Black women?
My data consists of all tweets containing the phrase “black lives matter” and “blacklivesmatter” from June 1, 2014 to May 31, 2015, including famous cases such as the killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. This dataset was published by Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016) after the publication of their popular report on Black Lives Matter for the Center for Social Media and Social Impact at American University. I used Python to retrieve the tweets from the Twitter API. The tweets and their associated metadata were saved in a spreadsheet file. After removing duplicate tweets using RStudio, an open-source statistical software, there are over 800,000 tweets total in the document. All tweets in the dataset were published by public profiles, and so they are considered public information.

Figure 1 displays the frequency of tweets per day. The episodic nature of the data corresponds to events that took place offline. Although all of the tweets are about BLM, topics discussed vary widely at different points in time. Due to both the fluctuation in discussion and the large volume of data, it is appropriate to draw samples of tweets by period to perform a qualitative textual analysis. I drew samples for a temporal analysis to explore a few specific events as they occurred on Twitter (Brooker, Barnett, and Cribbin 2016).
The samples were drawn from week-long periods that corresponded to the week of a death of a woman, of a man, and of no one. These purposive samples were collected from the time of Tanisha Anderson’s death (November 13-19, 2014), the absence of a death (February 15-21, 2015), and Freddie Gray’s death (April 12-18, 2015). Tanisha Anderson had bipolar disorder and was killed by a Cleveland police officer who held her down while she was having an episode. Freddie Gray, after being arrested for alleged illegal possession of a knife, was taken in a rough ride by Baltimore police. Gray went into a coma and died of spinal cord injuries. I select a variety of samples because it would be problematic to conduct a discourse analysis with a gendered lens while only looking at periods where male victims were discussed. The goal of my sampling design is to mitigate bias toward discussion of one gender over the other.

For each time period, I attempted to collect 300 tweets that contain masculine, feminine, both masculine and feminine, or neither masculine or feminine language. For example, feminine language will include pronouns, such as she, her, and hers, as well as sister, sis, mother, and daughter. Although this list of gendered terms is not exhaustive, the number of masculine and feminine terms is balanced to avoid misrepresenting what kind of language is more prominent in the data. Table 1 contains the number of tweets I retrieved for each time period and gendered language category. There were always sufficient tweets to draw gender neutral samples, but the tweets that contained both masculine and feminine language were never sufficient for a 300-tweet sample.
For each of those four categories, tweets that were spam, unrelated to BLM, or against BLM were removed, as Flores (2017) has done. Tweets that were against the movement included arguments about #AllLivesMatter or smears of BLM protestors and activists. A discourse analysis of gendered language in both supportive and antagonistic BLM tweets is beyond the scope of this study. This thesis focuses on the discourse among supporters of BLM. Although this discourse necessarily includes critiques of the movement, this thesis focuses only on critiques intended to strengthen rather than end the movement.

In my qualitative analysis of BLM tweets, I followed the process outlined by Spencer et al (2014) of constructing an initial thematic framework, indexing, abstracting, and interpreting. I began by familiarizing myself with the data by paying attention to any mention of gender, oppression, and violence as related to my research questions. I specifically focused on the language used to frame these topics.

After becoming familiar with the data, I developed a preliminary thematic framework to organize themes and subthemes into a more organized and coherent structure. This structure was based on patterns I observed in the data that are relevant to my research questions, and was organized from broad to specific themes. My broad themes included recognition of activism and victimization, emotions, critique, and power. Then I indexed my

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data into my analytical framework, coding based on the themes and subthemes I developed. NVivo11, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to store, organize, and index my data. After I coded and organized my data for easier retrieval, I wrote summaries of the data that have been organized into my initial thematic framework. The purpose of this step is to determine “what is happening” within a given theme (Spencer et al. 2014). Then I developed categories and linkages across themes to answer my research questions. I worked to pay attention to what is present and absent in the discourse by keeping analytic memos, separate from any descriptive summaries, throughout the analysis process.

I include a positionality statement in my methods section because my identity has an impact on the choices I make in my research. I conduct research on BLM because I believe that all Black lives matter, and I can use my privilege to amplify the voices of those most marginalized in my scholarly work. As a white woman, I recognize that I hold a dominant racial position in society and occupy an outsider position in the BLM movement. I have a background in women’s and gender studies and feminist theory, which informs my work on gender in BLM. I take a critical approach because I believe it is important to understand the way that power shapes the content and methodology of my research. I recognize that Black women are valuable as ends in themselves and that they have played an instrumental role in creating social change. As such, I will study the BLM movement from many different angles, but I will use my work to lift and center the voices of Black women in academia, in the movement, and beyond. This thesis, as a first step toward that goal, will detail the discourse about gender in BLM, including both its problems and its opportunities for change.
CHAPTER 5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, I will describe the results and analysis of my feminist critical discourse analysis of BLM tweets. Social movement theory tells us that framing is about the inclusion and exclusion of ideas. The discursive opportunity structure, or the given range of political acceptability for a package of ideas, in Black discourse builds upon social movements of the past. This discussion of my results into two sections: what resonates and what is radical in the Black discursive opportunity structure.

Critical discourse analysis allows for an investigation of how BLM discourse can both reproduce the status quo as well as transform given power relations (Wodak and Fairclough 1997). The discourse that reproduced the status quo resonated within the current discursive opportunity structure. BLM discourse reproduced the status quo because it was androcentric and focused heavily on the relationship between Black mothers and sons, without including fathers or daughters in the discussion. Discourse that challenged the status quo was radical in the given discursive opportunity structure. Radical discourse deviated from resonant discourse by making connections between BLM and other marginalized groups’ social causes, employing strategies to make the dialogue and the movement more gender inclusive, and explicitly attending to emotion and love in the discourse.

**Resonant**

**Androcentrism**

The discussion on BLM reflects significant androcentrism in the movement.

Frequently men and boys are made the subjects of tweets, when a gender-neutral subject
would have been just as appropriate. In the tweets, men are described as the only or primary victims of police violence, and men activists are marked as the only predecessors to this movement.

First, boys and men are assumed to be the default victims, as in: “#blacklivesmatter thank you for saying it black boys are being killed and no one seems to care” (November 19, 2014). In this instance and several others, a gender-neutral subject would have been just as appropriate, such as “Black people” or “Black folks”. This simple and subtle turn of phrase directs attention to Black men and boys first and foremost, unless the reader has a critical feminist consciousness. In describing what the movement is about, a white Twitter user focuses only on boys when critiquing the All Lives Matter counter movement: “It’s #blacklivesmatter if we white people acted like all lives matter then we wouldn’t have so many murdered boys in the first place” (February 20, 2015). One Twitter user joked that police should give up shooting men of color for Lent. However, in doing so they removed women as perceived potential victims of police brutality. This collection of tweets suggests that the movement is only about police brutality against men and boys of color.

Second, the movement as a whole is discussed in ways that make it seem like it was founded by men and inspired by men’s activism historically. This took place when Twitter users claimed that BLM was similar to or even a rebirth of the I Am a Man movement of the 1970s. This movement resisted the deference towards whites that was expected at the time. White people called Black men “boys” to remind them of their inferiority (Estes 2005). One user wrote: “#blacklivesmatter is not just a hashtag. it’s declaring our place in society just as the i am a man or black power movements of the 60s” (April 18, 2015). This particular
movement resisted whites calling Black men “boy” as an insult to treat them as inferior and less-than men.

Other Twitter users went so far as to attribute the movement to Malcolm X, tweeting: “it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that malcolm x is the grandfather of #blacklivesmatter” (February 18, 2015). However, this movement was started by three Black women who did not specifically cite Malcolm X as part of their inspiration. It is unexpected to cite Malcolm X as inspiring this movement instead of any number of female activists who did similar work.

Taken together, this collection of tweets paints a very masculine picture of who BLM is about, who it is for, and whose work has made the most contributions. These tweets seem to write women, the founders and activists who started the movement, out of the discussion. Effectively these tweets make it difficult for Twitter users to recognize women as victims and as activists in the BLM movement.

Some of the connection between Black men as default victims is appropriate. Twitter users connect the social construction of Black men as “thugs” to the victimization of Black men. They say things like: “we must work together to fight the fear criminalization of #afrikanamericanmales in #schoolsystem #blacklivesmatter” (February 21, 2014) and “because they are the same systems that turn black people into predatory boogie men #ourthreewinners #ferguson #blacklivesmatter” (February 16, 2014). It is evident that these users understand that these stereotypes are social constructions because they use phrases like “criminalization”, indicating a process. They display an understanding of systems that influence Black men and people’s perceptions of them, rather than assuming that Black men are inherently scary and criminal. These users are drawing upon a campaign since the war on drugs to make Black men appear like dangerous criminals in public perception (Alexander 2012). However, it is
not clear that this constructed fear of Black men is the only cause of police brutality. This is probably not the whole story and this focus removes Black women from the discussion as potential victims. This aligns with what Crenshaw et al (2015) wrote in the #SayHerName report: Black women are not recognized as victims when their experiences are identical to Black men’s, nor when their experiences are distinctly affected by their gender or sexual orientation. This lack of discussion of women as potential victims makes it more difficult for the broader public to recognize Black women who are victims of such violence. Awareness of a problem is required to develop solutions.

**Mother-Son Relationship**

Throughout the entire study period, there was intense focus on the relationship between Black mothers and sons. Although the focus on this particular relationship is connected to a positive representation of Black motherhood, it might have negative consequences. Twitter users argue that Black mothers live in fear that their children, especially their sons, could be the next victims to police brutality: “mothering two black sons in the us takes courage and faith #systemicchangeisnecessary #blacklivesmatter #blackandblue” (November 19, 2014) and “disturbing ending a convo w/ mom & her saying she fears for your life as a black man #blacklivesmatter #ericharris” (April 12, 2015). These tweets address the emotions associated with the difficult position Black mothers occupy.

Twitter users acknowledge the strength that it takes to mother a child in these circumstances. One Twitter user said Black mothers are the image of strength: “these mothers continue to fight for justice this is what strength looks like blacklivesmatter blackfuturemonth” (February 17, 2015). However, this focus on strength might promote a common controlling
image of Black women as “superstrong Black mothers” (Collins 2007). This is a stereotype perpetuated among Black people, especially Black men, where Black mothers have features of archetypal motherhood: self-sacrificing, devoted to child, always putting others’ needs before their own (Collins 2007).

This positive portrayal of Black mothers is radical in the mainstream discursive opportunity structure. Historically, Black women were seen as bad mothers, as emasculating their sons and defeminizing their daughters, with critics citing high rates of divorce and the prevalence of female-headed single-parent households as problematic (Collins 2007). In Black discourse though, this image of the “superstrong Black mother” resonates. This representation is seemingly positive because it describes Black women as good mothers. However, in order to maintain this positive perception, Black women have to consistently place others’ needs, particularly their sons’, before their own. This phenomenon contributes to a discourse in which violence against Black men is seen as more important and more relevant than violence against Black women.

Over the study period, women are more frequently made the subjects and objects of discussion, which I will discuss below. However, the focus remains primarily on police killing women’s male relatives, as is evidenced in this tweet: “my prayers are for the mothers, sisters, and daughters losing their fathers brothers and sons #blacklivesmatter” (April 12, 2015). This lends support for Crenshaw et al.’s (2015) claim that “Black women leaders are often asked to speak only about their fears of losing their sons, brothers, partners, and comrades” (Crenshaw et al. 2015:7). In the discussion, it seems that Black women activists have been forced into this self-sacrificing superstrong Black mother archetype.
Radical

Interrogating Multiple Systems of Power

The BLM discourse was radical in the discursive opportunity structure when it made connections between multiple systems of oppression. I begin this section by focusing on Twitter users’ discussion of racism as systemic, which is resonant in the literature. However, the connections that are made to other systems of power are less resonant thereafter.

Some users demonstrate an understanding of racism and white supremacy as systemic. Users write about the history of anti-Black racism in the US and its legacy. One user compared racism to “[…] a 400 year old deep rooted tree. we can’t uproot it without disturbing the comfort of the branch dwellers #blacklivesmatter” (April 13, 2015). Beyond understanding racism as grounded in history, some users connect specific instances of police brutality and state violence to systemic racism. In response to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, one user wrote: “the whole damn system is guilty as hell #ferguson #blacklivesmatter” (November 15, 2014). There is also a connection of systemic racism to the economy, with some users stating that racism is important to capitalism, with one user sharing an article with the caption: “racism is a fundamental part of capitalism. on #ferguson & the need to build a political alternative #blacklivesmatter” (November 16, 2014).

Some Twitter users argue that the US is a police state that has declared war against its own people, particularly revolving around Ferguson, Mike Brown, Wilson, the police and the national guard who were called in. “this is how the state prepares fr war against its own citizens calling in the natl guard #ferguson #blacklivesmatter” (November 17, 2014). In response, one user wrote that a “state of emergency being declared in ferguson is the government publicly declaring a commitment to institutional racism #blacklivesmatter”
(November 18, 2014). One Twitter user wrote: “we are literally and figuratively living in a police state my black & brown brothers keep your camera phones charged #blacklivesmatter” (April 12, 2015), where they commented on the state but again focused only on men of color by addressing “black & brown brothers”. This critique of the state and focus on white supremacy is radical in the mainstream discursive opportunity structure in the US. Narratives about the American dream and meritocracy are prioritized over institutionalized gradients of opportunity in making sense of people’s experiences. However, the BLM movement at its core is a critique of state violence, so these ideas resonate in the Black discursive opportunity structure.

Twitter users made connections between BLM and other progressive social movements and between racism and other systems of oppression. Some people who tweet about BLM have a sense of the importance of social movement spillover, the notion that social movements are not self-contained, but they affect and are affected by other social movements directly and indirectly (Meyer and Whittier 1994). There are examples of users making lists, particularly later in the year, of ways that BLM activism should look like: “hoping your antiracism is also feminist & pro lgbt all black lives matter including black women girls & lgbt people” (April 13, 2015). One user stated that the BLM movement “is a fight for survival in a racist ableist patriarchal institution #blacklivesmatter” (November 14, 2014). By listing them together, these Twitter users are demonstrating that they believe these systems are connected in some way. A few users also connected their tweets about BLM to the struggle against classism. They brought up #FightFor15, a labor movement effort to raise the minimum wage to $15 per hour, and others discussed economic boycotts as an alternative
strategy to protests. Beyond racism, ableism, sexism, and classism, as mentioned above, the discussion also touched homophobia, genderism, Islamophobia, and transphobia.

These discussions were targeted at both BLM opponents and adherents. One user responded to those who opposed BLM using the hashtag #AllLivesMatter, by saying: “if you believe all then blacklivesmatter if you believe all then justiceformuslims if you believe all then transwomenarewomen” (April 15, 2015). Other tweets critiqued movement adherents, with this tweet addressing transphobic BLM supporters: “you think trans women dying is a joking matter but i bet you support black lives matter. trash their black lives matter too” (February 21, 2015). This could also be radical, to have an intra-movement critique in such a public space.

**Feminism in the Discourse**

Over the course of the study period, some users worked to make the BLM discourse more feminist. The BLM discourse’s focus is often narrow, with the subjects of tweets being Black men or their mothers’ in mourning of their sons. However, in this section, I describe the ways many users work in a variety of ways to change the dialogue to make the movement more inclusive. I begin by showing how Twitter users began telling individual women’s stories. This is followed by an explicit discussion of how Black women, and all other people besides just Black men, matter. My results illustrate how users critiqued sexism and transphobia in the movement, as well as promoted love and support for activists, Black women, and trans women.

Although the general dialogue was dominated by discussion of men as victims, Twitter users told individual women’s stories. There were brief mentions of Tanisha Anderson, a victim of police brutality, in November 2014. She had bipolar disorder and heart
disease, and a police officer performed a takedown move on her during an episode, placing his knee in her back, and she died. In this tweet, for example, the user says what happened to Anderson, and used hashtags to tell their audience what the tweet was about: “tanesha anderson killed at the hands of police #genocidelookslive #blacklivesmatter #mentalillness” (November 18, 2014). The user connected Anderson’s death to the pattern of police violence against Black people and pointed out that mental illness probably had something to do with Anderson’s death. However, the tweets did not analyze her death specifically as a Black woman, but rather told her story with a gender neutral lens.

Yuvette Henderson was another woman whose story was told. In February 2015, she was accused of stealing from a Home Depot, supposedly left the store with a head injury, and the police shot her three times with assault rifles after she refused to put down a weapon. However, one user wrote that Henderson “banged on their windows 4help but they were scared of her” (February 21, 2015), sowing doubt about the legitimation of this police killing. In this case, some Twitter users connected Henderson’s case to gendered police violence: “#justiceforyuvette cops kill black & brown women with impunity. silence is complicity #blacklivesmatter” (April 12, 2015). These stories are radical because they stand in contrast to the broad general statements about BLM and concern for men and boys in the discourse.

Twitter users developed the hashtag #BlackWomensLivesMatter to list the names of Black women killed by police. This hashtag was created based on the understanding that Black women victims are frequently forgotten or overlooked in the discourse, using the following format: “remembering black women killed by police w/ #blackwomenslivesmatter #blacklivesmatter #sharmeledwards” (April 14, 2018). Twitter users copied and pasted the first part of the tweet, and included names of Black women victims whom they knew about.
The crowdsourced list, with each name in its own separate tweet, included Rekia Boyd, Yvette Smith, Pearlie Smith, Tanisha Anderson, Tarika Wilson, and Latandra. This was a clever strategy to draw upon the knowledge of the group in the absence of better representation and storytelling in the traditional news media.

Beyond these crowdsourced lists, there is an increasing pattern of people who are specifically reminding their followers that women and transgender people should be included in the discussion. Twitter users do this by speaking directly to BLM supporters with dominant identities, as with: “reminder i don t wanna hear ur bs if u say black lives matter but only care about black able bodied cisgendered heterosexual men really” (February 17, 2015). Also, “when we say #blacklivesmatter we need to remember black women children trans etc all black people not just black men” (April 12, 2015).

One Twitter user in particular acknowledges that they are deeply concerned about the death of Eric Garner, a Black man killed by police, but they are able to make space for women in their discussion of BLM as well: “everyone knows I’m behind #blacklivesmatter you know I’m #ericgarner squad but remember to acknowledge women killed by police as well” (April 19, 2015).

Over the period, more users write “brothers and sisters” rather than focusing solely on men in their tweets, indicating a concerted effort at being more gender-inclusive. This takes place in the acknowledgment of who is participating in protest and resistance: “shout out to the brothers and sisters in the street #blacklivesmatter always” (April 14, 2015). It also takes place in the discussion of who are victims of police brutality: “#ericharris #walterscott #mikebrown #ericgarner #tamirrice stop killing my brothers & sisters stop protecting the police #blacklivesmatter” (April 12, 2015). A smaller number also discuss that nonbinary people
should be included as well: “how do we survive psychically when everyday we see black brothers, sisters & nonbinary siblings being murdered #blacklivesmatter #ericharris” (April 12, 2015). This simple change of phrase allows the public to more easily recognize people of all genders as potential victims and activists in the BLM movement.

There is also some critique of intra-movement sexism and transphobia. Some Twitter users used harsh language: “also if you don’t like black women you are not a supporter of black lives matter you’re a cancer to the movement” (February 17, 2015) and “you think trans women dying is a joking matter but i bet you support black lives matter trash their black lives matter too jackasses” (February 21, 2015). Some users express frustration with the hypocrisy of a BLM movement adherents, in these cases primarily Black cisgender heterosexual men, who identify with BLM without making it obvious that they believe all Black lives matter: “black lives matter. this applies to us blacks too. black men stop playing and using yall women. respect us n let’s be kings & queens” (February 20, 2015). There is a critique of Black men: “oh the privileged yet oppressed and marginalized cis hetero black men #blacklivesmatter is all or nothing” (February 17, 2015).

One Twitter user articulated the contradiction between Black women marching in protests and Black men saying Black women disrespect Black men. “black women out here marching talking about blacklivesmatter amp this dude has the nerve to say that bw dishonor bm gtoh idfwu” (February 17, 2015). Clearly there is some tension present in the dialogue on sexism within the movement.

An increasing amount of discussions about love and support, particularly for women, took place over the course of the study period. An important theme in the dialogue was a push for celebration of and thanks to women activists: “truly love, admire & appreciate the
persistent hardworking protesters #blacklivesmatter” (February 21, 2015). Many tweets honor and celebrate the queer Black women founders of BLM, as with: “because of these 3 sisters #blacklivesmatter exists thank you opal alicia & patrisse” (February 22, 2015), and “honored to be lead by strong black women in the movement #blackwomenappreciationday #blacklivesmatter” (February 20, 2015). There were also reminders to praise Black mothers for being strong and continuing to fight for justice: “black mothers praise them blacklivesmatter” (February 21, 2015).

Beyond this push for supporting Black women broadly speaking, there was also an effort to promote love and protection specifically for trans women in the BLM movement: “celebrate our trans sisters while we have them if #blacklivesmatter then our trans sisters deserve our love protection and celebration” (February 16, 2015). This focus on love and positive emotions was paired with an initiative to “make space.” This entailed broadening the conversation to include more groups of people than just Black men, and to include more issues than just police brutality. There were lists of who matters, modeled after the original #BlackLivesMatter, including women and LGBTQ people in particular. The hashtag #GirlsLikeUs was used to specifically discuss trans women’s issues and express support. This discussion indicates a clear understanding of the violence trans women face and a push to change that. Beyond recognizing trans women merely as victims, trans and queer women activists are recognized as instrumental to the BLM movement. For example, Cece McDonald, a bisexual trans woman activist was called a “freedom fighter” on Twitter.

In sum, the dialogue on Black Lives Matter during the study period is focused on transforming the status quo as it pertains to racial relations, but is less focused on transforming gendered power relations. Although this is not the primary focus of the
discussion, there is evidence that Black feminists were working to make the dialogue more gender-inclusive, using strategies specific to their medium of Twitter.
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated the choices in language, discourse, and meaning made by Twitter users, detailing the processes by which Black women are included or excluded in BLM discourse. The purpose of this investigation is to connect the marginalization of Black women’s needs to the marginalization of Black women in discourse. Given the history of Black social movements in the United States being dominated by Black male charismatic leaders, it is radical to focus on women and to bring women’s concern to the same level of importance as men’s. It can be strategic to choose to resonate, but not all movement adherents have to choose to resonate. In BLM discourse, although many Twitter users focused exclusively on men in their discussions, some Twitter users wrote tweets that were radical in the given opportunity structure. These tweets focused on women, on trans people, on nonbinary people, and on multiple systems of oppression.

My study improved upon the literature on discursive opportunity structure, which primarily has focused on women’s movements, by using it to analyze gendered discourse in a racial social movement. Additionally, this is among the first of studies to apply an understanding of discursive opportunity structure to discourse on social media.

Results will help inform BLM activists’ outreach efforts in diagnosing problems of gender specific injustices within the movement. Movement leaders could learn from this systematic study how they might more effectively reach their intended audience, given an understanding of how issues of gender injustice are framed in tweets.

This study has a few limitations. Findings from this study cannot necessarily be generalized to a broader public of BLM supporters. However, a case study of the BLM
discourse on Twitter is valuable because of the close relationship the movement has with social media. This study is not predictive of future BLM advances.

Future work should compare gendered discourse among mainstream BLM speakers and marginalized BLM speakers. Future studies could also do more quantitative analyses of how social media users choose to resonate or not with dominant discourse. This poses an interesting question because of the blurred lines between mainstream and marginalized speakers on social media. Additionally, future studies could also compare gendered language in posts by social media users with both large and small followings.

The literature on BLM has blurred the lines between scholarly research and activist mobilization and collaboration. Feminist scholarship contributes an important praxis dimension. In Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s (2017) book of interviews of Black Combahee River Collective members on Black feminism and its place in the modern BLM movement, Demita Frazier said that Black feminism had been theoretically strengthened but co-opted by the academy (Taylor 2017:138). She was specifically referring to Crenshaw’s coining of the term “intersectionality.” Although the BLM dialogue already contained some more gender-inclusive tweets, Crenshaw and other academics’ work has also been incredibly influential in the BLM movement since the time of the study period. Academics such as Crenshaw push the conversation in ways that otherwise would not have been addressed: “Our efforts to combat police violence must expand to address the experiences of all Black people. […] When the lives of marginalized Black women are centered, a clearer picture of structural oppressions emerges. No analysis of state violence against Black bodies can be complete with- out including all Black bodies within its frame” (Crenshaw et al. 2015:30).
This tension between scholars and activists will probably continue. Activism is complicated and messy, and both academics and activists have room to grow. According to McCammon et al (2007) though, those movement actors who are most strategic in responding to their environments get results the fastest. Academics and activists need one another, particularly in this case, to work toward bringing violence against Black women to an end.

This study of tweets is important because the way that Twitter users speak and post about current issues is indicative of public opinion on a given issue, but also has the potential to shape how people understand a given issue in the future. The BLM dialogue focused primarily on men, but my work recognizes the small work that activists were doing to push the BLM dialogue forward, even if it was a small part of that conversation. Like (Ince et al. 2017) say, Twitter users can shape the dialogue. They can push it in a particular direction when it comes to gender, too.
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