Black lives matter and imagined futures of racial dynamics in the US

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ABSTRACT

As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement fights to build an alternate future characterized by racial equality and justice, a priority is studying this projected image of what society could look like and how oppressed groups and activists who fight on their behalf feel this might be achieved. This article integrates knowledge from social movement studies, critical race theory, and futures research to add to this critical discussion. Specifically, I use the concept of social movement prospectus to investigate perspectives on future social change in relation to racial justice activism. Through analysis of interviews with 36 U.S. Black millennials about BLM and its potential impact on race relations in the United States, I examine the varied conceptualizations within this group of what success would look like for this movement and whether that success is likely to occur. Broadly, I find that Black millennials are skeptical about BLM's ability to effect social change, but are more optimistic when change is viewed in terms of cultural outcomes than structural ones. I consider the implications of these perspectives for the future of the movement, as well as for scholarship that investigates how social movements produce social change and shape the future of society.

It has been over half a century since the Civil Rights Movement, but the struggle to identify and ameliorate the effects of structural racism and achieve Black[1] liberation and racial equality is far from complete. Today, Black Lives Matter (BLM hereafter) is a social movement and organization at the forefront of this fight. Initially a discursive tool for identifying racial oppression, the hashtag '#BlackLivesMatter' became the foundation for the BLM Global Network. Founded by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, BLM has developed into an international, decentralized, and local chapter-based movement organization across the U.S. and beyond. BLM imagines a future in which we have been able to 'eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes' (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). In the current era of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), this means not only fighting against structural and overt interpersonal racism, but also against obfuscation and denial of racism and the ways it continues to shape everyday life and institutional patterns in

the United States and beyond (ibid). This challenge raises the question: To what extent do people believe racial justice movements like BLM will be able to achieve the imagined future they strive toward? In a society where racism is widely understood to be ubiquitous and hegemonic, what impacts do people expect a movement like BLM to bring about?

In this article, I integrate knowledge from the social movement, critical race, and futures literatures to provide one answer to this question and discuss its implications for the movement and racial dynamics within the U.S. To do so, I analyze data from interviews with Black millennials – those who identified as Black, were born between 1981 and 1996, and currently lived in the U.S – between 2019 and 2020, just before the second major 'wave' of BLM activism beginning in 2020. This group was chosen as a case to reflect their prominent participation in and organization of this movement (Garza, 2020; Higdon, 2019). Further, millennials' high levels of education, disproportionate identification with liberal ideals, navigation of a 'colorblind' society characterized by covert (rather than overt) racism, and status as the first generation of digital natives makes them a distinct sociopolitical group with perspectives worthy of concentrated examination (Jones-Eversley et al., 2017; Milkman, 2017). These interviews are part of a broader project examining perceptions of, exposure to, experiences within, and impacts of the movement. In this paper specifically, I examine Black millennials' answers to questions about the purpose and meaning of BLM, how it has impacted society thus far (i.e. up until the interviews concluded in February 2020),[2] how they envision success for the movement, and their vision of BLM's effect on U.S. race relations in the future. By doing so, I contribute to our theoretical understanding of the relationship between imagined futures and social movements, particularly as they are situated within the existing social structure of society. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the literatures on social movements, race, and futures research and how they could be better integrated; describe the sampling, interview, and analysis processes for this study; detail the three major themes that emerged in my analysis; and conclude by discussing the scholarly and real world implications of my findings.

Shaping the future: race, movements, and social change

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

2016). This paper meets this call, but with a particular focus on race, racism, and racial justice movements.

Social movements entail collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). In other words, those without power engage in social movements in order to challenge those with power and the power structure itself. Social change comes in a variety of forms, which are often separated into three categories: biographical, cultural, and structural or political change. Biographical changes are the consequences of social movement engagement that manifest at the micro level in the life courses of individuals (Giugni, 2004). Cultural change includes anything pertaining to symbolic meaning, narratives and discourse, and beliefs and ideologies that shape human experiences, attitudes, and relations (Dyke & Taylor, 2018; Earl, 2004). In contrast, structural change encompasses the tangible transformations in the social environment, such as institutional processes, laws, and patterns in measurable life chances and outcomes across social groups (Giugni, 2008). Since structural changes often emerge out of policy reform, this category is also referred to as political change (Amenta et al., 2010). Social movements vary in to what extent they pursue and achieve each form of social change. But in general, studies of social movements largely favor the examination of structural and political effects (Earl, 2000; Giugni, 2008). In this study, the fictional expectations of cultural and structural change through BLM are both examined.

Before developing fictional expectations that will serve as a basis for mobilization efforts toward social change, a particular set of conditions must first be comprehensible among those who desire those conditions. This means that social movements can be understood as the embodied collective expectations of social groups about what those efforts can realistically achieve. This horizon of possibility has recently been termed 'prospectus' (Brown, 2016). Prospectus is a useful concept because it expands the conceptual frame for interpreting the attainability of social change in a given social environment beyond more established concepts in the literature. For instance, studies on social movements often reference 'collective efficacy' – beliefs about the capabilities of a group to effectively make political change – as an important factor in mobilization (Beaumont, 2010). Collective efficacy is understood as a direct evaluation of the abilities of a mobilizing group to be successful in their aims, based on factors such as competency, cohesion, political representation, and treatment by media (Lee Francis, 2010). However, as Brown (2016) points out, the conceptualization of collective efficacy takes for granted that social change is generally possible. In contrast, rather than an evaluation of people's abilities, prospectus reflects judgment about whether the social structure of a given society is changeable in general. Furthermore, prospectus provides a lens through which we can understand why certain types of social change – biographical, cultural, or structural/political – may be perceived as possible to varying degrees.

Social movements scholars use the concept of 'political opportunity structures' (POS) to discuss the degree to which the structural organization of a society is amenable to change (McAdam, 1999; Meyer, 2004). Inherent in this concept is the idea that even when the POS is 'closed,' there is the potential for it to 'open' at another time. Collective efficacy is examined within and fluctuates in accordance with ongoing shifts in this structure (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Suh, 2001). This approach overlooks people's overarching sense of imagination about the future and what potential futures can

reasonably exist. The concept of prospectus, which offers a way of measuring and comparing this sense of imagined futures, points us to the question of whether there are types of social change that shifts in a POS simply cannot accommodate even at their most open, due to the foundational characteristics of that societal structure. If a POS never seems amenable to restructuring in a particular way, prospectus for change is likely to be low. This is not a reflection of the efficacy of the group, but an assessment of the environment in which the group exists. Therefore, the potential power of prospectus as a determining factor in mobilization should be more adequately considered. This study is one attempt to do so, specifically in relation to racial justice efforts.

Another key theoretical context for this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which examines the role of race and racism in the foundational construction and ongoing functioning of society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Race is understood to be a product of social thought and relations (rather than inherent and biological phenomena), and the various racial groups that have been socially constructed over time are racialized differently, but always in ways that advance the social interests of those who sit at the top of the racial hierarchy. According to scholars, the processes of racialization, distribution of resources across racialized lines, and normalization of these conditions through hegemonic racial ideology result in racism being embedded in all aspects of the social structure of society and daily life (Golash-Boza, 2016; Omi & Winant, 2015). Scholars and adherents of CRT are generally dedicated to subversion of and resistance against this system, with an expressed dedication to anti-racism (Bell, 1995). In addition, they argue that the experiential knowledge of people of color who suffer this experience must be legitimized and centered in social inquiry (Christian et al., 2021; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso & Solórzano, 2005).

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

Linking the concept of prospectus with the principles of CRT can help us understand how the racial order of a society shapes people's horizons of possibility for social change through social movements. According to Brown (2016), prospectus is linked to lived experience and the understandings of the world produced by those experiences. From a CRT perspective, racism is an ordinary and everyday experience built into the structure of society and foundational to one's worldview (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Golash-Boza, 2016). This suggests that one's experience and understanding of race and racism in society would also be foundational to one's prospectus for social change through activism. Further, we might expect prospectus to differ markedly based on the extent to which various groups are subjugated within the existing racial structure. In turn, that

prospectus likely impacts the emergence, development, and outcomes of social movements. In the U.S. specifically, the racial structure is characterized by white supremacy, with white people and whiteness occupying the position at the top of the racial power hierarchy, Black people and blackness at the bottom, and other groups of color marginalized to varying degrees between them (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Collins, 2001; Lewis, 2004; McDermott & Ferguson, 2022). In this study, I examine prospectus among Black millennials, who are part of the most oppressed group in the U.S. racial order, in order to explore and test these theoretical ideas.

While not exhaustive, this review of the futures, social movement, and critical race literatures points to the need for further exploration of how we can best understand the intersections between these social phenomena. Social movements influence the future, but how does prospectus – conceptions of what is possible in the future – influence social movements? And how do social structures of inequality influence this dialectical process? This study contributes to this effort by integrating concepts from all three areas to explicate how members of a particular racial group imagine the future of U.S. society in relation to social movements designed to shape it. Using Black millennial perspectives on the BLM movement as a case, this study centers the lived experience of the Black community, accounts for the racial structure of U.S. society that undergirds social movement activity, and explores how this reality informs their prospectus for change and the imagined future impact of BLM among this group.

Interviewing Black millennials on Black Lives Matter

This research examines the perspectives of thirty-six Black millennials in the U.S. about the success, impact, and future of the BLM movement. In semi-structured interviews, I asked respondents a broad series of questions about BLM to ascertain how they perceive, assign meaning to, feel a sense of connection with, have learned about, have participated in, and view the current and future impact and outcomes of the movement. This paper focuses specifically on the last of these topics by analyzing their interpretations of: (1) the goals and purpose of the movement, (2) what they would consider to be success for the movement, (3) whether they think the movement has been or will be successful in those ways, and (4) what they foresee as the future of BLM. While there is some overlap or connections across them, the other topics covered in the interviews for the broader project are beyond the scope of this particular study and not covered in order to maintain clarity and focus on Black millennial perceptions of the extant and future effects of BLM. U.S. Black millennials were chosen as the population for this study based on a theoretic sampling technique, which advocates choosing a study population based on their ability to provide data that would be most useful in answering research questions and informing future research and theory building on a specific topic (Warren & Karner, 2015; Weiss, 1994). I operationalize this population based on three characteristics: (1) identification as Black, (2) current residence in the U.S., and (3) membership in the millennial generation.

I recruited respondents who self-identify as Black, regardless of citizenship, multiracial lineage, or immigration status and generations, to account for heterogeneity in the Black population in the U.S. The sample this study is based on is not representative of the entire Black population of the U.S. (nor the entire population of Black millennials,

specifically). However, social characteristics across the sample are varied and represent myriad perspectives and experiences within this population. In order to capture this heterogeneity and detail, each respondent answered a set of demographic questions at the end of their interview. The sample ranges in age from 22 to 35 and is disproportionately comprised of women, Democrats, politically liberal, and college educated people (specifically many with postgraduate education), predominantly residing in the northeastern region of the United States at the time of the interview.[3] While all participants are Black, there is some variation in their racial/ethnic identities. Across other economic, geographic, and social characteristics, there is a wide range of experiences and backgrounds (see Table 1 for details).

These varied backgrounds undoubtedly shape participants' relationship with Blackness as an identity and the ways they experience that identity. However, they do not preclude them from identifying and experiencing social life in related ways as a result of being similarly racialized and categorized into the 'collective Black' stratum of the racialized social structure of U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2004). The decision to include respondents of varied backgrounds is also in line with CRT's (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) tenets of anti-essentialism and centering the voices and knowledge of

Table 1. Participant demographic summary ($N = 36$).

Age	Sex	Gender	Sex. Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Org. Region	Current Region
22–24: 10	Male: 8	Male: 8	Straight: 26	Black alone: 29	West: 8	West: 5
25–27: 10	Female: 28	Female: 28	Bisexual: 5	Black+: 7	Northeast: 14	Northeast: 17
28–30: 7			Pansexual: 2		South: 6	South: 9
31–33: 5			Queer: 3		Midwest: 6	Midwest: 5
34–35: 4					Outside U.S.: 2	Shift: 13

Education	SIC Family	SIC Current	Income in USD	Occupation	Political Party	Pol. Ideology
Voc/Trade: 1	Uppermid: 5	Uppermid: 5	<25K: 16	Manager/ Professional: 9	Democrat: 28	Radical: 2 (V)
Some College: 3	Middle: 12	Middle: 7	25K–<50K: 8	Serv/Trade: 3	Republican: 0	Progress: 2
Bachelors: 6	Lowermid: 5	Lowermid: 14	50K–<75K: 8	Student: 16	Other: 8	Very Liberal: 11
Some Grad: 6	Working: 11	Working: 9	75K–<100K: 2	Higher ED: 5		Liberal: 13
Masters: 17	Lower: 3	Lower: 1	≥100K: 2	Military: 2		Moderate: 8
PhD: 3		Uppermob: 12		Other: 1		
		Downmob: 24				

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

marginalized racial groups, as well as with BLM's focus on inclusivity and intersectionality in representing all members of Black communities (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). To provide a common contextual basis for interpretation of the movement and its future possibilities among the sample, current residence in the U.S. is a requirement for participation in the study. While BLM is a global Black liberation movement, it may be associated with different social meanings, tactics, and reception in various societal contexts that differ in their historical record of race relations and current manifestations of racism.

Respondents in the sample are part of the millennial generation – which Pew researchers define as those born from 1981 to 1996 (Dimock, 2019).[4] When the BLM movement emerged, millennials spanned the range of young adulthood – the youngest were just coming of age while the oldest were in the final years of this stage. Members of this generation cover an age range shown to be more commonly engaged in protest (Earl et al., 2017), and millennials have already proven to be a primary group engaged in BLM (Garza, 2020; Higdon, 2019; Jones-Eversley et al., 2017). Further, millennials are more likely to use social media platforms for social connection and obtaining information about current events (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Social media sites, particularly Twitter, have been integral to the BLM movement's internal development and tactics, as well as their communication with and reception among the general public (Carney, 2016; Clark et al., 2018; Freelon et al., 2016; Nummi et al., 2019; R. Ray et al., 2017; Tillery, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2019). Millennials' status as the first generation of digital natives and related immersion in the social media realm (Milkman, 2017; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) makes them a key population of study for research on contemporary social movements (such as BLM) that strategically use and are widely discussed on social media platforms.

While many respondents have participated in BLM activism, participation in the movement was not a requirement for participating in the interviews I conducted. This purposive sampling strategy allows for a more holistic analysis of perspectives on BLM by accounting for both intra-movement points of view (through those who have directly participated in the movement) and extra-movement points of view (among those who have been exposed to but have not participated). By not limiting the sample to organizers and those who have already been mobilized, as is common in social movement studies, I contribute to our understanding of the variation in perspectives and experiences that exist within a singular beneficiary group on behalf of which a movement advocates. Those who have not participated in a movement but are still tied to it through their social identity (in this case race) and social exposure even if only through social media discourse still have important perspectives for us to consider. This sampling approach also centers the experiences of members of the Black community, a social group whose perspectives have been historically marginalized by social movement scholars and/or studied in race-blind approaches as discussed earlier in this article.

Interviews were conducted between March 2019 and February 2020, and therefore reflect respondents' perspectives on the state of and future possibilities for the movement up until that point. Participants were recruited through advertising on social media.[5] All individuals who volunteered during this period were interviewed with one exception – this person withdrew due to scheduling conflicts. The interviews were conducted in person for those who lived in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and over the phone for those who lived elsewhere. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and an hour

and a half. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed either by myself or through a paid automated transcription service called Temi. All of the names used to reference participants within this article are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of respondents. Participant descriptions offered throughout the rest of the article are summaries of demographic characteristics collected directly from respondents in the post-interview questionnaires. All procedures were carried out in accordance with human subjects research ethical requirements and were approved by the University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board (approval number 1,402,771–3).

I employed an abductive analytic approach, which involves structuring research based on extant theory and literature and keeping these ideas in mind throughout the analysis process while still allowing the data to speak for itself through emergent themes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Coding and analysis for this study were completed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. Analysis for this study used established coding techniques in qualitative methods (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Charmaz, 1983) that allow for an iterative analysis process of constant comparison (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that gives attention to all of the various ideas that may present themselves through the data rather than only giving attention to information that fits predetermined codes. I first engaged in initial line-by-line open coding in conjunction with analytic memos to make connections between codes present in the data and relate them back to the interview and research questions. I then proceeded into focused coding to aggregate initial codes into broader themes that help answer the research questions and illuminate Black millennials' current perceptions of and future projections about BLM. Codes used in this process were descriptive rather than processual (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) in line with the research aims of uncovering the meanings that Black millennials themselves construct in relation to BLM and its future.

Black millennial visions of BLM and race in the U.S.[6]

The foremost finding of this study is the presence of a near-ubiquitous sense of skepticism about BLM's ability to enact social change in the U.S. among Black millennials. The prospectus of this group – their outlook on what potential imagined futures could exist – was quite limited in relation to BLM. They generally did not envision the U.S. as ever being characterized by racial justice and equality, despite the movement's ultimate goal to produce such a reality.

However, assessments of extant impacts of the movement and prospectus for change in the future differed based on the type of social change being considered.

Participants perceived the movement as successful in centering Black issues in social discourse and challenging existing hegemonic narratives about race. Because they pertain to symbolic processes of meaning making and their impact on social life, I refer to these impacts as 'cultural change' (Dyke & Taylor, 2018; Earl, 2004) throughout the analysis. In contrast, participants expressed sincere doubts that BLM would bring about legislative or institutional reforms significant and widespread enough to effectively eradicate racism. This ultimate outcome – a wide sweeping transformation of the racial hierarchy and race relations in U.S. society – is referred to throughout the analysis as 'structural change' (Amenta et al., 2010; Giugni, 2008). The perspectives of Black millennials in this study

drew a clear distinction between cultural and structural change, and their general skepticism was largely tied to the latter.

Regardless of their personal background and characteristics, the Black millennials interviewed in this study believe social change through BLM has been and will likely continue to be cultural in nature, rather than structural. In the sections below, I present these themes in detail: general skepticism, positive assessments of cultural change, and disbelief in the possibility for structural change. I then outline their implications for scholarship on race, movements, and the future and discuss what they may mean for the future of BLM in the U.S.

"I'm hesitant to say": BLM and general skepticism about social change

A clear thread of skepticism emerged in respondents' discussions of the success BLM has and will potentially achieve, to the point where some respondents felt they couldn't provide a steadfast answer as to whether they see success in BLM's future. For example, Kevin (a Black-white multiracial man born at the end of the millennial generation) said the following about the movement:

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

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

Similar to Kevin, Angie (a 23 Black and Latinx woman of working class background pursuing a graduate degree at the time we spoke) was dubious in her projections of social change as a result of BLM. In discussing change in U.S. policing, she lamented:

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

While Angie is referencing a particular institution, rather than the overarching social structure that Kevin commented on, she still expresses the same skepticism. Her

description of white supremacy as 'infiltrating' the institution of policing reflects the way the overarching system of racial domination is argued to be upheld through an inter-locking system of institutions, across which the same cultural meanings and ideologies exist (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In effect, she implies that this arrange-ment makes racism inescapable, and that possibilities for social change in race relations in the U.S. are limited.

Imani[7] also expressed skepticism about whether BLM can successfully subvert white supremacy. However, she goes beyond recognizing the deeply rooted origins and endur-ing strength of racism to highlight the direct challenges against BLM's efforts that impede its ability to produce change:

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

The perspective Imani offers provides an additional explanation for lack of confidence in BLM's ability to produce social change in the U.S. Not only is racism at the core of contemporary institutions, culture, and social relations as a result of a long history of white racial domination, but in addition, she suggests, efforts to draw attention to and change are hotly contested. She argues that people whose life work is designed to bring racial equality, such as race scholars and activists, are at risk for being discredited, marginalized, and even killed. In mentioning that this is something that has also happened in the past, she underscores a history of violently silencing those who attempt to challenge white supremacy as the status quo.

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

"It's done so much for us": BLM and cultural change

Black millennials in this study were much more optimistic about the extant and future success of BLM when it came to achieving cultural change than structural change. For example, Kenneth – a 27 year old Black man working in corporate sales

on the west coast – said the following when asked what he would consider success for BLM:

> I think just shedding light on the issues, right? The social injustices. I think that's what a successful movement is. It's like, can you get a large amount of people to stop what they're doing, not stop what they're doing but take a step away from their lives, and look at this issue that you're advocating. Right? So I think Black Lives Matter has done a great job of that.

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

Eve – a 33 year old Black woman completing a doctoral program in the Midwestern U.S. – also credited BLM with producing cultural change in the U.S.:

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

Just like other Black millennials in the study, Eve argues that BLM has brought race to the forefront of public discourse about inequality and social change, and highlights this as a movement success. They attribute the increasingly common attention to racism across societal spheres – media of all kinds, various levels of the political arena, the consumer economy, educational curriculums, and micro level social interaction – to the efforts of this movement. Beyond bringing racial inequality to the forefront of public discourse and institutions, Eve also cites BLM as effectively keeping it there. In her mind, by 'perpetuating and normalizing' those topics on an ongoing basis, the movement holds those in power accountable to act in accordance with these expanded cultural understandings of race and racism. Her perspective also aligns with existing assessments that it is BLM's dedication to shifting racial discourse on the value of Black humanity generally that opens the door for eventual policy reform in areas of social life, such as policing and criminal justice, in which Black people suffer disproportionately negative outcomes (R. Ray, 2020). In this way, cultural change is linked to possible future structural change.

Black millennials in this study recognized BLM as achieving cultural change by interrogating both broad racial ideology and more specific ideas about racial groups, particularly Black people. For example, Jacob[8] expressed:

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

Here Jacob points to the embeddedness of cultural ideas about blackness. Hegemonic racial ideologies, he argues, are upheld through pervasive cultural narratives and images

that become common sense, taken for granted ideas among members of a society (Omi & Winant, 2015). In particular, he references what Collins (2000) calls the 'controlling images' that stereotype Black people as inferior, serve as the basis for discriminatory and dehumanizing treatment, and reinforce white supremacy. From his perspective, BLM has forced a widespread conversation about the presence and role of these cultural images in the U.S.

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

"I just don't see it": BLM and structural change

Despite optimistic perspectives on the cultural changes that respondents cited have and will continue to be made through the BLM movement, their expressed prospectus for achieving tangible structural changes (e.g. eliminating racial disparities in police violence, incarceration rates, and political power/representation) was drastically more pessimistic. In almost all cases, respondents felt that BLM's work toward their vision of 'a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise' (Black Lives Matter, n.d.) would ultimately be unsuccessful. In explaining that position, many respondents alluded to the sheer magnitude of the task the movement has taken on and the myriad challenges BLM would have to overcome to accomplish it. As Adrienne[9] puts it:

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

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

1992) and cannot be eliminated within the confines of our existing society. However, as extant scholarship shows, it's not unusual for marginalized groups to still mount challenges in the face of a closed POS (Einwohner, 2003).

Danielle, a 24-year old woman pursuing her PhD at the time of our interview, also sees lasting structural change through BLM as unattainable. Specifically, she points out that social change is not linear and movement outcomes do not always last:

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

By drawing on her knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement, Danielle highlights that appearances can be deceiving when it comes to social movements and their success. Specific changes may be achieved at any time. For instance, BLM activism has caused reforms to police procedures to be signed into law in some states (Black Lives Matter, 2018; Campbell & Nuyen, 2020; Gruber-Miller & Richardson, 2020). Yet these changes have not been unopposed, with many examples of simultaneous efforts to undo such changes or nullify these gains. This is demonstrated by recent attacks on voting rights in Georgia which disproportionately affect Black voters (Griffith, 2022), despite these rights being cemented by constitutional amendments two centuries ago. Recognition of these processes have led some critical race scholars to critique what they call the 'racial progress paradigm' (Christian et al., 2019; V. Ray et al., 2017; Seamster & Ray, 2018). They argue that because the structures and mechanisms of white supremacy are adaptable and shift in response to challenges mounted against them, focusing on gradual advancement toward racial equality through a series of small steps over time is a misleading narrative and a futile approach. Danielle's perspective also points to the important distinction between prospectus and collective efficacy. By asserting that there will be wins, she demonstrates collective efficacy (Beaumont, 2010) – a belief in BLM's capability to achieve political change on behalf of Black people. However, lasting structural change is still outside of her sense of prospectus, reflecting the fact that social change is constrained by factors outside of BLM's control.

Similarly, in the context of expressing the implausibility of structural change, Ashley (a 28 year old Black woman who was pursuing her PhD at the time of her interview) discusses the difficulty of even imagining a future in which racism no longer exists. She said:

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

Ashley's perspective is that the racial oppression that has constrained the well-being and progression of the Black community also constrains the imagination. She argues that because liberation – social, political, economic, or all of the above – has never existed for

Black people in America, it is hard to imagine how liberation would manifest. In another example, Maddie[10] states in her interview that BLM would likely exist until liberation is achieved for all Black people. When I followed up and asked what liberation looks like, her answer reflects a lack of clarity similar to Ashley's, yet a sense of urgency about the need to try to imagine.

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

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

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the discussion about the potential for activism to produce social change through a necessary examination of prospectus – the overarching perceptions of what is possible in the future. In particular, it integrates CRT and concepts from the social movements literature to examine how race as an organizing principle of social life shapes these processes. Through an analysis of interviews with 36 Black millennials about their perspectives on BLM, I demonstrate the way that perceived possibility of social change is linked to understandings of the social structure of the society in which one exists, as well as the forms and manifestations of inequality that result from that structure. Respondents understood racism to be embedded in all US institutions and a foundational element of all aspects of social life. This in turn means that perceptions of possibility for transformation varied by what type of social change is being considered. I found that respondents were broadly skeptical about BLM's ability to produce social change in the U.S. Upon further examination, this general skepticism was largely rooted in their prospectus for structural change, rather than cultural change. Despite consistent acknowledgement of BLM's significant impact on racial discourse, ideology, and stereotypes, however, these Black millennials were not optimistic about the future of American race relations. They were also unable to envision a future in which the U.S. is not characterized by substantial racial inequality across social outcomes and experiences, particularly for Black people.

These future projections provide insight into the perceived challenges facing the Black community and those mobilized in the fight for racial equality and Black liberation. In terms of providing an answer to Schulz's (2016) question of 'who shapes the future with

what means, how and why?' (pp. 98), the pessimism around possibilities of transformation by BLM or any other movement that would follow in its footsteps is significant. If the collective expectation of the Black community is that we are doomed to live with racism indefinitely, what does that mean for the strength and utility of these forms of resistance? How will Black liberation be obtained if it cannot be imagined? Some Black millennials, like Maddie, may already be ahead of the curve in efforts to answer this question and steer activists and scholars alike in the right direction. When I asked whether she thinks the movement will successfully achieve this elusive outcome, she said:

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

Data collection for this study concluded in February 2020. That summer, the successive deaths of multiple unarmed Black people at the hands of both police and civilians sparked a resurgence and spread of the BLM movement that propelled it to the status of the largest social movement in U.S. history (Buchanan et al., 2020; Wright, 2020). In addition to their prevalence, protest responses to the highly publicized cases of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade included a significantly larger and more diverse group of people than previous BLM protest waves (Fisher, 2020; McAdam, 2020). The U.S. uprising also sparked protests of solidarity as well as in response to local racism in countries across the globe (Kirby, 2020). These mobilisations may have significantly impacted Black millennial prospectus for the future in relation to the movement and what it can accomplish. However, despite continued protest activity through 2020 and beyond, the increased levels of support for the movement outside the Black community appeared to wane and returned to previous levels by September 2020 (Horowitz, 2021). Just as the intensity of this protest wave may have improved fictional expectations and projections for the future, the subsequent drop off in activism and support may have eroded them. Further research into the circumstances in which BLM (and other racial justice movements) take place fluctuate over time are important to understanding the relationship between movements, race relations, and the future of society.

Notes

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

2. Completion of these interviews occurred prior to the resurgence and growth of the BLM movement in the summer of 2020 following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black people in close succession. The impact of the timing of these data on the findings and implications of this research will be addressed in the discussion section.

3. While the overall sample was chosen through a theoretical sampling frame, the actual recruitment of participants was performed through convenience sampling methods and relied on social media networks emerging from my own social location. This largely explains the geographic and educational backgrounds of the respondents. Variation in interviewees' backgrounds were not associated with significant differences in responses relevant to prospectus and evaluations of movement success.

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

5. Use of social media networks for participant recruiting undoubtedly shaped the sample for this study. As a Black HBCU graduate and current PhD student, my network disproportionately represents these statuses. Therefore, certain characteristics, particularly pursuit of postgraduate education, are representative of my sample but not wholly representative of the Black millennial population in general.

6. Quotations in this section are drawn directly from the words of the respondents, but presented in a way that provides clarity for the reader. Supporting contextual information is inserted in brackets ('[text]'). Interviews were open ended with many clarifying questions and returns to certain topics at different times throughout interviews. Ellipses ('. . .') between sentences included within the same block quote are used to indicate synthesis of statements on the same topic from different points in the interviews.

7. Imani is a Black woman who works as an assistant professor at a university in the southern region of the U.S. She is an older millennial and was thirty-three at the time of the interview.

8. Jacob is a Black man who at the time of the interview was 24 years old and in graduate school.

9. Adrienne is a 25-year-old Black woman who was both in college and working full time in the customer service sector at the time we spoke.

10. Maddie is a queer Afro-Caribbean woman who has a master's degree, works in higher education student affairs, and was 27 at the time of the interview.

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