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Allison Utting

Alissa Frazee

Briana Bailey

Mariah Bensley

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History Behind the Hashtag: The Historical Roots of the Black Lives Matter Movement

For more information, contact:
Allison Utting
141 E 12th St, Holland, MI 49423
(616) 328-1300
allison.utting@hope.edu

Allison Utting, Mariah Bensley, Alissa Frazee, and Briana Bailey – History Department, Hope College

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Unrest: Buffalo and Ferguson

- White leaders abuse of power compounded with economic inequalities to ignite the growing rage amidst African Americans in Buffalo and Ferguson. In both cases, an instance of police brutality sparked a wave of riots.
- Rioters in Buffalo displayed the growing frustration many younger African Americans had with the slow pace of the Civil Rights Movement. Activists were increasingly drawn to the heightened awareness and urgency felt by white leaders when law and order was threatened.
- The riots of the 1960's largely succeeded in removing overtly discriminatory laws or policies and provided the historical example to follow, but the unrest in Ferguson diverged from 1967 in important ways.
- Frustrated with the general apathy of the American public, the rioters in Ferguson sought attention. Instead of trying to affect specific institutions and policies like the riots of the 1960's, this new generation of African American activists sought to impact the hearts and minds of every American.
- The rioters in Buffalo had a clear target; white-owned businesses that refused to hire African Americans, and this generated unrest with a clear goal. "Ferguson represented something new: a sweeping call to action that blossomed into a genuine cultural movement."^[1]

^[1] Michael Brown and Matthew Shaer, "The Vigil," *Smithsonian*, July/August 2015.



Abstract

It began as a hashtag. Generated by the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin in July of 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement emerged as an online response to claims of police brutality and racial discrimination. By August, 2014, the movement had transferred from the screen to the streets as demonstrators filled Ferguson, Missouri to protest the killing of Michael Brown. Subsequent reports of racial profiling and police killings only added fuel to the movement's fire, and its message quickly captured national attention. The apparent spontaneity in which the Black Lives Matter movement developed is belied, however, by the long history of racial injustice in the United States and the protest movements that have sought to respond to oppression. In an effort to understand this centuries-old story, this team examined the historical roots of the Black Lives Matter movement in the areas of politics and law, culture, organized responses, and violence. Specifically, this project sought to explore the Black Lives Matter movement within the context of the Brown v. Board court decision, the media, the women's sit-in movement, and the 1967 Buffalo riots.



Media and the Movements

- When learning about the Civil Rights Movement, police brutality and unfair racial treatments are proven through multiple images, videos, and articles detailing the lives of Negro activists in the 1960's.
- Gruesome photos of police brutality against nonviolent protestors had the ability to recruit people who were originally unconnected to the movement by appealing to their humanity. Once the American people saw the violence, they demanded more action from their government, and thus a movement was born.
- In 2013 Alicia Garza started the movement using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.
- New technology such as phones and cameras can take instant videos from the streets that capture racial injustices. These can then be easily posted to sites and seen by millions in just a few minutes.
- Because of our technology and media opportunities, movements today can grow and excel at a much faster pace. Radical groups and violent protests are televised or shared on Facebook and then discussed over the dinner table.
- Martin Luther King said, "We will no longer let them use their clubs on us in the dark corners. We're going to do it in the glaring light of the television."

Brown v. Board 1954

- The NAACP was a political group which lobbied for "favorable legislative, judicial, and executive action"^[1] they believed the surest way to bring about change was through government action. This attitude of "the prospects for advancing black civil rights through the legal system"^[2] inspired and a man by the name of Charles Hamilton Houston.
- The brilliance of Houston's strategy was, as legal scholar Mark Tushnet remarked, "the sociological argument was Realist to the core. Law, even constitutional law, was social policy. Social policy had to be understood as it actually operated."^[3] The rhetoric they used, incorporating a societal concern, employed legal realism, resulting in break-through success with Brown v. Board.^[4]
- The Black Lives Matter movement is not focusing on the legal strategy, instead they make cultural appeal. The BLM official website does not use legal rhetoric. They do not advocate for repealing specific racist laws, rather what they claim are racist attitudes in the social structure of America.
- Their protest cries are aimed at society's attitudes toward blacks, specifically police officer's attitudes. As one article describes them they are an "internet-driven Civil Rights Movement,"^[5] their support depends on social media and not on court rulings.

- ^[1-4] Waldo E. Martin Jr. *Brown v. The Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 9.
- ^[5] John Eligon, "One Slogan, Many Methods: Black Lives Matter Enters Politics," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/us/one-slogan-many-methods-black-lives-matter-enters-politics.html>.

Women in the Sit-in Movement

- In 2013 three women, Alicia Garcia, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi addressed a huge issue and created the Black Lives Matter Organization and now are known worldwide for it Co-founder Tometi stated: "We wanted to create a political space... that could stand firmly on the shoulders of movements that have come before us, such as the civil rights movement, while innovating on its strategies, practices and approaches."^[1]
- The contributions of BLM movement for women's rights owe much to the women of the past. Within the Civil Rights Movement, women profoundly impacted the success of this movement, particularly the women of Bennett College in the Greensboro sit-in movement.
- The population of the all-female Bennett College and their staff greatly contributed to the success of the protest but received little credit.
- During the peak of the sit-in "as much as 40 percent of Bennett College's student body was in the local jail, and they accounted for more than half the students being held at that time in the city."^[2]
- All in all, through the hard work and persistence of the women of the past, the women of the present are able to be the strong independent and powerful women they were made to be. The sit-in movement provided a great starting point for women in protests and as leaders.

- ^[1] "Black Lives Matter." Black Lives Matter. Accessed April 04, 2016. <http://isreview.org/issue/96/black-lives-matter>.
- ^[2] Deidre Flowers, "The Launching of the Student Sit-in Movement: The Role of Black Women at Bennett College." 52-63.