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In and Beyond the Field: Researching Black Lives Matter from France

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by Audrey Celestine and Nicolas Martin-Breteau

To talk publicly about race remains taboo in France. Since its origins in the late eighteenth century, the French Republic has grounded its political identity on the theoretical equality of all its citizens, regardless of their origins. In practice, this "universalist" ideology tends to deny and neglect blatant racial inequalities among French citizens. Unlike in the United States in recent years, there has been no public discussion about whether France has turned "post-racial" since most white French people consider that their country never entered any sort of "racial era" to begin with. In fact, the French academic world is one of the few arenas in which debates over the issue of race have been accepted and sometimes encouraged.

1However, the growth of scholarly works dealing with racial issues, while often remarkable, has not translated into permanent academic jobs, which makes it risky for aspiring social scientists to develop research projects with race at their core. That may be part of the reason why many researchers in French academia have commonly used the United States as a proxy to study France through comparative work (Berg, Soto, and Schor). 2In this context, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2013 transformed the French intellectual landscape. As a large-scale social movement aimed to expose and dismantle the systemic violence against racial minorities in the United States, BLM has indirectly raised awareness about racial tensions in France—namely the structures of racism affecting post-colonial sub-Saharan and North African immigrants and their children. Indeed, the intertwined issues of racial discrimination, residential segregation, economic inequality, and police brutality targeting racial minorities, while not identical in scope, intensity, and formation, are nevertheless similar in France and the United States. The issues of racial profiling and police violence, as we shall see, raises similar attention in both countries. The story is well known: Black Lives Matter appeared in the wake of unprecedented American and international media coverage of police shooting cases against African American men and women. A pervasive and persisting reality since the slavery era, the anti-black violence of law enforcement agencies gained wide publicity in the early 2010s, partly due to video recordings that bluntly displayed what looked like extra-legal executions of unarmed people. Since the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the movement's main claim has been articulated as such: "Stop killing us" (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 17). These tragic events encouraged the mobilization or the creation of many French anti-racist associations, like *Ferguson in Paris*, which applied to the French situation a wide array of concepts primarily used by American militants, such as "institutional racism," "systemic racism," and "state-sponsored racism", in the wake of widely publicized cases of police violence. These

concepts and the reality of systemic racism are now being more commonly discussed in French mainstream media. Our research on Black Lives Matter was conducted in this transatlantic context. 3We seek to explain how we—an historian and a political scientist, both teaching American Studies at a French university—approach our ongoing research on Black Lives Matter. First, the article will show how our respective academic backgrounds and experiences both in France and the United States have influenced our research agenda. Then, the article will expose the main findings of our preliminary study. Finally, the article will point out the relevance of methodological "bricolage" in the study of Black Lives Matter, even more so given the current state of academia in France where difficulties to garner both time and resources have a significant impact on the forms taken by academic research on foreign areas. More broadly, this article argues in favor of interdisciplinary and international research on current social movements for racial justice.

How We Got There

4Starting a research project is always challenging, all the more so when one does not live close to the field of research. As a first stepping-stone, our previous respective studies on American and French racial history offered precious resources to shape our research agenda on Black Lives Matter. Grounded in a comparative perspective, political scientist Audrey Célestine's doctoral research explored the articulation of citizenship, race, class, and ethnicity in Puerto Rican movements in the United States and in French Caribbean movements in France. Historian Nicolas Martin-Breteau's doctoral research explored how African Americans have used the black athletic body as a political means in their mobilizations for racial justice since the collapse of Reconstruction. Influenced by sociology, philosophy, and political science, his subsequent research focuses on how African Americans have continuously redesigned their political strategies and tactics to address the destructive effects of racism on their communities. Our respective academic backgrounds were key to studying BLM within the long tradition of historical and sociological studies of social movements. 5Like most people, we first learned about BLM through the extensive media coverage of Trayvon Martin's killing in February 2012 and the acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerman, in July 2013. In the following months, the international outcry triggered by the killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, and hundreds of other persons of color as well as the many mobilizations of tens of thousands of citizens protesting police brutality throughout the United States and abroad—from bus rides to marches, die-ins, boycotts, occupations of public spaces, disruptive actions, and urban uprisings—caught our attention as a movement was taking shape. BLM shed a raw and crude new light on the brutal and lethal policing of black Americans, harassed, beaten, and killed at a disproportionate rate when compared to other racial groups. After the massive 2015 protests in Baltimore, a city we both know well, we made the decision to move from dismayed spectators to active researchers. 6Yet, this move raised a number of questions: How to contact the BLM movement from France? Who were these people we saw demonstrating on TV? What were the implications of the claims we read on

protest signs? Our first concern was to access the political experience of BLM activists. In accordance with French scholarly work on social movements, we opted for a qualitative methodology, mixing archival work, face-to-face interviews, and direct observation. In recent years this orientation has indeed led to the publication of influential scholarly contributions on methodological principles as well as on the reflexive dimension of social sciences that have proved useful to conduct our ongoing research project (Combes et al.). One important principle in our research has been not to deal separately with discourses and actions in social movements, but rather to thoroughly examine both the lived experiences of mobilized actors and the social conditions and circumstances that enable them to successfully carry out their actions, in particular their discursive practices. Such a strategy proves to be particularly useful and heuristic when studying from afar a social movement that has been overwhelmingly active and visible on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This methodological choice also ties in with our pedagogical practice as professors of American studies where we train students to pay close attention to both discourses, practices, and contexts, and to view discourses as actions. Because we both teach classes dealing with race in the United States, keeping up to date with the movement has also become part of our daily tasks. 7To begin with, we endeavored to collect and classify as many primary sources documenting the movement as we could. At the time, many historical institutions like the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) with artifacts, as well as American colleagues with syllabuses, were doing similar work. From the outset, BLM has inspired a wide literature analyzing the situation of African American and other racial minorities in the United States. Highly visible on the Internet through viral videos, Twitter threads, publications by affiliated organizations, individual members, and exterior observers, the movement has generated a wide array of first-hand, well-informed sources. The many organizations affiliated with the movement—Black Lives Matter, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Ferguson Action, The Dream Defenders, The Million Hoodies Movement, The Black Youth Project (BYP 100), and many others—published hundreds of documents while the movement was gaining momentum. The three black women who coined the motto "Black Lives Matter" told their version of the movement's genesis just a few months after its birth. Many political platforms were published, e.g. "Campaign Zero" by WeTheProtesters in August 2015 and then the "Movement for Black Lives" by fifty black organizations in 2016. Online groups like KilledByPolice.net, FatalEncounters.org, MappingPoliceViolence.org, PoliceViolenceReport.org as well as American and international newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* have regularly been publishing reports on police killings—a task long overlooked by local or federal agencies. Subsequent official reports by the United States Department of Justice documenting police brutality have been released on the situation in Cleveland, Ferguson, and Chicago. Scholarly books, articles, and commentaries have flourished on the movement. The momentum became such that a few measures advocated by BLM activists were even incorporated into the Democratic platform for the 2016 presidential election. 8Due to the multifaceted reality of the movement and our complementary academic backgrounds, we decided to address BLM through interdisciplinary research. We came to the conclusion that this second methodological decision—in addition

to our qualitative framework—represented a challenging but necessary scientific endeavor to understand how race was both defined and addressed in a mass movement such as BLM. In that regard, the interdisciplinary perspective of our research should not be viewed as mere abidance to a conventional catchword, but as a crucial intellectual effort to study racial issues. While trained respectively as a historian and a political scientist, we both read extensively across disciplinary boundaries. Fields like sociology, philosophy, psychology, and critical theory have been crucial to comprehend issues at stake in the BLM movement. By doing so, we aimed to inscribe ourselves in the critical tradition pioneered by black scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Aimé Césaire, Cedric Robinson, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, or Kimberle Crenshaw and many others who reevaluated white-dominated practices in social sciences across academic fields. By doing so, we found new ways to challenge the prevailing consensus regarding American (and French) history and society as the realms of universal freedom. 9Indeed our work on BLM is not confined to the United States. While harvesting data we simultaneously decided to study how BLM stimulated a strong interest in parts of France's new anti-racist organizations advocating more strident forms of racially-based mobilizations at odds with the traditional "universalist" campaigns promoted by older anti-racist movement organizations. The former tend to use on a regular basis concepts forged in the American context that are not always well received and understood in France. Institutional racism, white privilege, micro-aggressions, structural racism, etc. are new notions for many scholars and most commentators in France (Laplanche-Servigne 148; Picot). In late 2017, France's Secretary of Education filed suit over the use of the concept of "state racism" (*racisme d'État*) by a labor union whose members organized a workshop to help teachers cope with the institutional reproduction of racism by state-run agencies like public schools, in particular in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. In an editorial rightly entitled "France Fails to Face Up Racism," the *New York Times* summarized the debate by saying that "The term institutional *racism*, which in French is called *state racism*, is seen by many as an affront to the colorblind ideal of a universalist French republic" ("France Fails").

What We Found

10Building on these premises, we tried to map out the movement. Grasping how leaders, members, and supporters of the movement talked about it, listing their claims, identifying their targets, studying their vocabulary and the meaning given to their actions, finding out about the various repertoires of action they mobilized were part of the basic processing of our "messy data"—to borrow the phrase used by Auyero and Mahler (118). In this effort, three main questions have guided our work: Who are the BLM activists? Where does the movement come from? How different from previous anti-racist mobilizations is this movement? In the following paragraphs, we offer a retrospective analysis of the intellectual process that led to the publication of our article: "'A Movement, Not a Moment': Black Lives Matter and the Reshaping of Minority Struggles under Obama" (Célestine and Martin-Breteau). 11Our first question—Who are the BLM activists?—aimed at understanding the

identity, or rather the identification of the activists and their allies in and around the movement. We used identity as a category of practice and analysis—rather than as a fixed, reified concept—to study the reasons why BLM activists got involved in the movement, the production of the movement's social image, and the various forms of affiliation acknowledged by individual activists and organizations (Avanza and Laferté; Brubaker and Cooper). In other words, we tried to apprehend BLM's boundaries through the degree and forms of participation in the movement. Indeed, the movement is made up of a coalition of old and new progressive organizations working locally on issues of social and racial justice mainly at the local but also national and international levels. These organizations are spread across a broad political spectrum and resort to different modes of action. Many militants are community organizers supporting community control as a mode of subversion of power relations at the local level. This well-established tradition of grassroots democracy seeks to favor social change through the counter-power exercised by ordinary people in the face of the political establishment. Within this framework, militant roles in the movement could be distinguished: the community members organize to sustain a collective grievance, the most active members becoming local leaders. Leaders sometimes come from outside the community. This militant model clearly situates BLM in the longer tradition of African American protest, epitomized in the 1960s and 1970s by the Black Power movement. 12The other relevant characteristics we found about BLM militants were their age, social class, and gender. From the information we were able to gather, the movement highlights the divisions along class and age lines in the African American community today: On the one hand, an integrated black elite in position of political and economic power (from the former President of the United States to elected members in the United States Congress and state assemblies, mayors, judges, businessmen, professionals, etc.) and, on the other hand, poorer and younger people relegated to the margins of American capitalist democracy. This tension is reflected in younger activists' refusal to adopt the codes of "respectability politics" still promoted as a pivot of African American political culture, particularly through black churches. Linked to the racial uplift strategy designed by the African American upper classes at the end of the eighteenth century, the public display of black respectability sought to reform the alleged immorality of the black working classes in order to prove the dignity of the whole community and thus obtain equal civil rights and social integration. By favoring the conversion of whites' psychology to put an end to racial injustice, this emancipation strategy neglected the transformation of the social structures at the origin of the reproduction of racial injustice. Publicly identifying as queer women and active in the fight against violence directed at LGBTQ people, BLM founders Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors exemplify the new militancy of a younger generation involved in grassroots empowerment actions. 13The second question—Where does the movement come from?—led us to study the vast body of BLM militants' public interventions and scholarly works dealing with the sociology and history of black social movements. An important methodological principle followed in our research project has been to base our understanding of BLM not only on what we can see today, but also on what came before. Contrary to a widespread understanding of contemporary United States history, African American mobilizations for justice did not stop in

the late 1960s. Since then, given the brutal federal and state crackdown on black activists in the dual context of the cold war's demise and the so-called war on drugs' surge, African American communities have mobilized for justice (Baldassare). These actions are but a continuation of the longer black political struggles dating back to the abolitionist movement and, more recently, the Black Power movement. They are also the outgrowth of more recent militant alliances, from the feminist movement to the LGBTQ and Occupy movements. In that regard, through primary sources and archival work, our analysis shows the extent to which BLM is part of long-term intergenerational and interclassist mobilization (Garrigou 41; Rickford 34; Thurston 162). 14In contrast to a sanitized narrative, this allowed us to understand that BLM was not simply a resurgence of the Civil Rights Movement, but was more similar to Black Power. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which considered resorting to the federal government as the best remedy for racist oppression, Black Power sought to attack the institutional racism lodged in the core of American state structures. In the 2010s as well as the 1960s, the same causes produced the same effects: violent oppression of black people through police brutality and mass incarceration, extensive racial segregation and discrimination, persistent poverty amid growing economic inequalities, mass disfranchisement through terror and administrative schemes, subsidization of white privilege through taxation and plundering of communities of color. Mainstream accounts tend to forget the violence which lay at the heart of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, during which half a million African Americans took part in protests in some 300 cities across the country, most of them being triggered by a case of police violence directed at black people. Contrary to an appeasing commonplace, historian Robin D. G. Kelley points out that it was not the moral commitment of the federal government to eliminate racial injustice, but the hundreds of uprisings in the black ghettos which eventually forced federal action and the passage of the main legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement (Kelley and Martin-Breteau 119). From this latter perspective, the issues, arguments, and even remedies remain the same today. The massive protests and renewed organizing that followed the beating of Rodney King by white LAPD officers and the subsequent acquittal of his assailants in 1992 as well as the forty-one times shooting of Amadou Diallo by white NYPD officers in 1999 tell tragic and recurrent stories. In other words, we found that BLM is not a "new" movement but a spin-off, that is to say the continuation under different modes, of a century-long struggle (McAdam, "'Initiator' and 'Spin-off' Movements"; Meyer and Whittier). 15This led us to our third question: To what extent is this movement pioneering? We found that BLM is a horizontal, intersectional, and inclusive social movement. A pluralist political coalition, BLM has been organized as a horizontal network of old and new grassroots activist organizations. To combat structural racism, the movement connects, without any kind of hierarchy, multiple local initiatives. Although leaders have emerged at the head of the movement, its decentralized structure facilitates the proliferation of new and dissident voices, particularly through the use of social networks and collective mobilizations. As a result, BLM might well be the first African American political movement since the Black Panther Party not to be explicitly supported by the network of black churches, which are hierarchically managed by charismatic leaders.

Second, BLM voluntarily expanded as an intersectional movement, combining analyses of social domination in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. BLM seeks to circumscribe a structure of domination characterized by the intersection of various, mutually reinforcing forms of oppression. Like any intersectional movement, BLM is, in practice, confronted with key strategic issues as to what struggles must be waged first. 16The police and justice issues concerning primarily the figure of the young black male have constituted the core of the political demands formulated by the movement. Nonetheless, by mingling a wide variety of identities and interests within one single movement—in particular the identities and interests of traditionally marginal or invisible figures like women, LGBTQ persons, migrants, prisoners, etc.—BLM is characterized by the heterogeneity of its members in terms of sex, gender, age, and class. Last, BLM is also defined by its inclusiveness. From the outset, leaders have explicitly asserted that the movement is inclusive of all of those who value the lives of black people. Consequently, BLM's interracial character—even though problematic (Menasce and Livingston)—is one of the movement's most remarkable dimensions. This poses anew the question of the movement's collective identity and capacity to mobilize (and shape) a coherent group. Over the last few years, this issue was raised time and again: How to organize into a single mass movement what sometimes appears as a wide range of circumscribed local actions led by very different people? How to fulfill BLM's intersectional promise? In fact, we should refrain from underestimating the degree of organization of this seemingly fluid social movement as well as overestimating the formalization of its structures and claims. The BLM movement is better seen as a political constellation displaying more or less precise patterns. 17From this horizontal, intersectional, and inclusive movement, new modes of protest emerged. BLM activists have created new languages, practices, and spaces in order to denounce old problems and propose new solutions. The movement has been seeking to disrupt the daily functioning of society in order to revolutionize the status quo ante. Like television in the 1950s and 1960s, the use of digital social networks allows for the effective mobilization of activists and a massive diffusion of their message, including the embedding of lurid videos. Disruption as a means of direct action inherited from the Civil Rights, feminist, LGBTQ, and Occupy movements is a remarkable feature of Black Lives Matter's protest repertoire (McAdam, *Political Process*; Fernandez and McAdam; Friedman and McAdam). Voluntarily provocative, thousands of collective mourning gatherings, die-ins, and Freedom Rides, have, since 2014, sought to subvert the usual functioning of public space by blocking traffic on roads, railways, bridges, and tunnels, delaying sports events, interrupting political speeches, occupying shopping centers, and encircling city halls and police stations. These actions responded to the slogan "Shut It Down!" Therefore, the movement offers new framings in the militant discourse not only by insisting on traditionally marginalized populations, but also by expressing in new words an old reality of oppression. Phrases like "The New Jim Crow" (Alexander) and slogans like "Hands Up Don't Shoot" are typical of this dimension of BLM. In fact, BLM militants developed their own languages and practices by improvising on a pre-existing, well-established repertoire of action transmitted by successive generations of black activists (Tilly).

Where We Are Heading

18Our current work on BLM is threefold: discourse analysis, cultural analysis, and fieldwork —both in the United States and in France. Our presence in the United States being intermittent, we are currently pursuing the “macro-sociological” study of the movement, especially through the Internet. This leads to reflecting on how to handle the heterogeneous nature of the digital data collected. Twitter is a case in point here. As one of our most instrumental windows into the movement, we must deepen our understanding of its role in the mobilization, both as a tool and a space. Research dealing with the role of the Internet in politics and social movements is being credited with more and more legitimacy. As early as 2004, Lesley Wood (71) analyzed anti-globalization protests targeting “neoliberalism” during Global Days of Action in several countries over the course of several years. She used activists’ reports of action on the Internet and was able to identify a much higher number of protests than with more traditional tools such as LexisNexis or Reuters. Also, using such a method led her to realize that media accounts tended to over-represent large and violent protests. 19Twitter is interesting beyond its digital role, though. The recent surge in the study of digital data in social science encouraged us to explore what Twitter does to, and reveals about, the BLM movement (Ollion and Boelaert). Yet, in one of the first comprehensive scholarly attempts at making sense of the movement, Keeanga-Yamattha Taylor (175) argues that the movement’s digital presence, more specifically on Twitter, is at the heart of key tensions within BLM. Indeed, a number of activists consider that Twitter’s role is both temporary and limited. It can be used to spread slogans, news or specific events—it has even proved its importance in turn-out at specific protests. Nonetheless, actual organizing remains both unavoidable and necessary. Just like the archives produced by a social-movement organization, using BLM’s sole digital presence is risky as it provides access to the most visible activists or those with a more intense and regular use of social networks, which is only one dimension of activism. Furthermore, in a Goffmanian interactionist perspective focusing on the quasi-theatrical performances of everyday social life, we can regard social networks as a frontstage that does not tell us much about what is going on backstage (Eliasoph; Goffman). Consequently, our research protocol has to comprise other data collected through actual observations and interviews. 20In the same line of ideas, it appears that exploring the digital dimension of the movement could help investigate processes of signification and meaning by both supporters/members and opponents of the movement. Another remarkable feature of BLM has been its cultural impact. The importance of non-political actors in appropriating and referring to the movement was analyzed thanks to the concept of social movement community as used, for instance, by French political scientists Laure Bereni and Anne Revillard (26). Beyond activism strictly defined, this concept invites us to rethink how the movement is circulated in (and picked up by) popular culture, from movies, TV series, and documentaries to comics, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/Z-48u_uWMHY

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/WDZJPJV__bQ

Forged from research on second-wave feminism in the United States, this concept makes it possible to reflect on a continuum of activities that have a contentious dimension without being based on formal membership in a political organization, and invites us to reevaluate the role of collective identity as a lever of political protest (Staggenborg; Taylor and Whittier).

21To contrast the more global approach of BLM we carried out so far, we decided to also look at the movement at the local level in three cities: Chicago, Baltimore, and Paris. Studying BLM through a local lens enables us to have an entry point to the study of the movement's ordinary people and rank and filers. Indeed, it is necessary to look at the reception and various appropriations of BLM's frames by both activists and non-activists. Focusing on rank and filers allows us to understand what they make of the slogans and discourses developed by the movement and how effective the movement is at both recruiting and keeping activists. A local perspective also provides information on what the movement does to the politicization of ordinary United States citizens. The movement displays an intersectional rhetoric, but both the involvement of academics and the types of analysis put forward by movement leaders indicate that it is a rather intellectual movement. How does that translate in the field? To what extent are the analyses developed by BLM shared by rank and filers? What are the most important issues for ordinary members and why? Or, more generally: What is the movement's impact on the politicization of United States citizens? To answer these questions, in-depth interviews and observations in Chicago and Baltimore, two cities marked by the movement, prove to be particularly relevant.

Chicago and Baltimore: Two Major Sites of the BLM Coalition

22Chicago offers the student of BLM a fertile ground for researching the movement. One of the most influential organizations of the BLM coalition was founded in Chicago in the aftermath of George Zimmerman's 2013 acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin: Black Youth Project 100, or BYP 100. Among its founding members, political scientist Cathy J. Cohen and community organizer Charlene Carruthers explicitly claim Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s militancy for racial justice as their inspiration. Besides, Chicago is a city with a long history of racial violence. For decades, anti-black police violence has been characterizing the racial relations in the "Black Metropolis." The 2014 video-recorded killing of Laquan McDonald, who was shot sixteen times as he walked away from a white police officer, stirred one of the largest mobilizations in the African American community in recent years. The violence of the Chicago police in black neighborhoods devastated by poverty and crime is the result of a well-known history of sweeping deindustrialization, public and private disinvestment, deep-seated racial segregation, and neoliberal management. In many ways, the evolution of this metropolitan area of 10 million inhabitants is typical of the recent urban experience of many American cities (Diamond). 23More specifically, our research project on Chicago focuses on education issues. The city runs the third largest school system in the country, which is characterized by high levels of racial school segregation, numerous closures of public schools in poor neighborhoods, and the opening of many privately-run charter schools. In that regard too, Chicago presents a paradigmatic case study of the educational situation of many American cities. The situation of public education in Chicago appears as one of the consequences of the city's evolution in what historian Andrew Diamond (34) calls the "neoliberal moment of late capitalism." Through a study of the local press, mining of public archives, and interviews of black and Latino activists in the movement

for a more equitable education, our first goal is to research how grassroots organizations such as BYP 100, the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU), Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), and Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) are developing their actions. Our second objective is to understand how activists try to politicize the causes of the devastation of Chicago's public education away from the standard narrative that explains this situation as a damaging, yet predictable effect of cultural and moral shortfall in communities of color. As such, this study resorts to different scales of analysis in order to combine a macro study of BLM in Chicago with a micro study of its role in the city's education field.
24What makes BLM so worth studying, especially from afar, is the tension between the current incorporation of black people into the political elite (at the local and federal levels) and the intensity of protests urging people and institutions to value the lives of black people. In 2015, protests erupted in Baltimore, following the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray. Barack Obama, the first black United States president, was in office. At the end of his two terms in office, there were forty-five black members in the House of Representatives and two Black senators, which was the highest number of black members in American history to that point. As the riots erupted in Baltimore, Loretta Lynch became the first black woman appointed Attorney General. Baltimore's mayor was also African American at the time of the uprising, just like three of the six police officers involved in Freddie Gray's death. In other words, African Americans could be found in important positions of power both at the national and local levels. And yet, Baltimore is one of the places where protests turned into riots leading city officials to declare a state of emergency. 25The city itself has a long history of police brutality cases about which local actors had already been mobilizing prior to BLM. Such a context makes it all the more worthwhile to study how DeRay Mckesson, one of the movement's most prominent figures, attempted to move from social movement activism to electoral politics. In February 2016, the famous 30-year-old activist with no experience in city government but around 350,000 followers on Twitter at the time became the thirteenth and last Democratic candidate to register into Baltimore's Democratic primaries, in a city with as many as ten Democrats for every Republican. While greeted with excitement nationwide, the candidacy drew a lot of criticism locally for several reasons that are key to this research project. First, Mckesson lacked local support for the mayoral race, showing the tension between national prominence and local presence. Second, the issues of police brutality and criminal justice, of prime importance for BLM, were already part of the other Democratic candidates' agenda. Finally, Mckesson announced he would focus his campaign on education, a key issue in BLM and a complicated one in Baltimore. However, his ties to national reform groups like Teach for America or his support for charter schools—often denounced as neoliberal—seem at odds with claims for a more equitable educational system made by BLM local activists in other cities as well as Baltimore.

Ferguson in Paris

26One last aspect we've explored is the transatlantic circulation of the BLM movement. In 2014, in the wake of the uprising in Ferguson, a group of French antiracist activists decided

to create “Ferguson in Paris.” The Paris-based movement was launched in support of BLM and protesters in Ferguson as well as to “fight against anti-black racism” in France (Couvelaire; Ferroudj). Police brutality was a case in point since in France as well as the United States, there is a long history of complaints of racial discrimination and targeting of minority groups by the police (Diallo; Delpeuch et al.; Dupuis-Déri et al.; Goris et al.; Du Roy and Simbille). Therefore, mobilizations against police violence targeting black and Arab youth are nothing new in France (Dewerpe; Mohammed and Mucchielli). In recent years, however, a number of organizations and more informal groups have been trying to expand what they identify as a narrow definition of racism in France. In other words, the discourses and claims formulated by BLM as well as the denunciation of systemic or structural racism have been adapted to the French context. Much like in the United States, these debates also concern cultural issues like the names given to public monuments. While the controversy over the removal of Confederate monuments in public spaces is still making headlines in the United States, the Representative Council of France’s Black Associations (CRAN, “*Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires*”) has recently proposed to change the names of French public schools named after Jean-Baptiste Colbert, King Louis XIV’s minister who was responsible for the passage of the Code Noir in 1685, which institutionalized slavery in the French Caribbean (Tin). This proposition prompted a vehement disapproval from much of the French political spectrum that considers Colbert a central figure of French national history.

27Given their explicit goal to launch a transnational movement, BLM leaders have been meeting with antiracist activists in other countries, including France. Among others, Opal Tometi came to Paris in 2016 to meet French antiracist militants. Angela Davis participated in the “Marche de la dignité et contre le racisme” in Paris in October 2015, and since then has regularly returned to support other social events for racial justice in France (Davis). Through in-depth analysis of “Ferguson in Paris” as well as “Urgence, notre police assassine,” “Observatoire des violences policières,” “Stop le contrôle au faciès,” “Justice pour Adama,” and other recent French antiracist organizations, we seek to understand how concepts, ideas, and repertoires of action travel within the field of antiracist activism across the Atlantic, especially between the United States and France, usually but incorrectly thought of as two absolutely unique and fundamentally distinct societies (Flanders).

Conclusion

28Both the interdisciplinary dimension of our work and our respective training in political science and American history have been central to investigating the Black Lives Matter movement. This approach allows us to go beyond the post-racial narrative in analyzing the situation of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. It also enables us to assess the novelty of the movement and the extent to which it has been in line with a long history of antiracist mobilizations in the United States. To do so, we have collected a variety of qualitative data from afar—particularly statements by leaders and interactions on social and news media—to analyze how the action was both staged and received by French and American audiences. It has enabled us to carry out the project thanks to a direct access to

leaders and organizers. But faced with the methodological challenges brought about by the heterogeneous nature of the data collected, we have also planned local fieldwork in Chicago, Baltimore, and Paris. Doing so is key to assessing the impact and practicalities of Black Lives Matter as a "transnational movement."

Read Charlotte Thomas-Hébert's Response to "In and Beyond the Field: Researching Black Lives Matter from France"

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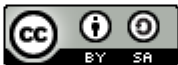

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