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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

ON AND OFF THE STAGE AT ATLANTA GREEK PICNIC: PERFORMANCES OF  
COLLECTIVE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF  
BELONGING

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

GLOBAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL STUDIES

by

Synatra A. Smith

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

This dissertation, written by Synatra A. Smith, and entitled *On and Off the Stage at Atlanta Greek Picnic: Performances of Collective Black Middle-Class Identities and the Politics of Belonging*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Florida International University, 2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
ON AND OFF THE STAGE AT ATLANTA GREEK PICNIC: PERFORMANCES OF  
COLLECTIVE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF  
BELONGING

by

Synatra A. Smith

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Jean Muteba Rahier, Major Professor

This dissertation presents a thick ethnography that engages in the micro-analysis of the situationality of black middle-class collective identification processes through an examination of performances by members of the nine historically black sororities and fraternities at Atlanta Greek Picnic, an annual festival that occurs at the beginning of June in Atlanta, Georgia. It mainly attracts undergraduate and graduate members of these university-based organizations, as they exist all over the United States. This exploration of black Greek-letter organization (BGLO) performances uncovers processes through which young black middle-class individuals attempt to combine two universes that are at first glance in complete opposition to each other: the domain of the traditional black middle-class values with representations and fashions stemming from black popular culture. These constructions also attempt to incorporate—in a contradiction of sorts—black popular cultural elements in the objective to deconstruct the social conservatism that characterizes middle-class values, particularly in relation to sexuality and its representation in social behaviors and performances. This negotiation between prescribed

middle-class values of respectability and black popular culture provides a space wherein black individuals challenge and/or perpetuate those dominant tropes through identity performances that feed into the formation of black sexual politics, which I examine through a variety of BGLO staged and non-staged performances.

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## GLOSSARY

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| AKA          | Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority, Inc.  |
| Alpha        | Member of Alpha Phi Alpha (ΑΦΑ) Fraternity, Inc.  |
| BGLO         | Black Greek-letter organization   |
| Call         | Each organization has a call that carries significance to the members. Calls are either a call and response or a word.  |
| Delta        | Member of Delta Sigma Theta (ΔΣΘ) Sorority, Inc.  |
| Diss         | Something that disrespects or teases another organization.  |
| Divine Nine  | The National Pan-Hellenic Council originally consisted of the four sororities and four fraternities that were founded prior to its organization in 1930 who became known colloquially as the Elite Eight. Upon accepting the Iotas into the council, the group was renamed the Divine Nine. |
| GLO          | Greek-letter organization   |
| HBCU         | Historically black college or university  |
| IFC          | Interfraternity Council   |
| Iota         | Member of Iota Phi Theta (ΙΦΘ) Fraternity, Inc.   |
| Kappa        | Member of Kappa Alpha Psi (ΚΑΨ) Fraternity, Inc.  |
| Line brother | Members of a pledge line refer to each other as line brothers.  |
| Line number  | During membership intake initiates are typically arranged in height order and given a number based on where they fall in that line.   |
| Line shirt   | Line shirts have the organization's Greek letters on the front, the line name and line number on the back, semester of initiation abbreviated on one sleeve, and the school and chapter on the other.   |
| Line sister  | Members of a pledge line refer to each other as line sisters.   |
| Line name    | Each member is given his or her own line name and the entire line is given a name.  |

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| NPHC      | National Pan-Hellenic Council  |
| Omega     | Member of Omega Psi Phi ( $\Omega\Psi\Phi$ ) Fraternity, Inc.  |
| Prophyte  | Members of one's organization who were initiated prior to their own initiation.  |
| PWI       | Predominantly white institution  |
| Que       | Member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.   |
| Que Dog   | The unofficial bulldog symbol that is associated with the members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.  |
| SGRho     | Member of Sigma Gamma Rho ( $\Sigma\Gamma\rho$ ) Sorority, Inc.  |
| Sigma     | Member of Phi Beta Sigma ( $\Phi\beta\Sigma$ ) Fraternity, Inc.  |
| Stepping  | Stepping (known as hopping for members of Omega Psi Phi) is a type of synchronized rhythmic dance routine that involves using hands, feet, and the body to make percussive beats.  |
| Strolling | Strolling, also known as party walking (or hopping/party hopping in the case of members of Omega Psi Phi) is a synchronized dance typically performed in a line where members of the organization follow a designated leader through a space.                      |
| Tail      | Pledge lines are typically arranged in height order. The last person on the line is referred to as the tail. During the pledge process, the tail is typically expected to undergo the most physical stress on his or her line and to protect the rest of the line. |
| Tiki      | A small wooden medallion in the shape of some particular symbol often painted in the colors of the designated organization   |
| Zeta      | Member of Zeta Phi Beta ( $Z\Phi\beta$ ) Sorority, Inc.  |

## GREEK LETTER DICTIONARY

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| A | Alpha   |
| B | Beta    |
| Γ | Gamma   |
| Δ | Delta   |
| E | Epsilon |
| Z | Zeta    |
| H | Eta     |
| Θ | Theta   |
| I | Iota    |
| K | Kappa   |
| Λ | Lambda  |
| M | Mu      |
| N | Nu      |
| Ξ | Xi      |
| O | Omicron |
| Π | Pi      |
| P | Rho     |
| Σ | Sigma   |
| T | Tau     |
| Υ | Upsilon |
| Φ | Phi     |
| X | Chi     |

$\Psi$

Psi

$\Omega$

Omega

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation presents an ethnography that engages in the micro-analysis of the situationality of black middle-class collective identification processes through an examination of performances by members of the nine historically black sororities and fraternities at Atlanta Greek Picnic, an annual festival that occurs at the beginning of June in Atlanta, Georgia. The festival mainly attracts undergraduate and graduate members of these university-based organizations as they exist all over the United States. This exploration of black Greek-letter organization (BGLO) performances uncovers processes through which young black middle-class individuals attempt to combine two universes that are at first glance in complete opposition to each other: the domain of the traditional black middle-class values, and the representations and fashions stemming from black popular culture. Contemporary constructions of black middle-class masculinities and femininities continue to be built on the traditional politics of respectability that have developed as a response to negative historical stereotyping of black people. In fact, there have been a number of black middle-class criticisms of what has been deemed “the vulgarity” of some of the most visible aspects of black popular culture, particularly regarding music videos in which a recurring image has been that of barely covered black women’s bodies that are objectified and disposed of in an obvious misogynistic way (Fallek 2014; Munn 2013; Rauch 2012; Schmidt 2013; Weitzer and Kubrin 2009).

As I engage in analyses of black middle-class performances during the Atlanta Greek Picnic, I also explore non-African American<sup>1</sup> individuals’ participation in this

---

<sup>1</sup> In “Chapter 5: Reflections on the Impact of Diversity and Color-Blindness within Black Spaces,” I use African American in order to differentiate between black people born in the United States and black immigrants.

space of African American identity creation and reproduction. Through an examination of their experiences, as revealed to me during interviews or on digital micro-blogging platforms, I uncover the way non-African American members of African American organizations often play a conflicting role in the configuration of African American identities. These members come from a variety of backgrounds such as non-black people of color who seek to connect their own minority experiences with the aims of African American organizations, black immigrants or self-identified mixed-race individuals who complicate our understanding of African American identities, and non-black members who prefer to deny the relevance of race.

One of the major points I am making in this dissertation is that these identity constructions and reproductions also attempt to incorporate—in a contradiction of sorts—black popular cultural elements in the objective to deconstruct the social conservatism that characterizes middle-class values, particularly in relation to sexuality and its representation in social behaviors and performances. This negotiation between prescribed middle-class values of respectability and black popular culture provides spaces wherein black individuals challenge and/or perpetuate dominant tropes. This can be accomplished through identity performances that feed into the formation of black sexual politics, which I examine in the subsequent chapters through an analysis of a variety of BGLO staged and non-staged performances.

#### 1. THEORIZING IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES AND IDENTITY POLITICS

My approach is anti-essentialist and social constructionist as I consider the fluidity of identification processes, and the multiple factors that influence conceptualizations of “blackness” as they relate primarily to class, gender, and sexuality. Every BGLO in focus

in this study has developed its own identification schema that is defined by its own unique history, popular culture, as well as localized university/collegiate culture, in contra-distinction with the history and particularities of other organizations from which they clearly want to distinguish themselves. The transformation and perpetuation of particular identity schemas are made manifest through public and semi-public performances, which brings me to use a performative lens to analyze the way black middle-class collective identities are constructed and disseminated in the festival in focus, and also in BGLOs in general. I borrow from several theoretical approaches to set up the framework of my study.

First, I apply an intersectional approach that explores black identities without privileging some imagined, mythical connection to Africa (Clarke 2010; Gilroy 1993, 1995; Thomas and Clarke 2006). Even though I am not immediately examining hierarchical black transnational exchanges, I do note that scholarship about black realities, always embedded in transnational networks, must necessarily consider the plurality of black identities as a fundamental premise. As new black Diasporas are forming in the United States and engaging black identification, black identity construction processes are unfolding in constantly transforming contexts of socio-political conflict and struggle over representations (Clarke 2010; Hall 1992; Collins 2006; hooks 1992; Koser 2003; Hintzen and Rahier 2003). Thus, although previous work on the United States' black middle-class has been fundamental for the research conclusions presented in these pages, and particularly so in helping construct the genealogy of contemporary identity performances, today's configuration of the United States' black middle-class cannot be equated with the reality that formation endured or

enjoyed in the 1960s. Additionally, the disciplines have also changed, as have the theoretical frameworks and the methodological preferences erected to make sense of them.

Another component of my framework involves identity politics, which I see in the context of this dissertation as the struggle in which a collective engages for recognition, legitimacy, and power (Calhoun 1994). These struggles are inherently political because they are about rejecting ascribed identities and replacing them with new ones (Calhoun 1994). Patricia Hill Collins (2006) identifies the catalysts for black identity politics to be (1) the racial hierarchy that exists regardless of any legal, economic, or social victories, and (2) the new racial formations that elicit new political responses. bell hooks also notes that black identity politics are a “political struggle to push against the boundaries of the image” (1992:4). I begin my analysis with a discussion of the historical development of black middle-class respectability politics as a mechanism to qualify black people as equal to white people based on mainstream standards of morality. It was out of this specific set of identity politics that BGLOs were established beginning in the early 1900s through the 1960s. As I will show, although they undoubtedly engage in practices that were unknown a century ago, these organizations continue to promote values associated with respectability.

Additionally, as hooks (1992) argues, black women are often excluded from racial narratives even when they deal with gender and sexuality. The focus of these narratives is generally characterized by the adherence to a “black men versus white men” dichotomy: a focus that pushes white women and stereotypes of black femininity to the background (hooks 1992). Although there are five fraternities and four sororities included in my



analysis, I pay careful attention to black female identification processes in addition to those of black men, with respect for variations within each gender group. These organizations provide spaces for the performance of black middle-class identity politics.

In this project I consider multiple configurations of black identities in response to a specific context and identified situations. A still growing trend in identity construction studies has scholars examine “the mechanics by which collectives create distinctions, establish hierarchies, and renegotiate rules of inclusion” (Cerulo 1997:395). Rather than viewing identity as a static phenomenon, identification processes scholars highlight the fluidity of identity/identification where situations shape how one relates to his/her setting(s) and the people within them. Social identity theorists argue that individuals have available a multiplicity of identities that are activated depending on specific situations. This activation is motivated by a desire to successfully blend with an in-group, therefore privileging environment and interaction (Owens et al. 2010; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner and Tajfel 1982). Here, the key concepts are symbolic boundaries, or the accepted designation between groups that often lead to hierarchization, cultural repertoires, or “systems of meaning that characterize various symbolic communities,” and objects or commodities as symbols (Cerulo 1997:395; see also Appadurai 1986; Cohen 1986; DiMaggio 1982, 1987, 1992; Goldman 1992; Hennion and Meadel 1993; Lamont 1992, 1995, 1997; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Martorella 1989; O’Barr 1994; Rubenstein 1995; Sahlins 1989; Somers 1994; White 1992).

The festival that fosters the context of my ethnography—the Atlanta Greek Picnic—incorporates a multiplicity of settings in which identification processes take place. I have analyzed various racialized presentations of class, gender, and sexuality that

vary depending on the very space wherein a given performance takes place. Through performance analysis I have engaged a “corporeal micro-politics” that considers the movement between bodies and the mutually intelligible codes of conduct in collective identities (Malbon 1999; McCormack 2008). These performances operate as a manifestation of culture that cannot be contained and defined in strict terms once and for all. They constitute at the same time the fluid perpetuation as well as the transformation of society and culture. They are significant inasmuch as they exemplify the way motion operates in relation to ideas (McCormack 2008).

Scholars have developed conceptualizations of the black middle-class based on such factors as income, occupation, and education (Battle and Wright II 2002; DuBois 1967[1899]; Frazier 1966[1930], 1969[1940]; Kronus 1971; Landry 1987; Sowell 1981). Rather than basing my analysis on the characteristics of individuals, I examine BGLO members as representatives of black middle-class status organizations. I have elected to employ BGLO membership as my key indicator of black middle-class status because all members must have some degree of education to join, and must pay an initiation fee as well as annual dues in order to maintain active membership. I have therefore invoked two of the three markers of middle-class status, education and income, in a manner that is appropriate for this space. I am less concerned with occupation because most of the festival attendees are undergraduates or recently enrolled graduate students and therefore may be unemployed or new to the workforce. In that same vein, annual salary would not be a reliable measure of class status.

Additionally, in “Chapter 1: The Development of the Black Middle-Class and the Formation of Social Status Organizations,” I underline the way these organizations are an

outgrowth of a desire to create an elite space for black people by groups of educated black people at a time when Jim Crow segregation laws not only excluded black people from middle-class spaces that were designated as white, while also heavily subjugating people of color. These organizations were established at a time when the majority of the country’s population did not complete more than eight years of education.

**Table 1: Educational Attainment for Persons 25 Years Old and Over in 1940**

| <b>Educational Attainment</b>    | <b>United States</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Black</b> |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Some College</b>              | 5.5 percent          | 6.6 percent  | 1.8 percent  |
| <b>Bachelor’s Degree or More</b> | 4.6 percent          | 5.4 percent  | 1.2 percent  |

**Table 2: Educational Attainment for Persons 25 Years Old and Over in 2000**

| <b>Educational Attainment</b>    | <b>United States</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Black</b> |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Some College</b>              | 51.8 percent         | 54.1 percent | 42.5 percent |
| <b>Bachelor’s Degree or More</b> | 33.3 percent         | 35.6 percent | 19.1 percent |

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the educational attainment of persons who are 25 years old and over according to the United States censuses of 1940<sup>2</sup> and 2000, respectively. These tables show how much exceptional the founders of these organizations were when considering their enrollment in college at the time. BGLO founders and early members

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<sup>2</sup> The 1940 census is the earliest census available with this data. All of the founders of each organization were 25 years old or over by 1940, with the exception of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity which was established in 1961.

were part of an elite group of people who were able to afford to complete their secondary education and go to college. There is absolutely no ambiguity or question as to BGLOs' founders belonging to the black middle-class at the time. BGLOs were founded as black middle-class status organizations and have continued to operate as a crucible for the perpetuation of this group's values.

I have applied a Hip Hop generation feminist framework to my analysis of black Greek identity performances as I explore the semi-staged performative and staged theatrical identification processes. Treva B. Lindsey argues, "This framework provides critical tools for grappling with female sexual desire within the complicated spaces of hypermasculinity, misogyny, and heteropatriarchy" (2013:24). Hip Hop generation feminism allows me as a black female ethnographer to critically engage the way black women and men are participating in representing ourselves and thus perpetuating and/or challenging the dominant tropes of black identities. My raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized subjective experiences create a platform on which to base my analysis of black femininities and masculinities. Hip Hop provides a unique lens through which I interrogate black identity construction in an expressive landscape that is very much influenced by the genre.

As gender has been largely overlooked in black performative spaces (hooks 1992), the Hip Hop generation feminist framework creates a space to underscore the performative manifestation of black genders and sexualities. Black Greek spaces are largely heteronormative and patriarchal and a performance studies lens allows me to explore the relationship between black visibility and black subjectivity as I analyze how schemas of blackness are perpetuated and/or contested, at the light of the cultural and

historical specificities of each organization (Fleetwood 2011). Individual BGLOs have their own individual black sexual politics. In what follows I examine five constructions of black masculinity and four constructions of black femininity. These constructions contribute to the same project of black middle-class identity construction and reproduction, while also drawing from black popular culture, the media, and each other. Each organization has a distinct identity performance configuration based on its own traditions and histories.

BGLOs provide sites for the development of Hip Hop generation black identities as members negotiate between middle-class values of respectability that continue to circulate in their family and other social networks as “black popular culture.” Stuart Hall explained,

By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight of strategic contestation... [Popular culture] is a theatre of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time [1992:26, 32].

Black popular culture has been internalized by consumers and impacts the way we interact with each other as members of the Hip Hop generation (Jenkins 2011). It has become a space of hegemonic and commodified homogenization (Hall 1992; Lindsey 2013). The media has increased its ability to sway public opinion on a myriad of issues, thus maintaining its reproduction of certain stereotypes, which are not always positive representations of blackness. Media representation therefore perpetuates the oppression

of black people (Jenkins 2011). Nicole R. Fleetwood defines this omni-presence of negative images of black people in the media as a state of hypervisibility that “simultaneously announces the continual invisibility of blacks as ethical and en fleshed subjects in various realms of polity, economies, and discourse so that blackness remains aligned with negation and decay” (2011:16).

## 2. COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF PERFORMANCE

In his discussion of the geographies of dance, Derek P. McCormack calls for collaborative research between researchers and performer/choreographers, which “might allow [researchers] to revisit and rethink a range of disciplinary debates...[and it hopefully] allows us to extend the repertoire of methodological techniques available to [researchers] interested in researching moving bodies.” (2008:1832). In an essay on performance studies research methodological strategies, Lorne Dwight Conquergood explains that performance studies “manifests itself most powerfully in the struggle to live betwixt and between theory and theatricality, paradigms and practices, critical reflection and creative accomplishment” (2002:151). Conquergood goes on to discuss the utility of the “text-performance hybridity” and its ability to compliment traditional written research strategies by offering an added component of “experimental and participatory engagement” (2002:152; see also Allen and Garner 1995; Becker, Conquergood 1988; Jackson 1991, 1998; Jones 1997; Kemp 1998; Laughlin 1995; McCall and Becker 1990; McCall, and Morris 1989; Paget 1990; Wellin 1996).

As a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority (SGRho), one of the historically black sororities under investigation in this analysis, I was given the unique opportunity to act as choreographer/performer and researcher during this project. My step team was also

selected to represent SGRho and I worked very closely with the step mistress in outlining the show and training the members of the team. As a stepper, I have knowledge of the entire process of creating and practicing for a performance, particularly as it relates to the negotiation between tradition and entertainment. In “Chapter 2: Atlanta Greek Picnic as a Quasi-Diasporic Black Greek Space,” I give an in-depth description of my team’s performance during the step show, and I concentrate on providing an overview of how we prepared for the show.

It is our custom to choreograph a routine in the beginning of the academic year around September that will provide the foundation for the remaining shows in which we plan to participate that year. We performed in the Atlanta Greek Picnic step show during the previous year and won second place, so we decided to position ourselves to participate again in June 2013 with the hopes of increasing our standing to first place. In September of 2012, the step mistress (or step team leader) Samantha began choreographing a routine for the homecoming step show at my university. She enlisted a group of sorority sisters to participate in that show. I was unable to participate because I had already relocated to Atlanta, GA to prepare for my dissertation research, so I concentrated my efforts on being the team manager. As team manager, I acted as the point of contact between the step show organizers and the team, I completed and submitted all necessary paperwork, including the contract to participate in the show, and I drafted the script and outline of the show. I also created an introductory video to establish the theme of the performance.

After reviewing the footage from that step show Samantha and I discussed what worked for the team and what did not, and we identified a team that was willing to

continue stepping throughout the rest of the academic year. We created a list of six shows that we anticipated participating in as preparation for Atlanta Greek Picnic in June: (1) the National Pan-Hellenic Council of Miami-Dade Alumni Step Show on January 20, 2013 at Florida Memorial University in Miami, Florida; (2) the Florida Memorial University Homecoming Step Show on February 8, 2013 at Florida Memorial University in Miami, Florida; (3) the Greek Extravaganza Step Show on February 14, 2013 at the University of Miami in Miami, Florida; (4) the Florida Invitational Step Show on February 16, 2013 at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida; (5) the Dallas Alumni Greekshow on March 16, 2013 at the Black Academy of Arts and Letters in Dallas, Texas; and (6) the Sunshine State Classic Step Show on April 13, 2013 at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida.

In order to prepare for these step shows, I visited Miami for about a week in January of 2013 to work with Samantha to choreograph new routines and practice with the team. After that, I practiced with Samantha via Skype and on my own. I also travelled to Miami about a week before each show to practice with the team. In my absence, Samantha worked with new steppers to train them and clean the steps. This is a key component of our stepping process because our team is extremely conscious of the execution of steps. We practice such stepping components as holding our hands strong and stiff to create the loudest and sharpest clap possible, standing up straight when we clap under our legs rather than hunching over, and holding our arms stiff, straight, and at the same levels when they are extended from our bodies. Samantha goes through this type of training with each new stepper after teaching them the choreography. In fact, I received my own training session during the Fall semester of 2009 when I prepared for



my first homecoming step show at my university. Following the choreography and training, we enter a cleaning process where Samantha and I coach the team during practice and break each routine down into smaller sections that are practiced slowly and repeatedly to ensure that everyone is sharp and accurate in their execution of the steps.

I continued to be the manager for each show and added to my list of duties identifying songs to incorporate into the show and working with our audio-visual assistant to create a soundtrack. I also made props from cardboard boxes and wrapping paper and I sewed many of our various costumes. Many of the step shows had their own themes (e.g., Disney movies or 1990s television shows) so I made necessary edits to the layout of the show, made new costumes and props, and selected new songs to keep our performances relevant to each step show. Due to the expenses accrued for travel, materials, and individuals' varying availabilities, we often had to replace members of the team with other sorority sisters. This proved to be a major difficulty for us in preparing for each show because we had to teach the steps, train, and clean new steppers in an extremely short period of time. Still, we were able to move forward with each of the six previously listed step shows and then we switched our focus to Atlanta Greek Picnic on June 7, 2013 at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

## 2.1 Reflexive Methodology

Franz Breuer and Wolff-Michael Roth argue that research is a “subjective system” and the researcher is “a member of a social world whose constructions are mediated by individual and social characteristics” (2003:6). I recognize, as Breuer and Wolff-Michael (2003) have noted, that I am not an “interchangeable instrument.” The background knowledge that I have acquired through my own sorority membership and the pilot study

I conducted in 2012, as well as my participation in the festival under investigation, framed my understanding, analysis, and interpretation. My BGLO membership facilitated greater access to the group because some participants were more willing to talk to me once they knew I am a black Greek. We are a heavily stigmatized group and many of the stereotypes surrounding black Greek life highlight hazing, promiscuity, alcoholism, and accusations of paganism. Overall, my inclusion in the research group gave me background knowledge about symbols and their meanings that are not entirely obvious to outsiders.

I see this full engagement of mine in this multifaceted research project as nothing but an excellent illustration of what has been called in anthropology “participant observation” (see among many others Banks 2010; Brown 2005; Clarke 2004; Duneier 1992; Fikes 2009; Hintzen 2001; Rahier 2013). Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell define participant observation in the following manner:

It connects the researcher to the most basic of human experiences, discovering through immersion and participation the hows and whys of human behavior in a particular context...we must, at least a little, systemize and organize an inherently fluid process. This means not only being a player in a particular social milieu but also fulfilling the role of researcher—taking notes; recording voices, sounds, and images; and asking questions that are designed to uncover the meaning behind the behaviors. Additionally, in many cases, we are trying to discover and analyze aspects of social scenes that use rules and norms that the participants may experience without explicitly talking about, that operate on automatic or

subconscious levels, or are even officially off limits for discussion or taboo [2013:75].

This search for full and engaged participant-observation to reach as closely as possible an insider's perspective has in fact characterized a number of performance studies research on a variety of festivals and rituals (Brown 2014; Regis and Walton 2008). Peter Tokofsky notes, in his study of the Fasnet carnival festival in the German town of Elzach, “textual strategies for excluding visitors while constructing local belonging include use of dialect, selection of topics for satirical treatment, reference to local personalities and locations, and employment of esoteric naming practices” (2001:369). Membership in the community under study mediates the issue of translation in the field and during interviews because all involved interlocutors are privy to the significance of relevant terminology, abbreviations, and coded meaning. I have created a glossary to accompany this text so that all terms—which often carry a singular significance in black Greek life—are made intelligible to the reader.

Additionally, following what a number of festivity studies scholars have done, my objective is to analytically locate the festival within its larger socio-economic and political contexts (Brown 2014; Peterson 2007, 2011; Rahier 2013; Regis and Walton 2008; Straker 2008; Tiatco and Bonifacio-Ramolete 2010; Tokofsky 2001; Ware 2001). My attempt to reach this objective begins with a synthesis of the historical trajectory of the BGLOs as privileged spaces for the development and reproduction of the black middle-class and the social values it has been attached to.

Since joining SGRho in February 2009, I have acquired a wealth of preliminary background knowledge that facilitated my ability to conduct this project to a successful

conclusion. This insider's perspective has given me the background necessary to interpret the data in its complexity and in a sophisticated manner. My analyses are grounded both on the data I have been able to collect during my research and on the information provided by already existing and relevant scholarship. If I at times might make reference to what the reader might call an anecdote, it is due at my more intimate knowledge of BGLO culture. The bulk of my analyses in this dissertation are grounded on the data I have gathered through my fieldwork in 2013. Although I conducted a series of interviews during and after the festival, much of the information that circulates within this group is shared at highly unstructured moments—such as hanging out in the university student center around lunch time or between classes, visiting each other on or off campus and at different schools, attending parties and small gatherings, and other social situations in which members find themselves. In fact, my membership has provided an ethnographic catalyst on which to base my research. Notably, by the time I began my fieldwork for this project in June 2013, I had already attended the festival three times within the previous four years: 2009, 2011, and 2012. I conducted pilot fieldwork at the 2012 festival by attending each event keeping in mind that I needed to begin crafting a methodological approach to the project. As I previously mentioned, my step team participated in the 2012 step show so I was able to take note of the kinds of challenges text-performance hybrid methodological strategies present regarding the feasibility of focusing on the step show while conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

I would like to note that there are a variety of private, semi-public, and public narratives that are disseminated between members, between organizations, and to the general public. The private narratives of other organizations are unavailable to me as a

non-member and I am expected to maintain the privacy of those of my own organization, so out of respect for the discretion of each organization I will only deal with those narratives that are semi-public and public. Those private narratives also encompass each organization's membership intake rituals. Therefore, I will only incorporate general references to initiation as they become relevant to the arguments presented in the subsequent chapters. Additionally, my focus only involves post-initiation processes. In addition, because of the oral circulation of these narratives many of them may be false but they still have some degree of significance as they are useful to members to define their own organization in opposition to other such organizations.

Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I recruited a research assistant to videotape specific scenes as I collected data through participant-observation and brief semi-structured interviews with 34 festival attendees and 10 vendors. The festival attendee interviews centered on perceptions of one's own organization in contrast to the others, and the vendor interviews focused on their experiences selling paraphernalia and other items at different events. In order to discuss the collective identification processes that take place at Atlanta Greek Picnic, it was necessary to supply a visual demonstration of identity performances rather than completely relegating them to a text.

I discuss the details of the research experience during the festival in "Chapter 2: Atlanta Greek Picnic as a Quasi-Diasporic Black Greek Space." In that chapter, I provide a reflexive description of the festival as a participant researcher. Here, I focus on the post-festival interview trends that facilitated my usage of the reflexive interview, as described by Norman K. Denzin (2001). Denzin states, "The reflexive interview, as a dialogic conversation, is the site and occasion for [performance]; that is, the interview is

turned into a dramatic, poetic text. In turn, these texts are performed, given dramatic readings” (2001:27). Initially, I was disappointed in the type of responses I was getting but after reviewing the transcripts I became fascinated with the lack of transparency as a defense mechanism. Although two dominant mantras throughout the interviews were “I am myself first and then I’m Greek” and “I make the letters, the letters don’t make me,” each interviewee transformed into a representative of his or her organization and was sure to represent the organization in a positive light. In actuality, these interviews operated in a more complex reaction to myself as an “embodied researcher, who bears social, historical, socialized, and biographical characteristics and who *interacts* and *intervenes* in [the] research object” (Breaur and Roth 2003:7). These interviews were a reflection of my own positionality, a member of one of the sororities under investigation and a researcher seeking to glean knowledge and experiences for public consumption, and the positionality of each interviewee, a spokesperson for their own organization.

After the festival, I conducted 52 interviews with members of each organization, 26 of which were relatively brief semi-structured interviews that concentrated on differentiating one’s own organization from the others, and 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews explained: why respondents were drawn to their specific sororities and fraternities and what their thoughts were on the performances of sexuality in the festival; what the use of social media around and during the festival was; and what was the festival paraphernalia. The interviewees include 33 members from five fraternities and 18 members from four sororities with the following educational backgrounds: 11 had some college education, 1 had an associate’s degree, 29 had bachelor’s degrees, 6 had master’s degrees, and 4 had doctoral degrees. The interviewees provided representation from

Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Forty-four of the participants identified as black or African American, 3 identified as mixed race, 4 were non-black people of color, and 1 was white. In addition to the 51 members of BGLOs, I also interviewed the festival's founder about the formation and development of Atlanta Picnic, and 10 vendors who shared their experiences selling products at the festival.

I began each interview stating my own sorority membership and going over the interview topics while the participants filled out the informed consent form, demographic survey, and release form on my iPad. We also usually had some sort of brief relaxed conversation about the project and Greek life in general, but once I turned on the camera and gave each participant the microphone, their entire demeanor changed; they became their rehearsed and careful Greek alter egos. If there was a moment during the interview where anyone needed to break character in order to properly word their response, they made sure that I could edit out what they said before they were able to phrase the politically correct response.

Some participants had specific projects they attempted to advance during our interviews. A member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (Delta) named Brittany told me that she only agreed to participate after she found out that I was Greek. She explained that in her experience, people were usually only interested in perpetuating stereotypes of paganism and promiscuity with these types of projects, and she decided that since I was also Greek I was unlikely to participate in that characterization or stereotyping. Still, during our interview she was adamant to make references to church and covering her

body with layered and loose clothing in order to qualify her organization as Christian and respectable. I had a similar encounter with Fred, a member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity (Omega), who was determined to refute the stereotype of wild behavior that is associated with his fraternity brothers. He stated:

We weren't made to be wild in the public side at least. So we like to keep our bodies covered for the most part. We might show our arms because we wear brands but, you know, the over-excessiveness of taking off your shirt, butt crack out, none of that stuff is, is acceptable at all.

Another common trend across the majority of the interviews was the preoccupation with "Greek unity" or being polite when making a negative comment about another organization. When asked what differentiates their own organization from the others, many explained some positive attribute about their own organization, usually concerning community service, and then concluded by either saying that all of the organizations did the same thing or made it specific to their campus so that they did not make a negative generalization about the other organizations. Some even refused to mention any other organization specifically and elected instead to refer to the others in general terms or not at all. Most of the sorority interviewees made sure to not mention my organization at all during the interview so as to not run the risk of offending me.

Finally, hazing was a topic that was spoken about with extreme caution and finesse so as to not incriminate the organization. During my interview with Darin, a member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity (Sigma), he stopped and told me what he was trying to say so that I could help him rephrase it in such a way that pledging was implied but not obviously so. After our conversation we settled on using the words "joining your



organization” instead of any references to pledging as an initiation process. Jamal, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (Kappa), is the only one to make overt references to pledging when he talked about his brand and the symbolism behind it. He explained that it did not heal well and for him that represented the process he went through when joining the organization. He only referred to pledging using the word “process” but he did not hide the struggle and challenge that is inherent to initiation.

After the data collection phase ended, I proceeded with an analysis of the data collected to look for trends and their significance for the performances in focus. After transcribing and coding the interviews, images, and videos, I organized them by theme and compared the trends in behavior to determine how thoughts compare to actions.

The key limitation of this project is certainly the issue of its generalizability. Indeed, since it is focused on a specific group of collectivities within the black middle-class, some of the findings may not be accurate descriptions of black non-Greeks, be they from the middle-class or not. However, this group’s influence on black middle-class identity construction in general, and especially at the collegiate/university level, provides a major justification for paying attention to what they do and the way they self-identify (Fine 2003). Many BGLOs members are also very active in various aspects of the lives and management of their respective campuses, which brings visibility to these organizations (Fox, Hodge, and Ward 1987; Harper 2008; Kimbrough 1995; Kimbrough and Hutcheson 1998; McClure 2006). Also, there are increasing membership rates in BGLOs due to university-enforced membership quotas, an increase in the number of “legacies” or children of members of BGLOs enrolling in college, and an increase in the

number of black students enrolling in college (Ruffins 1999). Table 3 demonstrates the national membership of each organization included in this analysis.

**Table 3: National BGLO Membership**

| <b>Organization Name</b>   | <b>National Membership</b> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity | 290,000 Members            |
| Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority | 283,000 Members            |
| Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity | 150,000 Members            |
| Omega Psi Phi Fraternity   | 250,000 Members            |
| Delta Sigma Theta Sorority | 200,000 Members            |
| Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity  | 290,000 Members            |
| Zeta Phi Beta Sorority     | 100,000 Members            |
| Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority   | 85,000 Members             |
| Iota Phi Theta Fraternity  | 70,000 Members             |
| <b>Total</b>               | <b>1,678,000 Members</b>   |

Chapter membership varies regionally, where areas with higher populations of black people and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) tend to have larger chapters. For example, whereas my friend who is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity (Alpha) from Virginia State University, an HBCU in Virginia, was initiated with about 25 other men, only two Alphas were initiated on my campus at Florida International University in Miami, Florida during the same semester as myself. There are also some chapters who will initiate members during the Fall and Spring semesters, some who will host intake once a year, and some who will wait for years. Therefore, chapters can range from one to a few hundred of members at a time.

These national membership counts also include alumni members who have either maintained their active membership after completing their bachelor’s degree or those who were not initiated until they graduated from college. In fact, this is one of the distinguishing characteristics of BGLOs, as I discuss in “Chapter 5: Reflections on the Impact of Diversity and Color-Blindness in Black Spaces.” Membership is viewed as a

lifetime commitment and black Greeks are therefore expected to maintain their active membership by paying annual dues and being associated with an alumni chapter. Alumni membership provides an opportunity for members to continue their community involvement, to mentor and advise younger members of the organization, and to fellowship and network with other members.

Additionally, black Greek culture has been the subject of various aspects of black popular cultural productions, including film (e.g., *School Daze* (1988), *Stomp the Yard* (2007), and *Steppin: The Movie* (2009)), television (e.g., *A Different World* (1987-1993) and *Sorority Sisters* (2014)), and music (e.g., *School Spirit* by Kanye West (2004), *I'm Goin' In* by Drake featuring Lil Wayne (2009), and *College Drop* by Sage the Gemini (2014)). Finally, many BGLOs also have a youth auxiliary group associated with them, thus placing them in an influential position with future generations.

### 3. DIGITAL MEDIA DATA ANALYSIS

In addition to my participant-observation and semi-structured interviews I examined Instagram, one of the most popular micro-blogging social media networks that acted as a catalyst for black Greek phatic communication. After the festival was over, I searched for any post containing “#agp2013.” I imported the resulting 2,925 screen captures of each post with its comments and likes into a qualitative data analysis software program called NVivo and I coded them by organization and theme.

Instagram is a photograph-based<sup>3</sup> social media application where users can post individual photographs or collages that fit into the designated square-shaped space. It was designed primarily for smart phone usage and it allows users to connect to each other in a

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<sup>3</sup> Instagram also released an upgrade that allows users to post videos but this occurred after the festival ended that was not included in my analysis.

variety of ways. Photographs can be captured through the application itself or uploaded from one's phone. After the photograph is selected users can zoom in, apply a variety of filters, blur any region located outside the designated area, adjust the brightness, angle the photo, and add a border. Next, users can write a caption, tag individuals that appear in their posts directly in the photograph and/or in the caption and comments using the "@username" format, and they can tag their location. They can also share the post on the Facebook, Twitter, Email, and Tumblr accounts that are linked to their Instagram account.

Once posts are uploaded it appears on the user's own timeline as well as their followers' timelines and those followers can like the post so that their name appears in the list of likes, which turns into a count after a post has accrued at least ten likes. Users can also comment on posts, and these comments often turn into a variety of conversations as they tag other users. The captions and comments associated with a post often include hashtag (e.g., #naturalhair) that are intended to link a variety of posts together by topic. Many hashtags are witty phrases that have been constructed for comedic effect (e.g., #nailedit). They can be used to mock popular culture as it connects a network of users that are highlighting some specific issue (Florini 2013). If one's page is not locked, non-followers are able to find these posts through hashtag searches, and they can like and comment on them, too. Users will often repost, or share another user's posts on their own timeline and tag the original user and include such indicators as "lol" (laugh out loud), "lmao" (laugh my ass off), and "rofl" (rolling on the floor laughing) in the caption. Reposts and captions added to reposts can denote approval of a statement or skill crafting

a statement, and it also allows for a greater audience as the followers of one's followers are able to view a user's post (Florini 2013).

The technology that shapes our social universe and our connectivity is simultaneously constructed through our adherence and/or disregard for the rules established by the social network (Van Dijck 2012). Social networking websites package their content in specific ways, impacting our connectivity with the site itself, our presentation of self, and how we connect with others (Goodings and Tucker 2013; Van Dijck 2012). During the festival in 2013 Instagram only allowed users to post photographs but shortly after it ended the platform was upgraded to include video. Since this upgrade occurred there have been more people standing around recording videos on their smart phones rather than just quickly snapping photographs, thus impacting not just how we use the applications and websites but also how we connect to our technological devices and physical space. Instagram was not the first platform to allow video but because of its popularity it is one of the most significant ones.

Social media platforms “are therefore socio-technical and cultural-ideological constructs that are built to create and mediate a new type of social capital: connectivity” (Van Dijck 2012:150). They encourage phatic communication where what is being communicated is often less important than the fact that it is being communicated; there is a greater emphasis on connectivity than communication (Miller 2008). Various forms of micro-blogging are “based on the notion that information is a commodity that is being used to build and maintain relationships” (Miller 2008:389). Social interaction through digital media participates in the embodiment process where there is a set of cultural norms that influence the way a network of bodies interact with each other in specific

contexts (Schandorf 2012). The organization of social media networks also impacts our connectivity in a variety of ways. Filtering allows content to be accessed by a common theme among the posts of the individual, timelines appear in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post is at the top, and searching applies the combination of filtering and ordering as a result of user input (Hogan 2010).

Following is another manifestation of connectivity that allows the user to have a better idea of their audience, although there are still those who are not followers that can anonymously view posts (Marwick and boyd 2010). Users often collapse different groups of friends, family, coworkers, etc. into a single space so users must “negotiate multiple, overlapping audiences by strategically concealing information, targeting tweets to different audiences and attempting to portray both an authentic self and an interesting personality” (Marwick and boyd 2010:122). Consequently, follower takes on a new meaning in social media contexts where it can refer to a variety of relationships, or collapsed contexts and should therefore be analyzed as a set of individuals who the user wants to have access to their content rather than a set of close, personal relations (Hogan 2010).

Although anyone can access social media posts, depending on privacy settings, the audience is still understood as a specific group of people, allowing users “to choose the language, cultural referents, style, and so on that comprise online identity presentation” (Marwick and boyd 2010:114). Participation in digital communities requires one to possess the social capital (i.e., black Greek membership) that shapes the cultural context. Sarah Florini (2013) explains that while there is not a singular entity called “black Twitter,” just like there is no singular black identity, there is a network of

black users on Twitter (and other social media platforms) interacting through micro-blogging, particularly through hashtags. Signifying on black Twitter is a manifestation that one understands black popular culture and it operates as an outlet for social critique whether it is of black or mainstream popular culture (Florini 2013).

Digital media also allows us to participate in a multitude of spaces that are not bound by physical location (Meyrowitz 1997). Earlier studies have accused mass media of creating greater anomie and isolation (Broom and Selznick 1958; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1982; Giner 1976; Horne 1986; Jaspers 1951; Mannheim 1943; Nisbet 1953), but the forms of social media that predominate actually encourage direct social interaction that is reported through digital micro-blogging via text, photographs, and videos. Digital communities therefore do not subvert locality but rather transcend it (Bromley 2010; Casalegno 2004; Meyrowitz 1997; Purcell 1997). Kristen Purcell argues that embedded technology “overcomes the social isolation and limited interpersonal interaction that often characterize large gatherings by connecting group members on a level other than the physical” (1997:109). Rather than focusing on location-defined groups, I examined idea- or characteristic-defined groups where “there is a dual process—a movement toward unification across boundaries but also a splintering within boundaries” (Meyrowitz 1997:67) are a result of the variety of organizations and localities participating in a single black Greek digital space.

Mass media offers a medium where the core, collectively agreed upon values of a group are able to be presented on a mass scale, and shared response to such mass scale messages are able to strengthen the relationship of the group (Purcell 1997). Mass media becomes the site at which the group is able to be created, defined, perpetuated, and

transformed at the macro-level, and in the process some ideas are being omitted or rejected and are therefore assisting in defining the boundaries of the group (Cerulo et al. 1992; Marwick and boyd 2010; Purcell 1997). Frequent and regular digital communication allows members of the group to create relationships with each other that mimic locality-based relationships. Daily tasks can become associated with electronic communication, thus integrating it into one's reality (Cerulo et al. 1992).

My argument therefore participates in the critique of Robert Merton's (1946) argument that digital spaces create a pseudo-*Gemeinschaft*, or a pseudo-“community of values,” and that the new infrastructure is the shift from “organic community” to community based on mass methods of communication that are impersonal. Interaction takes place in both physical and digital spaces, often simultaneously, and these interactions are no less organic than those interactions that take place in person (Casalegno 2004; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Purcell 1997). The notion of the pseudo-*Gemeinschaft* is particularly salient in the case of black Greeks where the smallest fraternity has 70,000 members and the smallest sorority has 100,000 members, and these members are not only located across the United States but also internationally. Technology provides these organizations a single space to interact and permeate their regional boundaries.

#### 4. OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

In “Chapter 1: The Development of the Black Middle-Class and the Formation of Social Status Organizations,” I trace the historical development of the black middle-class since the antebellum period and I situate my analysis within current debates on black identification processes. In “Chapter 2: Atlanta Greek Picnic as a Quasi-Diasporic Black



Greek Space,” I give a detailed account of my experience at the festival including a physical description of the locations in focus and of my own interactions—as a participant and researcher—with festival attendees. The subsequent two chapters, “Chapter 3: Black Identity Scripting Processes” and “Chapter 4: Black Greek Symbols, Middle-Class Respectability, and Material Culture,” establish the dominant identification tropes presented through performances and material culture. “Chapter 5, Reflections on the Impact of Diversity and Color-Blindness within Black Spaces,” considers the consequences of the “breaching the racial boundaries” policy these organizations seem to have adopted. I conclude with a discussion of black fraternities and sororities as sites of contestation where identities are being simultaneously perpetuated and transformed.

These chapters illustrate the myriad ways in which respectability is manifested through elitism and through the re-affirmation of hegemonic masculinity (hypermasculinity, misogyny, and heteropatriarchy) (Lindsey 2013). The presentation of the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity provided in this analysis is complemented by a celebration of female conservative sexuality, even though the analyses of performances show that Black Greek women are opening up a space for black female sexual desire and in doing so, combating the pressures imposed upon them to embrace middle-class respectability. Paraphernalia provides important marking tools to publicize one’s membership in a particular black Greek-letter organization and subsequently one’s subscription to black middle-class respectability politics. This form of embodiment and inscription participate in the signification process where all involved scripted bodies interact with each other in specified manners. Finally, non-black members can create a state of contention within these spaces that have been designated as black spaces. Thus,

black identification processes become a space of homogenization for the black people who are encompassed within, while mainstream forces simultaneously assert their hegemony over black spaces through commoditization and appropriation, particularly thanks to a hypervisibility in the media that perpetuates the circulation of dominant stereotypes.

## CHAPTER 1: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS AND THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL STATUS ORGANIZATIONS

In this chapter I trace the historical development of the black middle-class since the antebellum period through the present with a specific focus on the founding and impact of black status organizations. This chapter establishes a conceptualization of the black middle-class and points to the specific role played by black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) in order to contextualize this analysis. I discuss the various ways scholars have examined the black middle-class and relevant race relations in the in United States order to make a case for the investigation of BGLOs as black middle-class social status organizations and thus representatives of the black middle-class.

I begin with a discussion of the Victorian ideals upon which black middle-class respectability politics are founded as a means to justify antislavery discourse and the humanity of people of color. I move on to how that translates into the formation of “acceptable” black masculinity and femininity throughout the early twentieth century. It is during the latter period that we find the inception of black fraternalism, which was created to give black people access to black elite spaces. Next, I discuss the role of the black middle-class, specifically black Greeks, during the Civil Rights movement as well as some of the main criticisms, particularly as they relate to elitism and the paternalistic role of the black middle-class vis-à-vis poor black people. The discussion then moves to an overview of some of the gains and losses of the subsequent Black Power era as the United States became increasingly conservative. I conclude by exploring the impact of social status organizations today and the way the younger black middle-class navigates between respectability politics and black popular culture regarding identification processes.

## 1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE EARLY BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS

The free people of color living in the northeastern region of the United States during the antebellum period believed that certain moral codes would make them “living refutations of proslavery doctrine” (Ball 2012:13, see also Blumin 1989; Halttunen 1982; Hemphill 1999; Johnson 2004[1978]; Ryan 1981). Their values were highly politicized because they linked the mastery of the Victorian ideals of “education, thrift, hard work, temperance, and Christian morality” to the abolition of slavery as a symbolic gesture for black people to assert their humanity and contest discourses of racial inferiority (Ball 2012:14; see also Russwurm and Cornish 1827). Still, education and training did not necessarily equate to economic security for free people of color who still experienced discrimination as a result of scientific racism, proslavery discourse, and segregation, as well as the looming possibility of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South (Ball 2012; Cornish et al. 1838; Douglass 1997[1845]; Fredrickson 1987; Hinks 1996; Litwack 1961; Melish 1998; Sweet 2003).

Three types of literature circulated during the antebellum period to reinforce the patriarchal Victorian-based model of black middle-class ideals that endured through the turn of the twentieth century. First, black conduct writers promoted the imitation of the white middle-class as an imperative mechanism to challenge racism, and this correlation between behavior and antislavery consciousness became central to black middle-class culture (Ball 2012; Bell 1969; Cary 1860; Douglass 1847; McHenry 2002; Wright 2011). They also linked racial responsibility as an extension of Christian teachings to their discussions of behavior and antislavery discourse (Ball 2012; Paul 1969; Nell 1849; Wright 1998). Second, domestic advice literature on child rearing, ‘self-made’

independent men, and the female influence on the morality of black men and the creation of a protective domestic space circulated as a model to which black families should aspire in order to provide another lived ‘antithesis of slavery’ (Ball 2012; Carby 1987; Cott 1995; Dixon 1997; Foster ed. 2008; Isenberg 1998; Northrup 1968[1853]; Pascoe 2010; Ryan 1981, 1985; Samuels 1986; Stewart 1987). Finally, slave narratives that detailed the experiences of ‘self-made’ black men complemented black conduct writings to encourage elite and aspiring black men to focus on education and training to elevate their status and resist local temptations and spaces of leisure for the sake of morality (Ball 2012; Bederman 1995; Douglass 1997[1845]; Kimmel 2006; Martin Jr. 1984; Rael 2002; Rotundo 1993; Ward 1968[1855]). Violence against slave women who were often forced into the ‘sinful’ sexual circumstances of concubinage, breeding, and rape and the physical and mental health risks of slave children were used to both terrorize women and underscore the degree to which slave men were not only unable to protect their own bodies but also those of their partners and children (Ball 2012; Clinton 1994; Dixon 1997; Douglass 1997[1845]; Mintz 2004; Thompson 2009).

Following abolition, many of the newly freed slaves worked in unskilled professions that mimicked the structural position of their slave work (e.g., servants, farmers, artisans), in an unstable lower position in society in which they competed with unskilled white laborers usually preferred by white employers (Jewell 2007). Skilled and semi-skilled black workers who had mastered a trade during slavery were able to advance their postbellum status through entrepreneurship, and those who were able to gain a significant black patronage were the most successful at inter-class mobility (Jewell 2007). Most of the newly formed black middle-class worked in medicine, dentistry, and law, and

others worked with universities, churches, usually Episcopal, Congregational, Presbyterian, or Catholic, or they were entrepreneurs (Graham 1999; Jackson and Stewart 2003; McBride and Little 1981). Two main factors that facilitated an increase in the size of the early black middle-class were the new northern jobs that were created through industrialization and the urbanization that resulted in the occupational differentiation between blue-collar and white-collar jobs and increased entrepreneurialism, which increased access to capital (Frazier 1957; Durant and Loudon 1986; Jackson and Stewart 2003). Urbanization also placed similarly positioned people in contact with each other so that they could form social classes, and organizing helped those with resources to work together to enhance their own status (Durant and Loudon 1986).

The construction of femininity known as the cult of womanhood and domesticity heavily influenced eighteenth and nineteenth century constructions of black femininity, placing them as lived representations of the humanity of black people (Literte and Hodge 2011; Thompson 2009). Black middle-class femininity emphasized the Victorian values of “piety, purity, and submissiveness” to combat dominant narratives of the immorality of black people, and their politics of respectability were centered on “domesticity, chastity, and propriety” as a strategy for racial uplift (Thompson 2009:3). These women operated against the backdrop of the damaging stereotypes of black women including the maternal, asexual Mammie whose priority was caring for white families, the angry, violent, asexual Sapphire who unleashed her wrath against both black children and men, and the hypersexual, immoral Jezebel who deserved the sexual abuse she encountered (French 2012; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009, 2011). In fact, since violence against black people was frequently demonstrated through the sexual abuse of black women’s bodies, black

women's conservative sexuality became a substantial tool to signify black respectability and humanity (Thompson 2009).

Two overlapping models of black middle-class masculinity surfaced during the early twentieth century. These models were promoted by two different groups: the Prince Hall Freemasons, the black branch of freemasonry that was established in 1787 by Prince Hall, a black Methodist minister born in Barbados (Kimbrough 2003); and Marcus Garvey and his Black Nationalist followers in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Both groups promoted a black masculinity defined by a preoccupation with production and respectability. While the Freemasons defined themselves against the 'unrespectable' working class, the Garveyites situated themselves against liberal, anti-nationalist politics (Summers 2004). Both models also defined black women and children as 'passive objects' that are the antithesis of black masculinity, and they advocated a paternalistic positioning of black men regarding the family, community, and race (Summers 2004). Black women challenged the notion of 'domestic femininity' through an active engagement in constructing black institutions as well as community and political activism, but in order to maintain their dominant position black men would inhibit women's attempts at organizational autonomy and relegate their attempts to peripheral spaces (Summers 2004).

One of the first scholars to write about the black middle-class, E. Franklin Frazier, initially encouraged black entrepreneurs to participate in 'uplifting the race' because of their greater access to resources (Frazier 1923, 1924a, 1924b). In his scholarship on second-generation black entrepreneurs in Durham, NC he underscores their role in defying the negative stereotypes of black people through public demonstrations of

respectability (Frazier 1925). He was also critical of the politically conservative and/or non-political black middle-class that is mainly concerned with ‘conspicuous consumption’ and status (Frazier 1928, 1935-1936). During this period, post-World War I modernist consumer culture provided new modes of identity formation that had the possibility to operate outside of the traditional aspects of “work, family, and local community,” so consumption and new leisure activities began to undermine the dominant conservative Victorian middle-class values (Summer 2004). The New Negro of this modernist era challenged earlier black middle-class codes of respectability and embraced instead the growing bohemian jazz culture that celebrated consumption and sexuality (Summers 2004). The Harlem Renaissance, in particular, resulted in the defeminization of art and instead designated it as an appropriate space for black male artists and intellectuals to challenge the status quo through a celebration of a feminized primitive spirituality (Summers 2004). Still, some defined these manifestations of masculinity as a perpetuation of the ‘cult of production’ since they were creating the narratives that were being circulated through their works. In their attempt to challenge the black middle-class preoccupation with independence and production they actually perpetuated it through their insistence to construct black cultural spaces of artistic expression (Summers 2004). Similarly, many black female writers incorporated chaste black female characters as the central focus of their stories to demonstrate a narrative of black female conservative sexuality for the purposes of gaining social or class status and, by extension, ‘uplifting the race’ (Thompson 2009).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the black middle-class was concentrated around progressive cities in the South and around black universities. During



the 1930s, they relocated to the Midwest and it became the dominant region for new black middle-class births by 1940 (Frazier 1955; Graham 1999; McBride and Little 1981). Frazier (1955) explains that Jim Crow policies in the South resulted in limited opportunities for black people so much so that it led them to relocate the ‘capital of the black middle-class’ from Durham to Detroit. Scholars described this Jim Crow era of US racism as a caste system, and their work varies on the foundations of the scholars’ analysis of the “quality of race relations and the stage of development of the black class structure” (Landry and Marsh 2011:378; see also Davis et al. 1941; Dollard 1937; Drake and Cayton 1945; Myrdal 1944). Similar to Frazier, Gunnar Myrdal (1944) argued that while they were not able to accumulate real wealth, those in the black middle-class maintained an inflated perception of their class status. Prior to World War II less than 10% of black people had middle-class occupations, and since black businesses did not experience the same growth as white corporations the black middle-class was no longer defined by black entrepreneurship but rather on white-collar work (Frazier 1955; Landry 1987). Those who did achieve middle-class status maintained an attitude of superiority *vis-à-vis* poorer black people even though that was their client base (Davis et al. 1941; Drake and Cayton 1945; Higginbotham 1993; Powdermaker 1939). Affluent black people also had a tendency to relocate out of impoverished black neighborhoods and preferred to live in middle-class black neighborhoods instead. Despite the attempt to exclude poorer black people, they were still able to move into black middle-class neighborhoods as residential segregation practices and white terrorism kept black people out of white middle-class neighborhoods (DuBois 1996[1899]; Gamm 1999; Gotham 2002; Hirsch 1983; Jackson 1985; Kusmer 1976; Osofsky 1966; Sugrue 1996; Wilson 1978).

## 1.1 Black College Students and the Foundation of Black Fraternalism

Prior to the Civil War, white religious groups opened schools for black people and abolitionist fundraising attracted black and white teachers to the South to establish secondary schools and colleges (Frazier 1957; Graham 1999; McBride and Little 1981). The antebellum schools that came out of this era were Howard University in Washington, D.C., Fisk University in Nashville, TN, and Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College, all of which are located in Atlanta, GA (Graham 1999). After the Civil War there was an upsurge in educational opportunities as black colleges were developing their programs and the black middle-class had access to advanced and professional degrees (McBride and Little 1981). World War I military service disrupted this increase in overall educational attainment because while some black people were obtaining advanced degrees others stopped early and opted instead to join the military (McBride and Little 1981). Also, during the late 1920s there was a decline in educational attainment due to the Great Depression, higher admission standards, and the closing of several black medical programs (McBride and Little 1981). After a period of relatively steady increase in average years of education for black people, these factors contributed to the decline from 18.41 years in 1918-1928 to 16.73 years in 1923-1933 (McBride and Little 1981).

In his study of the black upper-class, Lawrence Otis Graham (1999) identifies three major elite black colleges, respectively: Howard University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College. Howard University was founded by the Freedmen's Bureau for freed slaves. It was intended to be apolitical and rise to the status of a black Ivy League institute. Spelman College was the first black female college and Graham (1999) argues that Spelman's white leadership resulted in greater respect from Atlanta's wealthy white

residents and politicians, which was demonstrated through their financial contributions. Morehouse College is the only black male college and is currently a part of the Atlanta University system along with Spelman College since its relocation from Augusta, GA. Morehouse College was less reliant on white supporters for affirmation of status than Howard University and Spelman College, which is made evident by the fact that its first black president was selected in 1906, whereas Howard University and Spelman College selected their first black presidents in 1926 and 1954, respectively (Graham 1999). Graham (1999) explains that Fisk University is not considered to be on the same level as Howard University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College socially but it boasts of having more intellectual advancements since it was the first historically black college or university (HBCU) to have a Phi Beta Kappa<sup>4</sup> chapter and to achieve full accreditation. Other elite black universities are Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, which started as a trade school, resulting in its lesser prestige until more recently when it expanded to include liberal arts and sciences, and Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama, which was founded by Booker T. Washington and modeled after Hampton University (Graham 1999).

Beginning with the Henondelphisterian Society, which disappeared by 1830 and was replaced by the Athenian and Philomathean Societies, collegiate debate clubs and literary societies were the precursors for black fraternalism since they were the first types of extra curricular activities for black students at black colleges (Kimbrough 2003; Little 2002). Women experienced isolation as a gendered minority in higher education and

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<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, Phi Beta Kappa, a liberal arts and sciences honor society, was the first Greek-letter organization (Kimbrough 2003)

decided to create their own gender-exclusive organizations, beginning with the Hesperian Society in 1870 (Kimbrough 2003). As the Greek-letter system developed it had an increased impact on the college campus environment, but as with other mainstream institutions black students were excluded from white fraternal organizations and therefore established their own organizations as a challenge to this form of white supremacy and exclusivity (Hine 2003; Kimbrough 2003).

Dr. Henry M. Minton, a founder of one of the first black fraternities, encountered fraternal life in Philadelphia in both collegiate and professional settings, and although he was considered for membership he was ultimately rejected and therefore decided to begin a black fraternity (Kimbrough 2003). In 1904 he met with his colleagues to formally organize the graduate fraternity Sigma Pi Phi that is colloquially known as the Boulé (Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). Since five of the founders were physicians and one was a dentist, the Boulé was originally conceived as having an elite black membership. W.E.B. DuBois (1948), a member of the Boulé, and Frazier (1957) criticized it for not having a significant aim for the black community beyond access to elitism. DuBois (1948) proposed that this type of black professional “guiding hundredth” would be the site to challenge the white power structure, but believed they would be too preoccupied with the frivolity inherent to youthfulness and establishing themselves professionally following graduation.

Walter Kimbrough (2003) recognizes three other BGLOs during this foundational era. First, as fraternal development increased in Indiana so did racism against black students at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN, so black male students established the Alpha Kappa Nu Greek Society in 1903. The organization only lasted about fourteen

months (Jennings 2008; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). Next, Pi Gamma Omicron Fraternity was advertised during the 1905-1906 academic year at Ohio State University in Columbus, OH but the university denied its existence when questioned about it by the black male students who would go on to establish Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (Kimbrough 2003). Finally, Gamma Phi was founded at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, OH in 1905 and expanded to include three additional chapters, but disappeared after about thirty years (Kimbrough 2003).

Such colleges as Atlanta University and Fisk University were reluctant to permit Greek life on their campuses because they saw them as distractions, and they were critical of those organizations for their elitist practices (Frazier 1957; Graham 1999; Little 2002). The religious campus community preferred to develop Christian groups rather than fraternal groups, but their decline in student interest allowed the establishment of black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) on black campuses, beginning with Alpha Phi Alpha's Beta chapter on Howard University's campus in 1907 as well as the founding of Alpha Kappa Alpha on the same campus in 1908 (Little 2002).

## 1.2 Introducing the Elite Eight and Other Black Greek-Letter Organizations

### Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (ΑΦΑ)

*Founded December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1906 at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY*

*Colors: Black and Old Gold*

*Motto: First of All, Servants of All, We Shall Transcend All*

Alpha Phi Alpha (Alpha) was founded during the Jim Crow era at Cornell University when black students were isolated from mainstream campus life at predominantly white Ivy League colleges (Anderson et al. 2011; Jenkins 2012). Scholastic success for black students at Cornell was threatened by academic difficulty, racism, and financial hardship,

so they formed a study group facilitated by an older student named C. C. Poindexter to create an atmosphere of social solidarity (Bradley 2008; Jones 2004). Several members wanted to develop this group into a collegiate literary society at a time when reading for leisure was largely unheard of since illiteracy rates were high and leisure time was rare (Anderson et al. 2011; Bradley 2008; Kimbrough 2003). Some other members had been working in white fraternity houses, which motivated them to work toward establishing themselves as a fraternity instead (Anderson et al. 2011; Bradley 2008; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). Poindexter was opposed to this idea because he felt Greek letters did not represent the group as black men, so as the members pushed through with their plans to form a fraternity he and another member resigned from the organization (Bradley 2008; Jones 2004). After establishing the fraternity on Cornell University's campus in 1906 the Alphas were very selective about where they would allow the organization to expand (Bradley 2008; Jones 2004). In 1907, the Beta chapter was chartered at Howard University, leading to the university's classification as the "cradle of black Greek civilization" (Bradley 2008; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003).

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (AKA)

*Founded January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1908 at Howard University in Washington, DC*

*Colors: Salmon Pink and Apple Green*

*Motto: By Culture and By Merit*

All of the historically black sororities were founded during Jim Crow when many national women's organizations had exclusionary local chapters and black women were only permitted to be members-at-large (Neumann 2008). The possibility of a black sorority created a venue for black women to have their own networking opportunities (Neumann 2008). Led by Ethel Hedgeman, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. was

founded by nine women at Howard University. They invited seven sophomores to join them in February of 1908, all of whom are recognized as founders (Evans 2008; Kimbrough 2003). In addition to being a social club, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) was founded for social and political service, demonstrated through their letters Askosis Kai Axiosis, which mean “By Culture and By Merit” (Evans 2008; Neumann 2008).

#### Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (ΚΑΨ)

*Founded January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1911 at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN*

*Colors: Crimson and Cream*

*Fundamental Purpose: Achievement in Every Field of Human Endeavor*

Kappa Alpha Psi (Kappa) founders Elder Watson Diggs and Byron K. Armstrong were exposed to black Greek life at Howard University during the 1909-1910 academic year (Bradley 2008; Jenkins 2012; Jones 2004). The following year they transferred to Indiana University and decided to work with nine other black male students, one of whom did not return to school in the spring semester, and established a new fraternity to alleviate the social isolation of black students at this predominantly white institution (PWI) (Anderson et al. 2011; Jenkins 2012; Jennings 2008; Jones 2004). The organization was originally named Kappa Alpha Nu out of tribute to Alpha Kappa Nu Greek Society (Anderson et al. 2011; Jennings 2008; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). Evident of the intense racial climate of Indiana where the Ku Klux Klan dominated, a white student referred to them as Kappa Alpha Nig in 1914, so the Kappas officially changed their name to Kappa Alpha Psi in 1915 (Anderson et al. 2011; Jenkins 2012; Jennings 2008; Kimbrough 2003).

#### Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (ΩΨΦ)

*Founded November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1911 at Howard University in Washington, DC*

*Colors: Royal Purple and Old Gold*

*Motto: Friendship is Essential to the Soul*

Three undergraduate students and one professor at Howard University created Omega Psi Phi (Omega) in response to discriminatory membership recruitment practices (i.e., social class and complexion) by the Alphas and the Kappas (Anderson et al. 2011; Jeffries 2008; Jenkins 2012; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). Inspired by the fact that the three students had been friends since high school, the organization's letters represent their motto "Friendship is Essential to the Soul" (Jeffries 2008; Jenkins 2012; Jones 2004). Unlike the Alphas and AKAs who experienced a relative amount of ease in finding administrative support for establishing their organizations, the Omegas were initially opposed but they were eventually permitted to establish a chapter at Howard University in 1911 (Jeffries 2008; Kimbrough 2003).

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. (ΔΣΘ)

*Founded January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1913 at Howard University in Washington, DC.*

*Colors: Crimson and Cream*

*Motto: Intelligence is the Torch of Wisdom*

Internal strife over the AKA's practices and ideologies led to the creation of Delta Sigma Theta (Delta) because some of the members felt that the organization was too dependent on the Alphas, particularly regarding their letters (Kimbrough 2003). In 1912, AKA was planning to take the initial steps in revising the organization by changing their name and colors but internal conflicts ensued between proponents and opponents regarding the direction in which the organization was developing ideologically (Kimbrough 2003). As a result, twenty-two members ceded and pushed through with the establishment of Delta Sigma Theta with the aim of becoming a more politically active organization (Harris 2008; Kimbrough 2003).



Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (ΦΒΣ)

*Founded January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1914 at Howard University in Washington, DC*

*Colors: Royal Blue and Pure White*

*Motto: Culture for Service, Service for Humanity*

A student at Howard University, A. Langston Taylor, discussed creating a fraternity with his roommate Leonard F. Morse, and they invited their mutual friend Charles I. Brown and worked with nine other undergraduates to establish Phi Beta Sigma (Sigma) as a non-elitist organization (Hughey 2008a; Jenkins 2012; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). After seeing the difficulty the Omegas had, the Sigmas kept their activities underground until the university officially recognized the organization in 1914 (Jenkins 2012).

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. (ZΦΒ)

*Founded January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1920 at Howard University in Washington, DC*

*Colors: Royal Blue and White*

*Founding Principles: Scholarship, Sisterly Love, Service, Finer Womanhood*

Sigma Founder A. Langston Taylor worked with a group of female students to form Zeta Phi Beta (Zeta), leading to their status as the only organizations to define an official affiliation in their national constitutions (Kimbrough 2003; Neuman 2008). Thus, Sigmas and Zetas are the only two “constitutionally-bound” black Greek brother-sister organizations. Other organizations make unofficial claims of affiliation that are not recognized in their constitutions.

The Zeta founders found it difficult to create the sorority because of sexism and racism, and the campus community was not welcoming because of their “religious character,” so the initial group of fifteen women decreased to five (Hughey 2008a). Similar to the Sigmas, the Zeta’s aim was to prevent elitism and socializing to eclipse the sorority’s goals (Hughey 2008a).

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. (ΣΓΡ)

*Founded November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1922 at Butler University in Indianapolis, IN*

*Colors: Royal Blue and Gold*

*Motto: Greater Service, Greater Progress*

Seven educators from working-class backgrounds who were initially interested in creating a sorority for teachers founded Sigma Gamma Rho (SGRho), and the organization was eventually expanded to include non-educators (Neumann 2008; Pruitt et al. 2008). It is the only sorority to have been founded at a PWI during a time where Indiana was the epicenter for Ku Klux Klan activity and Butler University practiced de facto segregation and a quota system that only allowed ten black students to be admitted per year (Kimbrough 2003; Pruitt et al. 2008).

### 1.3 Continued Greek-Letter Organization Formation

Other graduate-level professional Greek-letter organizations (GLOs)<sup>5</sup> were organized at Howard University, and this influx of Greek Life created the need for the a student council to govern student organizations (Kimbrough 2003). Regarding undergraduate GLOs, Gamma Kappa Phi Sorority was established in 1920 and the Royal Crescent Club, which functioned like a fraternity, was established in 1921 (Kimbrough 2003). Sigma Pi was established in 1922 and it functioned like an honor society that included junior and senior undergraduate members of the other sororities, thus causing it to be a precursor to a Greek council (Kimbrough 2003). In 1924, the Kappas established a short-lived version of such a council but those organizations were excluded, thus creating a distinction between local groups and national organizations (Kimbrough 2003). The Alphas, AKAs,

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<sup>5</sup> 1913: Chi Delta Mu Fraternity for male medical, dental, and pharmacy students; 1916: Tau Delta Sigma Fraternity for male law students; 1921: Epsilon Sigma Iota Sorority for female law students; 1922: Rho Psi Phi Sorority for female medical students

Omeegas, Deltas, and SGRhos met during the Kappa Grand Chapter meeting in 1928 to discuss establishing a council, and during the 1929 meeting the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was officially recognized and Howard University approved it in 1930 (Kimbrough 2003).

The aforementioned BGLOs gained popularity the fastest during the 1930s at accredited PWIs mainly in the Midwest where black students experienced isolation and were not permitted to live on campus, and they eventually expanded to accredited HBCUs in the South and Southwest during the 1940s-1960s to facilitate access to elite black collegiate society (Graham 1999; Kimbrough 2003). Regarding BGLO elitism, Frazier (1957), an Alpha, underscored the issue that initially family background and skin complexion were key factors in membership selection (see also Gasman 2011). He explained that this changed after World War I as more black people started migrating to the North and education and occupation became more important factors. The ‘Elite Eight’ also politicized campus activities because each organization was seeking to advance itself, so while many other social organizations functioned like GLOs and often used Greek letters in their names they were ultimately replaced by NPHC organizations when they expanded to those campuses (Kimbrough 2003; Little 2002).

## 2. CIVIL RIGHTS, BLACK POWER, AND CURRENT BLACK POLITICAL AND FRATERNAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Following World War II the US experienced a period of major mobilization against Jim Crow policies that legitimized racism and black disenfranchisement. As a result of this ‘protest era’ several pieces of Civil Rights legislation were passed which addressed social and racial justice and assisted in the mobility of the black middle-class and political activity (Davis 2012). The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 addressed voting rights,

anti-discrimination in public places and federal programs, equal employment opportunities in the federal government, and prohibited discrimination in residential matters (Davis 2012). Also, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited discrimination against anyone trying to exercise their right to vote and outlawed literacy tests (Davis 2012).

During the Civil Rights Movement the AKAs established the American Council on Human Rights (ACHR) in 1948 with the Alphas, Kappas, Deltas, Zetas, and SGRhos to protest government policies (Gasman 2011; Neumann 2008). Through this organization, Alpha founder Henry Arthur Callis reiterated the DuBoisian obligation that black Greeks have in ‘uplifting the black community’ as representatives of the black middle-class (Gasman 2011). By 1957 no fraternities were involved because they were focusing instead on such organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Urban League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Gasman 2011).

Marybeth Gasman (2011) postulates that the sorority members preferred to work with the ACHR because the other aforementioned organizations maintained a predominantly male leadership. Caryn E. Neumann (2008) disputes this point arguing that sorority women did not have a problem working with their male counterparts due to their common goal to combat racism. The sororities supported the NAACP and made significant financial contributions to help the organization with its legal efforts to challenge Jim Crow policies (Neumann 2008). The sororities also participated in the establishment of the National Council for Negro Women (NCNW) in 1935 to address black women’s national issues, but although some members were active on an individual

level the organizations did not participate in an active way on a national level (Neumann 2008). Neumann (2008) argues that it was difficult to establish a substantial black women's collective movement because racial issues took precedence over gender issues since it was widely believed that black men were not significantly positioned above black women.

In addition to these national supra-fraternal organizations, individual fraternities and sororities mobilized in a variety of ways that show alliance between fraternities and sororities in order to strategize together against anti-black racism in general (Gasman 2011). For example, the Kappas drafted a proclamation, the Deltas made presentations in front of government committees, and the Sigmas made presentations at their national convention (Gasman 2011). Because of the domestic role of black women during the first half of the twentieth century, the sororities focused their efforts on community work through cooking, cleaning, and personal care lessons for working class families (Neumann 2008). Education was also a significant focus of the sororities as a mechanism to improve the status of black people, so the sororities worked with various groups of adults and children through tutoring, funding, community education programs, and mentoring (Neumann 2008). In addition to education, the AKAs and SGRhos created vocational programs to work with black youth and prepare them for employment (Neumann 2008). Additionally, sororities hosted debutante cotillions to show racial pride and celebrate black women's beauty with high school students who also received etiquette training and worked on college preparation, thus advancing their middle-class agenda through the younger generations (Neumann 2008).

Black Greek involvement in the Civil Rights Movement has been internally and externally critiqued because as they worked to become more than just an intellectual elite they still did not take part in the active protesting against Jim Crow policies at the organizational level (Gasman 2011). Frazier (1957) criticized BGLOs for spending more money on appearances during fundraisers than the amount that was raised (see also Hughey and Parks 2011). Regarding the black middle-class in general, he echoed his earlier criticism of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and the perpetuation of the ‘social myth’ that their status was higher than it was. He argued that this was a result of the discrimination the black middle-class encountered regardless of education and occupation. Frazier (1957) agreed with Du Bois (2007[1903]) regarding the paternalistic role of the black middle-class in ‘uplifting the black community’ but maintained that they were failing at this task, for which he criticized them while simultaneously recognizing the impact of discrimination on all black people regardless of class status. He claimed that the black middle-class lacked a foundation in both the cultural world of black people and in mainstream US society. They also suffered—Frazier insisted—from self-hatred because they seek acceptance from mainstream US society and model social codes around the white middle-class, which never fails to reject them.

Building on Frazier’s criticism of the black middle-class, Nathan Hare (1991[1965]) argued that they imitated mainstream society in order to confirm their social status above the black poor while experiencing rejection from the white power structure due to racism. He goes on to explain that black empowerment is undermined by the black middle-class ‘custom of accommodation’ because it reinforces the superiority of ‘whiteness’ and discourages black activism. Finally, he encouraged black militancy to

initiate a movement toward equality and hoped that his writing would push the black middle-class in that direction. During this period, a new fraternity that would later align itself with the old guard BGLOs was established at Morgan State College,<sup>6</sup> an HBCU in Baltimore, MD.

Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Inc. (IΦΘ)

*Founded September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1963 at Morgan State College in Baltimore, MD*

*Colors: Charcoal Brown and Gilded Gold*

*Motto: Building a Tradition, Not Resting Upon One!*

Iota Phi Theta (Iota) was the only NPHC organization to be founded during the Civil Rights Movement at a time when BGLOs were being criticized for not having a greater presence outside of the black community (Jenkins 2012; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). The founders are identified as twelve ‘non-traditional’ students because they were three to five years older than average college students (Jenkins 2012; Jones 2004; Kimbrough 2003). Some of them were veterans, some were married with children, and some worked full time, but all of them were full time students (Jones 2004). Most of the founders had also been friends since childhood, unlike the majority of the other organizations where the founders met in college (Jones 2004). The organization was initially not able to join the NPHC because there were no guidelines for expanding to include additional new organizations. An amendment to the constitution was passed in 1996, and during the 1997 meeting the Elite Eight were expanded to become the Divine Nine<sup>7</sup> (“Iota Joins the NPHC,” 2014a).

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan State College has since changed its name to Morgan State University.

<sup>7</sup> The NPHC originally consisted of the four sororities and four fraternities that were founded prior to its organization in 1930 who became known colloquially as the Elite Eight. Upon accepting the Iotas into the council, the group was renamed the Divine Nine.

The Iotas are also the only fraternity that has an official nationally recognized auxiliary organization called the Iota Sweethearts who have historically assisted them behind the scenes (“Iota Sweethearts,” 2014b). It is interesting to note that while the organization was founded to combat the elitist tendencies of the other organizations, they perpetuate the earlier attempts to relegate women to a peripheral space through auxiliary organizations, similar to the early twentieth century organizations such as the Prince Hall Freemasons and the UNIA (Summers 2004).

Following the Civil Rights era, there was an increase in black college enrollment during the 1960s through the 1980s and Walter Kimbrough (2003) identifies two resulting primary approaches to brotherhood and sisterhood. First, the Black Power approach to fraternalism involved students participating in such organizations as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the aforementioned SCLC that were actively challenging the white power structure through organized protest (Kimbrough 2003). Second, the Blaxploitation films that were being produced depicted black actors as superheroes who operated in opposition to mainstream Civil Rights groups which feared these movies would have a negative impact on black youth. A variety of short-lived organizations were established to parody the NPHC, such as Nun Phi Nun and Hound Phi Hound (Kimbrough 2003).

Theodore J. Davis (2012) describes this subsequent Black Power era as the ‘politics era’ during which racial identity was highly politicized. There was an increase in black political activity particularly through electoral participation and representation. The social and racial justice gains of the previous era led to an expanded agenda of political empowerment as a means to gain equal access to resources therefore leading to economic



empowerment, but an increasingly conservative black middle-class developed alongside the increasingly conservative mainstream society (Davis 2012). It is during this period that we see the apex and subsequent decline of black political activity as race was gradually replaced by class as a priority due to an increase in black socioeconomic accomplishments (Davis 2012).

During the late 1960s through the 1970s, a variety of studies were published about the distinction between class effect, or mobility determined by generational or individual class, and structural mobility, or the increase in available job openings (Landry and Marsh 2011). As a consequence of low female participation in the labor market, these studies focused on male occupational trends (Landry and Marsh 2011). Otis D. Duncan (1968) found that black males experienced difficulty maintaining class status, but this trend changed by 1973 when the David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser (1976) study found that class effect influenced their mobility. Still, while the racial disparity between white and black middle-class male mobility decreased, racism continued to impact the mobility of the latter (Featherman and Hauser 1976).

Similar to Davis (2012), William Julius Wilson (1978) challenged the prevailing notion that racism was still a primary obstacle for black middle-class development and argued that class was the more decisive factor for educated black people who had more equal access to opportunities during the post-Civil Rights era. He argued that non-poor black people benefited more from Civil Rights legislation because they were already positioned to attain white collar jobs since they were better educated and more highly skilled than they were during the Jim Crow era. He explained that white corporations visited and hired more black graduates in 1974 than in 1964, but the data does not

account for those who maintained their occupations (Landry and Marsh 2011). There are discrepancies regarding the interpretation of whether Wilson meant class was more significant or that class was increasing in significance as race was decreasing (Landry and Marsh 2011). Also, he was criticized for placing non-poor black people as role models for all black people, thus reinforcing the traditional patriarchal model of the family vis-à-vis the stereotypical dysfunctional non-traditional poor black family (Duneier 1992; Gregory 1998).

A number of studies have been produced to empirically test Wilson's argument since the 1980s, all of which confirm that while class is increasing in importance it is not necessarily replacing race regarding black class mobility. In other words, apropos to Wilson's book title *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (1978), the increasing significance of class does not signify the declining significance of race. Similar to Featherman and Hauser (1976), Michael Hout (1984) found that inter- and intra-generational mobility improved, but black people from upper-middle-class backgrounds occupied the majority of upper-middle-class jobs. Furthermore, many of those who were working in these positions in 1973 were hired by 1962 and maintained their status on the basis of improved economic conditions. Thus, class barriers, or the ability to increase one's class standing, were still more impeding for black males than they were for white males. James Allen Davis and Tom W. Smith (1994) also concluded that race was still an influential factor in black male mobility during the 1980s as black men from all backgrounds were disproportionately unable to reach upper-middle-class status in comparison to white men from all backgrounds. Also, black upper-middle-class males were more likely to experience downward mobility. The

rate at which black men were entering the upper-middle-class had increased since the 1970s, so Davis and Smith (1994) also agreed with Wilson (1978) that race may be declining in significance. Debra Branch McBrier and George Wilson (2004), Ryan A. Smith (2005), George Wilson, Ian Sura-Lemessy, and Jonathan P. West (1999), and Kazuo Yamaguchi (2009) all had similar findings.

Sharon M. Collins's (1983, 1989, 1993, 1997) studies of black executives and managers found that they were disproportionately placed in 'racialized jobs' that served their respective black patrons and had very limited upward mobility. Bart Landry (1987), George Wilson, and Deirdre Royster (1995) found that there had been a greater diversity of occupations among black people during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s but they were confined to lower-salaried public sector positions. A number of other studies had mixed results but they all agree that there was an increase in black people's income accompanied by the narrowing of the racial income gap, and that this gap was the largest for the upper-middle-class stratum (Attewell et al. 2004; Grodsky and Pager 2001; Thomas 1993, 1995; Wilson 1997). Scholars have also found that there is a larger racial gap regarding wealth accumulation than income, which varies by type, although it is unclear whether this gap is the result of less disposable black income in comparison to their white counterparts or individual choice (Choundhury 2002; Keister 2000; Landry and Marsh 2011; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Shapiro 2004).

In addition to occupation, Mary Pattillo (2005) outlines three points in the scholarship regarding residential segregation as it relates to Wilson's (1987) race versus class argument: "(a) Residential segregation varies by social class for African Americans; (b) mobility choices and outcomes for middle-class blacks have come to favor nonblack,

non-poor neighborhoods; and (c) as a result, class segregation among African Americans has increased” (2005:312). Contrary to Wilson’s (1987) argument, the black middle-class had a tendency to live in poor or very poor neighborhoods during the period he studied<sup>8</sup> (Massey et al. 1994). During the early 1980s, the majority of the black middle-class relocated to middle-class black and mixed-race neighborhoods (South and Crowder 1998). Scott J. South and Kyle D. Crowder (1998) found that while income and employment did not encourage black middle-class homeowners to relocate into white neighborhoods, they did find a correlation between increased education and residence in white neighborhoods.

During the 1970s and 1980s the black middle-class tended to segregate itself from poorer black people, but by the 1990s and 2000s this trend was no longer applicable (Massey and Fischer 2003). This analysis of residential patterns contradicts Douglas S. Massey, Andrew B. Gross, and Kumiko Shibuya’s (1994) earlier findings that the black middle-class had a tendency to live in poor or very poor neighborhoods during the study periods 1970 through 1973 and 1979 through 1984. Pattillo (2005) explains that a possible explanation is that most of the black middle-class left white neighborhoods by the 1970s so the need for such movement was almost non-existent by the 1980s. Also, the earlier study (Massey et al. 1994) also included the black working-class along with the black middle-class in the black non-poor category whereas the later study (Massey and Fischer 2003) did not (Pattillo 2005).

These studies have been criticized because this type of class segregation does not account for the proximity of black middle-class neighborhoods to black working class

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson’s (1987) analysis concentrated on the years 1970 through 1973 and 1979 through 1984.

neighborhoods (Iceland et al. 2002; Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo-McCoy 2000). Bart Landry and Kris Marsh explain, “because of economic residential segregation, wealthier blacks can spatially separate from poor blacks, but because of racial residential segregation, middle-class blacks remain largely segregated from white” (2011:386; see also Adelman 2004; Pattillo-McCoy 1999, 2000). Some black middle-class neighborhoods act as a buffer between black working-class and white middle-class areas (Cashin 2004; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Wilson 1987), possibly as a consequence of white flight as more black people move into the neighborhood, which also results in the property values to slow in appreciation rates (Landry and Marsh 2011).

In her discussion of black suburbia, Sheryll D. Cashin (2007) debunks assumptions surrounding suburban life for black middle-class neighborhoods. She explains that this proximity to impoverished black communities causes conflict between the two groups where the middle-class residents attempt to create security and educational boundaries between them. Black middle-class neighborhoods also have higher crime rates than white neighborhoods possibly due to the gentrification of formerly impoverished neighborhoods that push middle-income families to relocate (Cashin 2007). Black middle-class scholastic testing also ranks low in comparison to their white counterparts, and middle-class black parents believe this is because of an influx of low- to middle-income black families, so they choose to enroll their children in private school (Cashin 2007). Also, residence and jobs/economic growth suburbanize in opposite directions as black middle-class people typically work outside of their region/county because affluent jobs are not located there (Cashin 2007). Under-investment in black middle-class communities impacts their ability to participate in

shaping market trends because higher end retailers do not open stores in black neighborhoods regardless of median income (Cashin 2007).

Davis (2012) identifies this post-Black Power era from the late 1980s to the present as the socioeconomic transition era, during which increased political conservatism has attacked the Civil Rights gains of the earlier periods and there has been an increasing political and residential polarization between the black middle-class and the black working class. He argues that individual and subgroup concerns have replaced collective action and while external black politics are still concerned with race, class divides the internal politics. He also explains that the political mobilization methods have not adapted to contemporary conditions, so there has not been a significant impact in the political sphere. This is particularly due to the fact that younger generations did not experience the Jim Crow policies that provide the foundation of the Civil Rights era organizations.

Kimbrough (2003) explains that Afrocentric organizations, which started forming in the 1980s, represent the student criticisms of BGLOs for extending from a tradition of mimicking white middle-class organizations. Instead, they chose to establish African fraternities and sororities with non-Greek-letter names such as Kemet, Malika Kambe Umfazi, and Order of Akande (Kimbrough 2003). These organizations are a result of such phenomena as the release of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing, Fight the Power* by Public Enemy (1989), and Molefi Kete Asante's scholarship on Afrocentricity (Kimbrough 2003; see also Asante 2003). Most significant among the Afrocentric organizations is Malik Sigma Psi Fraternity, founded in 1977 by black and Latino

students at C. W. Post College<sup>9</sup> in New York, which originally had an all-Swahili name but was required to have at least two Greek letters in order to be recognized as a fraternity (Kimbrough 2003). They elected to include the word Malik because it is a Swahili and Arabic word meaning king or ruler and is also part of Malcolm X's Swahili name, El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, who they uphold as a model for his contributions to United States race relations (Kimbrough 2003). The other two letters represent progression and masculinity, respectively, so the name of the organization, meant to be read from right to left as in Arabic, translates as "man's progression to become king or ruler" (Kimbrough 2003:101). This organization places Africa, specifically Egypt, as the birthplace of fraternalism and operates similar to the NPHC organizations as it has a call,<sup>10</sup> colors, similarly stylized paraphernalia, and the members participate in stepping (Kimbrough 2003).

### 3. BLACK GREEK-LETTER ORGANIZATIONS AS A SITE OF STRATEGIC CONTESTATION

While the black middle-class has broken into the mainstream of the economic sector, academia, and residential patterns, racism in these spaces creates a sense of exclusion that impacts not only the individual but also the family and the community (Benjamin 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994). Mainstream society embraces democracy, freedom, and equality while simultaneously promoting group discrimination and racism, so solidarity, group consciousness, and a sense of community offer mechanisms to deal with racism (Benjamin 1991; Broman et al. 1988; Durant and Loudon 1986; Hwang et al. 1998; Porter and Washington 1979; Sampson and Milam 1975; Welch and Combs 1985). As

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<sup>9</sup> C. W. Post College has since changed its name to Long Island University (LIU) Post.

<sup>10</sup> Calls are either a call and response or a word that carries significance to the organization's members.

stated during the earlier discussion of pre-Civil Rights era black middle-class efforts to organize, BGLOs and other parallel institutions and organizations continue to provide ways to deal with racism, as well as opportunities to maintain a paternalistic status vis-à-vis poorer black people (Hine 2003; Landry and Marsh 2011; Woodard 1986).

Black Greek membership continues to provide a “supportive environment that is conducive to increasing success in college and a sense of satisfaction with the campus experience, as well as increased possibilities for success after college” (McClure 2006:1045). Membership gives black students a sense of belonging at PWIs and they experience a sense of encouragement from other members to become more active on campus, thus gaining access to opportunities that they may not have pursued otherwise (Harper 2008; Little 2002; McClure 2006; Williamson 1999). Members also see their direct connection with black history through their identification with historical figures who are/were members of their organizations (McClure 2006). Black Greeks at both PWIs and HBCUs tend to be more involved in campus activities and organizations than black non-Greeks because of the politicization and leadership development that are key aspects to BGLOs (Kimbrough and Hutcheson 1998; McClure 2006). It is easier to ascend to higher leadership positions within BGLOs than it is in larger campus-wide organizations due to the smaller size of the chapters, which are on average around fifteen members, so black Greeks have a space to first develop their leadership skills and later apply them to campus-wide organizations (Kimbrough 1995). They also develop a sense of responsibility to be active on campus and positively represent the small black student population at PWIs, although some do resent the idea that they are perceived as representatives of the entire black population (Harper 2008). Regarding classroom



participation, they are inclined to engage classroom material because it affects the overall GPA and image of the chapter (Harper 2008).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have provided a brief outline of the historical development of the black middle-class and relevant status organizations. The historical trajectory of race relations in the United States have significantly impacted the ways race, religion, class, gender, and sexuality have been prioritized and conceived by members of the black middle-class since the Antebellum period. Through a demonstration of a mastery of mainstream values, black people, particularly those who make up the middle-class, use their resources to make an argument for the humane treatment and equal perception of black people, which has resulted in the advancement of black middle-class respectability politics. The institutionalization of black elitism as a response to exclusionary white organizational formations has allowed for the perpetuation of the politics of respectability, and specifically the reproduction of hetero-patriarchy that places black middle-class men on top of their families and that is intertwined with the conservative domesticity of black middle-class women. In what follows, I establish the ways in which these values are manifested and reproduced among BGLOs, and the major points in the performances under scrutiny at which they are contested, specifically when they refer to sexuality.

My position as a member of the group under investigation, as well as the Hip Hop generation feminist lens through which I have framed my analysis, facilitate my investigating the significance of black Greek identity performances as evidence of the current configurations of black middle-class identity politics, particularly in their relation to black popular culture. In addition to my exploration of the boundary established

between members of the black middle-class and other black people, I also discuss the significance of the conflicts that may arise when non-black people permeate black spaces. Although these black status organizations were initially created to qualify black people as equal to white people, the boundaries surrounding these spaces have crystallized in such a way that when non-black people, particularly white people, permeate them they tend to experience similar, though not the same, situations of tokenism, assimilation, and tension.

## CHAPTER 2: ATLANTA GREEK PICNIC AS A QUASI-DIASPORIC BLACK GREEK SPACE

Atlanta Greek Picnic attracts members of National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organizations from various backgrounds and locations to participate in a variety of events that demonstrate multiple aspects of black Greek life. Festival participants come from predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and historically black colleges or universities (HBCUs). Most of them are either undergraduate or graduate students. Inspired by the success of the Philadelphia Greek Picnic, a similar festival that began in the 1990s, Tiwa Aganga-Williams, the founder and CEO of TiwaWorks Inc. who is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi (Kappa), hosted the first Atlanta Greek Picnic in 2004 because of the multiplicity of prominent HBCUs that are located in Atlanta, GA.

The festival operates as a quasi-diasporic space of mutual influence regarding identity formation where attendees bring their localized black Greek identity configurations to this communal space of mutual engagement, interact with other members, and take the influences of these interactions back home with them where they phase in a series of transformations, and the cycle continues. Regarding the purpose of the festival Tiwa comments:

Atlanta Greek Picnic was created for Divine Nine<sup>11</sup> members because we had a situation where we haven't had anything for the D9<sup>12</sup> Greeks to do, especially in the summertime. You've crossed either in the Spring or you crossed in the Fall the year before the event comes around. So it's just something where Divine Nine

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<sup>11</sup> The NPHC originally consisted of the four sororities and four fraternities that were founded prior to its organization in 1930 who became known colloquially as the Elite Eight. Upon accepting the Iotas into the council, the group was renamed the Divine Nine.

<sup>12</sup> D9 is an abbreviation for Divine Nine.

members come together, unite, network, and just, you know, kind of continue to connect outside of their chapter and their city and their school.

The festival has developed into a five-day event that lasts from Wednesday through Sunday at the beginning of June based on the model Tiwa used while he was an undergraduate student planning Kappa Week<sup>13</sup> for his chapter at Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus, GA. The most popular days are Friday and Saturday so there are a larger number of events on those two days. Atlanta Greek Picnic attendees are encouraged to purchase a VIP card for \$100.00 which gives them access to a variety of perks, including expedited entry into every event and a 15% discount at the Greek paraphernalia stores and websites that are advertised throughout the festival. There is also a VIP Elite Card for \$150.00 that offers the same perks along with two entries for a raffle to win an iPad Mini and an Atlanta Greek Picnic 2013 shirt. Everyone is also encouraged to stay at the Sheraton Atlanta, the host hotel where impromptu pool and room parties are hosted by guests and other festival attendees.

In this chapter I engage in a description of my data collection process during each day of the festival from Wednesday, June 5, 2013 through Sunday, June 9, 2013. During some of the more relaxed events I conducted brief interviews regarding individuals' perceptions of their own organizations versus the others as well as their experiences as members. During the more performance-based events I did participant observation, and I was even given the unique opportunity to participate in one of the major performances. After the discussion of the events, I move on to a brief description of the major trends during the interviews that I conducted after the festival was over with members of each

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<sup>13</sup> On most campuses each organization hosts a week of events typically around a specific theme. These events may include forums, church services, game nights, and parties.

organization. I interviewed two to three people per organization to get more in-depth responses regarding members' experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the entire festival to establish an understanding of its layout and the individual pieces, which provide the basis of my analysis as I describe various performances and other key identity signifiers along with their larger implications for black middle-class identification processes and respectability politics.

#### 1. ATLANTA GREEK PICNIC: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5 THROUGH SUNDAY, JUNE 9, 2013

I spent the days leading up to this first event explaining everything I could about black Greek life to my friend Jazmin who agreed to help me record interviews and take pictures during and after the festival. I explained to her the significance of the organizations' colors and encouraged her to wear neutral colors since she is a non-Greek so that no one would mistake her for a member of one of the sororities. Following my open disclosure policy, I made sure to bring a variety of royal blue and gold outfits to demonstrate my own affiliation with Sigma Gamma Rho (SGRho) since those are our official colors. My goal was to interview at least two people per organization during the first couple of days of the festival before it got too hectic and people would be less willing to participate. I also recognized that because of the number of events, some of which overlap, I would have to determine the most popular events and focus on them rather than trying to make it to every single one.

##### 1.1 Wednesday Evening, June 4, 2013

Jazmin and I got dressed in our business casual attire and headed to the first event that kicked off the festival called "The Greek Network" at Buckhead Bottle Bar, a happy hour networking event targeted at twenty- and thirty-something black Greek professionals.

During a subsequent interview with Tiwa, he explained that on the basis of his experience planning Kappa Week he preferred to start with this type of simple event to get everyone warmed up to the festival. When Jazmin and I walked inside the venue there was a dimly lit long narrow walkway parallel to the bar that was lined with a few members of Tiwa's festival planning team. To the left, there was another dimly lit white room with an additional bar along the back wall and a few tables in a variety of sizes scattered around. They played a variety of old and current R&B and Hip Hop songs loudly over the speakers that ran throughout the bar and as groups of people entered they claimed some section of the room for themselves. Tiwa directed Jazmin and I passed the bar walkway into the open space filled with a number of tables that ran along the perpendicular side of the bar and we took over the opposite corner that had some larger VIP tables.

While Jazmin set up the camera equipment I approached a group of four members of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKAs) standing along the wall opposite the bar and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed for my project. A couple of them were very excited to participate so we negotiated who would be the representatives of the group and they followed me over to the corner where Jazmin was waiting to record. To ease their nerves, I explained the questions I would be asking while they signed the informed consent and release forms and filled out the demographic survey on my iPad. The intent of these interviews was to characterize one's own organization and identify which elements distinguish it from the others. After interviewing them and a couple of other people, a table near me filled up with a group of Greeks from different organizations who seemed to all know each other. The majority of them were very receptive to being interviewed once I explained the project. Jazmin and I even momentarily bonded with a member of

Iota Phi Theta (Iota) from Morgan State University over the fact that we were all from Maryland. I also ran into two members of Delta Sigma Theta (Deltas) who went to school with me in Miami, FL, and after a little pleading and assurance that the questions are not too invasive they agreed to be interviewed.

After getting through the majority of the groups distributed throughout this main area I went back to the white room looking for members of Phi Beta Sigma (Sigmas) and members of Zeta Phi Beta (Zetas) since I had not interviewed any of them yet. I was informed that they had initially congregated together at a couple of tables in this room but had already left, so as the crowd continued to dwindle I interviewed a couple of stragglers and decided to pack up and get more interviews at future events.

#### 1.2 Thursday Night, June 6, 2013

On that day, the first big event of the festival was held at the Cascade Family Skating Rink called “ATL Greek: The Movie,” which made reference to the film *ATL* (2006) starring rapper T.I. and actress Lauren London in which the main characters frequented the same skating rink. Because of the nature of the event it was fairly casual, especially the men who took their shirts off to show off their brands and tattoos, but there were also a lot of women dressed up and wore high heels. Most of the attendees wore the colors of their organization and/or paraphernalia, especially tikis, which are small wooden medallions in the shape of some particular symbol often painted in the colors of the designated organization. Upon walking inside the venue the first thing we noticed was the enormous crowd on the rink, the majority of whom were not wearing skates. The DJ played all of the latest Hip Hop and R&B songs and everyone congregated in the middle

of the rink demonstrating the strolls they had probably been practicing leading up to their arrival at the festival.

Strolling, also known as party walking (or hopping/party hopping in the case of the members of Omega Psi Phi (Omegas)) is a synchronized dance typically performed in a line where members of the organization follow a designated leader through a space. Strolling happens primarily at parties or other events where music is played (e.g., at tailgating events, in student unions on college campuses, in the audience of step shows). Each organization has its own traditional stroll to a particular song that may change by region and they also create strolls to songs they are likely to hear at parties or in other public spaces. One major rule that everyone adheres to regarding strolling is that you do not allow anyone to walk through your line because if someone somehow slips through it is taken as a sign of disrespect on their part and/or weakness on the part of the stroll line. Also, if a stroll line is headed in your direction you are expected to move out of the way because they may run into you otherwise. Often, a member will step out, hold up the organization's hand sign,<sup>14</sup> and lead the line through a space to make sure the line can get through easily.

Most of the sorority strolls incorporated moves that would bring spectators to focus on their hips and waists, and some fraternity strolls involved members interacting sexually with the nearest female (e.g., licking his lips and making some type of physical contact with her). The majority of the stroll lines at the event were comprised of members of a single organization usually from the same school or area, but some others jumped

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<sup>14</sup> Each organization has its own hand sign, or unique way to hold the fingers or hands, and these signs represent something specific to the organization to which only members are privy.



into the back of the lines and try to learn the stroll along the way. When I did spot a line with women and men it was usually Zetas and Sigmas, which is quite common since they are the only organizations that specifically state a bond with each other in their constitutions. Any other coed line was usually the result of women joining in the lines of their unofficial brother fraternity and not vice versa, demonstrating the fact that under specific conditions it has become acceptable for women to perform masculinity but not for men to perform femininity since the latter could be perceived as a performance of homosexuality, which would breach the boundaries of “acceptable” masculinity.

Since these strolls were not being judged in any official way many of them were more casual with people not performing them to the full extent of their ability. There were also a lot of “diss strolls,” which involve an organization performing a routine to tease the other organizations of the same gender. For example, sororities would break the Delta pyramid hand sign or shoot the Zeta dove symbol. C-Murder’s song *Down 4 My Niggaz* (2000) has become a diss stroll anthem, so when the DJ played this song everyone ran into the center of the rink to perform on behalf of his or her chapter. I noticed that a lot of sororities incorporated the hand signs of the others but would not form them fully, and I suspect that this is out of the paradoxical respect that they have for the other organizations.

1.3 Friday, June 6, 2013

There was a mandatory meeting for all of the step teams in the gymnasium of Morehouse College so that we could prepare for that night’s step show. Stepping (known as hopping for the Omegas) is a type of synchronized rhythmic dance routine that involves using hands, feet, and the body to make percussive beats. Each organization has its own

traditional manner of stepping. For example, the members of Alpha Phi Alpha (Alphas) perform a style of stepping called training where they alternate between feet and one foot is used to add a percussive emphasis to the beat. Kappas and SGRhos step with wooden canes that are cut to about the length of an arm and Sigmas and Zetas step with wooden staffs that are cut to various lengths and very rarely they will also perform with canes. Both canes and staffs are wrapped with electrical tape in the colors of the organization that is using them, and they are used to either tap on the ground or on each other to create a beat or they can be twirled to either a beat that the step team has created or to music.

Step shows are competitions during which a team from each organization has the opportunity to perform an eleven to fifteen minute step routine that they have created: it can range from a theatrical production with gymnastics, dancing, and other tricks to a basic show that only displays the stepping or hopping talents of the team. Each show has the following basic structure: (1) an entrance, (2) a series of stepping routines including a traditional step with an accompanying chant about the history of the organization, and (3) an exit. Depending on the level of theatricality, the steppers will have costumes, props, fog machines, music, lighting, and scenes in between steps to demonstrate a theme.

Each team for the Atlanta Greek Picnic step show was selected through a process in which different teams from each organization submit a nomination form with a list of shows they have participated in over the past two years, their placing during each competition, and videos of their performances. The point of this form was to ensure that the team will travel outside of their state to Atlanta, GA and to inspect the caliber of their performances to confirm that it is at the level necessary to compete at the festival. One team was selected to represent each organization and they are notified that they were

required to submit a contract and \$250.00 fee to participate. Teams from NPHC organizations are the only ones that are allowed to participate because that is whom the festival is catered toward although the events are open to the general public.

Following my own tradition, I was sure to wear an SGRho shirt to this step show meeting to keep my focus on the show and I transformed into my extra competitive stepping alter-ego who refused to speak to members of the other sororities unless absolutely necessary. As each team filed into the gym they picked a specific area of the bleachers to claim as their own. Jazmin and I waited on the bottom row near the center of the room for the rest of my team who had driven from Miami, FL the night before. After about ten minutes Samantha (our step mistress or team captain), Nadly, Curtina, Nikki, Trenesse, Felicia, Dreka, Ivory (our non-sorority male audio helper), and Stefanie (an actor during our performance) all walked in carrying canes and boots and joined us on the bleachers. I was informed that I would have to perform with a cane that I had never practiced with so while everyone else talked among themselves I grabbed the cane and practiced twirling so that I would be comfortable with it by the time I got on stage.

Before starting the meeting everyone was given a neon green wristband that allowed us early entry into the step show area to get settled in our designated dressing rooms as well as free entry into one of the after parties. During the meeting Tiwa went over the step show contract and explained that a panel of alumni members, one per organization, would score each performance on the basis of the criteria that had been provided to them. The stepping judging criteria included the following areas, each of which was worth ten points: (1) entrance, (2) stage presence/showmanship, (3) precision, (4) difficulty, (5) originality, (6) appearance, (7) clarity, and (8) exit. Also, profanity,

vulgarity, unsportsmanlike behavior, and going over the allotted eleven-minute time frame would result in a loss of points as indicated in the contract.

Typically, the audience acts as a set of collective judges and are often more significant than the panel of alumni judges since their enthusiasm (or lack thereof) can sway the scoring of the performances. When my team prepared our show, we were sure to address all eight areas of the step show judging criteria but we were more concerned with entertaining the audience. The audience tends to validate proper execution of each organization's performative corporeal scripts as well as the team's ability to entertain. Tributes are also a popular way to encourage crowd participation because members of certain organizations are specifically targeted and will subsequently clap, cheer, or do their call<sup>15</sup> as a symbol of their approval. Most organizations will perform tributes in deference order and often reference the organization with which they share an official or unofficial bond in a subsequent separate routine. During these routines sororities will dedicate a portion of their performance to the fraternities, and the fraternities will do the same for the sororities. These tributes are typically either erotic dance routines or hyperfeminine/hypermasculine impersonations of the other organizations. Some teams will also incorporate "disses" to the other organizations of their own gender during which teams will talk negatively about them and explain why their own organization is better than the others.

After going over the contract each team was instructed to send a representative up to pick a number out of a hat in order to determine the order of the show. I went up to

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<sup>15</sup> Each organization has a call that carries significance to the members. Calls are either a call and response (e.g., the Alphas' call is CALL: 1: 1-1-1-1-9 RESPONSE: Oh six!) or a word (e.g., the Deltas' call is OO-OOP).

represent my team and I selected the number nine, which we switched for the Omega's number four. In our experience it is better to go toward the middle of the show when the audience is warmed up and ready to engage in the performance but before they are tired and are no longer paying attention. I was then given the opportunity to inform everyone that I had been conducting research on the festival and I asked if everyone would participate in team interviews with Jazmin. I assured them that the intent of the interviews was not to find out the layout of their show but rather more general information about their participation, and that out of respect for their privacy I would not view these interviews until after the step show was over. Everyone agreed and Jazmin went off to start recording interviews.

Next, we were informed that each team would be allotted three minutes to practice on the stage, go over lighting, and work with the sound and video technicians, and we were also informed that no one would be forced to leave the gym during these rehearsals. My team was very upset and unsuccessfully protested because at every step show, including our performance at Atlanta Greek Picnic the year before, we had been given at least fifteen minutes of private time to do these things. Nonetheless, we all eventually accepted the conditions and each of the teams were allowed access to the stage in the order that we had previously drawn. When it was our turn, Samantha and I split everyone up to work on a list of tasks that we determined while we had been waiting, such as practicing flips, measuring the width and length of the stage, tossing canes, and making sure our soundtrack and video worked.

After our three minutes ended we went outside in the parking lot to practice the entire show. I pulled my car close so that Ivory could play the soundtrack through my

speakers, Samantha set the perimeter of the stage using parking space lines and random branches, and Stefanie arranged the canes at the front of the fake stage like they would be during the show. Samantha scrutinized us as we drilled the show over and over so that we could make sure everything was perfect. Our frustration with each other elevated as we danced around in the scorching Atlanta, GA summer heat, so eventually Samantha stopped everything to have a pep talk with the team to get everyone focused back on our goal to win the \$10,000. As we continued to practice the Deltas lingered out of the gym to their cars and everyone was distracted because we were so adamant about our privacy and we did not want them to see any part of our show; the closer it got to the show the more competitive the entire team became.

After a couple of hours of practicing we finally decided that whatever level of mastery we had achieved by that point was what we were going to perform with on stage and decided to go to Samantha's line sister<sup>16</sup> Maggie's house to take a break and eat. I called Jazmin and navigated her back to the parking lot so that we could leave. At some point, we realized that we needed to go back inside and work with the technicians because our video was not functioning when we worked with them the first time. By this time the majority of the team had already left in the minivan they rented to drive from Miami, FL to Atlanta, GA. Those of us who were left had gone back into the gymnasium and worked with the video technician on the far side of the gym between the stage and the bleachers. When we finished with that we piled into my car and went to Wendy's for lunch. I asked Jazmin how the interviews went and she explained that most of the teams had either already left or were uncooperative so she was only able to speak with the

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<sup>16</sup> Groups of members who were initiated together are referred to as line brothers or sisters: they continue to call each other that after joining their organization.

Alphas, Kappas, Omegas, and Deltas. I was initially disappointed but I decided I would have to worry about that later because I needed to stay focused on the step show. After purchasing our food we joined the others at Maggie's house and Ivory played music while we ate so that we could enjoy ourselves a little bit before the intensity of the competition set back in.

When we finished eating we headed back to Morehouse College, grabbed all of the props, costumes, and bags out of the cars, and headed to our dressing room. This time there were vendors selling paraphernalia lined up along one side of the hallway that ran parallel to the gym so Jazmin agreed to interview some of them regarding the items they are selling and their motivation to sell them at the step show. I went with the team to a locker room that had been assigned to us as our dressing room and we all got dressed in the first couple of pieces of our costumes: black pants and blue tank tops.

While the rest of the team members did their hair and makeup Samantha and I started setting up props. Our theme was *The Walking Dead* based on the AMC horror series (2010-present) by the same name that follows the events of a group in Georgia during the zombie apocalypse. While in Miami, Florida prior to the festival I had created two banners from gold wrapping paper with the words "CAUTION" and "DANGER" in letters cut from blue wrapping paper pasted on them vertically. We set up our two five-foot tall garment racks that are spray-painted gold and taped the banners onto them at the top, bottom, and sides. During this time Jazmin joined us in the dressing room to take a few pictures of us while we prepared ourselves, and then she went into the dark gymnasium to start taking pictures of the entire show when it began. Next, we took the

banners out into the hallway and spread them far apart from each other. Ivory helped us crisscross yellow caution tape between them so that they were connected.

When we returned to the dressing room we discovered that Nikki had painted Stefanie's face to look like a zombie using the face paint I had purchased. Stefanie periodically scared us as we continued to get dressed; she was already wearing her black pants and short-sleeved shirt. We braided a couple of small pieces of blue weave into our hair in random places, applied gold glitter to our lips, blue eye shadow to our eye lids, and put on our black mesh long sleeved shirts and gold studded belts. Our costume was our interpretation of Michonne, a leading black female character from the television show who wears dark jeans, a purple tank top, a brown leather vest, and a studded brown belt with a sword strapped on her back. We opted for the mesh shirts instead of a vest because Samantha insisted that sleeves make our arm movements look more precise.

Maggie and Mawi, Samantha's other line sister, joined us in the dressing room and Samantha explained the lighting cues to Maggie and told Mawi that she was going to help set up props on the stage. Finally, Samantha and I sat on the floor and while I added Sigmas to the outside of each stepper's boots out of gold tape she fixed the blue and gold candy-cane style tape on our wooden canes. During this time I noticed that it is very quiet and everyone seems to be tired, which I took as a bad omen since we are usually hyper and excited while we wait for our turn to take the stage.

During the Alpha performance someone instructed us to grab our props and wait behind the stage until they finished. Each stepper except Felicia put on a grim reaper cloak and we headed out of the dressing room. Stefanie grabbed the canes in the order that they were to be aligned on the stage. Mawi and Felicia grabbed the caution tape and



banners and Ivory and Maggie headed over to the area on the side of the gymnasium where the technicians were. While we waited, I noticed the Alphas' theme and I immediately got excited since it was from my favorite television show as a child. At this point in their show they were all dressed in black *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993-1996) costumes and forming a pyramid that represented the "Megazord," a combination of each Power Rangers' individual "Zord," or enormous mechanical fighting animal, in the shape of a human that wields a sword to fight large highly-skilled enemies.

After the Alphas finished their show the host of the step show, an Omega named Steve Brown, went out in front of the audience to make a couple of jokes before announcing us. He explained that he was going to "squash the AKA and Delta beef once and for all." He instructed them to do their call when he signaled to them as a symbolic battle. After giving each sorority a chance to do their call, he pretended to be a choir director and had them go back and forth, cutting them off by closing his hand to them. He ended with each sorority doing their calls at the same time and everyone laughed and clapped. After a few more jokes he finally introduced us, which was our cue to set up our props and get into our first formation to begin the show.

The stage was blacked out and the first thing that played was a video I created to introduce our theme, which began with three slow heartbeats accompanied by flashes of terrifying images from the television show. The last image was two doors that were chained together with "Don't Open. Dead Inside" written on them and zombie hands poking out of the center, and after a fourth heartbeat there was the sound of a door creaking open. Next, the ending snippet of the opening theme music and video played and blue light shined on stage with a blue spotlight on Felicia in the center of the stage

seated in chair position, balancing on one leg with the other crossed over it, and holding a cane across the top of her body parallel to the floor as if it were a weapon. Our banner was stretched across the back of the stage and our ten canes were aligned across the front of the stage in eight rows with two canes in each ending row. The rest of us were lined up along the front of the stage with our heads down standing motionless awaiting our cue as our sorors yelled our high-pitched sorority call “EE-YIP” from the audience.

The beat dropped from our introductory song, *Rich As Fuck* by Lil Wayne featuring 2 Chainz (2013), the spotlight turned white and transitioned into a variety of white and blue lights shining on stage, we all immediately took off our cloaks, jumped on stage, and joined Felicia to dance to our designated spots. Arranged in a pyramid with the point nearest to the audience, we began a choreographed dance that incorporated moves that highlighted our Miami, FL origins, a low, squatted shimmy where we rotate our shoulders to the back alternating between each shoulder accompanied by a slower body roll from the neck to the waist, and ended with each of the three rows peeling off from the front to the back and dancing to our next formation. The song ended with an explosion sound effect and we immediately began our first step. We started together by stepping as we turned around in a circle and then broke off into different sections where the groups on the sides continued the routine. Curtina and I were in the middle and got on one knee and then laid down flat on the ground with knees bent behind us. Samantha and Nikki cart wheeled over us to the front of the stage. Although there were microphones on stage I noticed how faint we sounded and while I hoped that this was just because the speakers were not turned toward us I still got a bad feeling about the team’s level of energy. We continued the step by moving into a line across the front of the stage and I

heard the “EE-YIPs” turn into “OHHHs” as some steppers messed up and caught back on. In our line we performed a sequence where every other stepper went down on one knee while the others remained standing, we all alternated clapping between our own legs and between the legs of the person to our right, and we finished this section of the step. We all stopped and yelled, “Freeze! Watch this!” bent over, lifted our left leg up onto the back of the person to our left, and stuck our arms out to the front holding up the sorority hand sign, with the ring finger and thumb down and showing the back of the hand with the first, middle, and little fingers up. My leg immediately dropped and as I scolded myself inside my head I continued to smile at the audience who is back to yelling “OHHH” at us in disappointment.

The first skit of the show began with a voiceover where we all talked about our disbelief that zombies had taken over and the white and blue lights turned yellow and blue. As Stefanie stumbled across the middle of the stage we pointed out that she was attacked by a zombie and considered “putting her out of her misery,” which we were unable to do because she disappeared off of the stage so we decided to continue the show. We arranged ourselves in two staggered rows by the end of the skit, the lights turned back to white and blue, and in this brief moment of silence on stage I noticed how loudly the audience was talking over our performance. Dreka cued the next step by yelling “Oh you don’t know ‘bout SGRho!” and we all joined her saying “Rho” while jumping in the air and continuing the step. We continued the chat as we stepped, jumping on the final word of each phrase: “The sisters of that blue and gold! We’ve got that flavor that’s so sweet!” We slowed down, continued a balance step on one foot, and yelled, “Now li-sten as we change...the...beat!” cueing the next sequence of the step. My section on the left

side of the stage balanced in chair position while cupping our right ears and listening to the other group step, and then we switched to stepping while the other group balanced and listened. The sequence ended with the group yelling “Awww snap!” as each individual added their own performative flair and thrust their arms out snapping on the last word. We paused with our fists together and yelled “Breakdown!” where we all began with a new sequence and yelled “Uh uh!” at the end of each segment. After a full cycle of this sequence my back row ran to the front of the stage and layered in a new beat where we hopped, kicked our right leg up in the air, and clapped under it. We all ended together with a final “Uh uh,” stood with our fists together, and yelled a high-pitched “YIP!” as we tilted our heads to the right. Our sorors in the audience did the call back at us to signify their approval and we waited a brief moment to catch our breath.

Samantha, standing in the center-front of the stage, slowly performed a snippet of our next step to cue the rest of us and we all joined in and formed a line down the center of the stage in height order. While we were in this line we alternated leaning to the left, right, and then back to the center. We performed the sequence a second time and arranged ourselves in three groups, two in the front on opposite sides of the stage and one between us in the back. Our sorors cheered until Stefanie did her zombie stumble across the stage to the front of my group to cue us. She forgot the beat so she made one up and stumbled off to the next group. As the senior stepper in my group I counted “1-9-2-2” quietly to Felicia and Dreka so that only they could hear me and we began our sequence. Stefanie layered in the cue for the second group and they began their sequence as we continued ours. Stefanie finally joined the center-back group and they all transitioned to the middle of the stage as they stepped. Stefanie continued to the front and Samantha and

Nikki headed toward the back. The point of this section was kind of a cat and mouse chase as the latter two tried to catch zombie Stefanie, alternating between the front and back of the stage, and when they caught up to her in the middle they pretended to kick her and she fell to the ground. We then all joined in a sequence we call “patty cake” where we stood with our legs apart in a V shape and rotated our torsos up and down in a circular motion, first clockwise and then counter-clockwise clapping across our arms and chest, then between our feet and the ground. We finished with a body roll that redirected our movements from top to bottom, ending with our fists together and cheers from the audience.

Stefanie got up, the lights turned back to yellow and blue, and a voiceover of Dreka yelled “Oh my God! Here she comes again!” So we ran around the stage frantically as a terrifying zombie grunt played and Stefanie stumbled off of the stage. We were arranged in a diagonal line across the stage in height order from the front left corner to the back right corner and Nadly, the shortest member of the team who was standing at the front of the diagonal, started our call and response chant based on the hook of *All Gold Everything* by Trinidad James (2012):

Nadly: Sigma all on my chain!  
All: What!  
Nadly: Gamma all on my ring!  
All: What!  
Nadly: Rho all on my watch!  
All: What!  
Nadly: Don’t believe me just watch!

Each time we yelled “What!” we individually did a quick move and stood back in line until the next one. Nadly powered down like a robot bent over with her arms in an upside down U shape and Samantha, the tallest member who was standing at the back of the

line, then began the following ripple up the line where each person yelled their designated phrase and held the associated position:

SGRho: squat facing the left side, arm stretch out toward the audience throwing up the hand sign

Blue and gold: arms crossed in front of chest throwing up the hand sign

In my heart: fists crossed over heart with torso twisted to the back

In my soul: bent over with fists crossed over chest

Right on time: finger pointing at imaginary watch on opposite hand

On my mind: fingers pointed at brain on each side of the head

All the time: finger pointing at imaginary watch on opposite hand

Nadly popped up and yelled, “She said all the time!” and did a dance to animate her part. She then began the movements of the ripple, and this time each person started one after the other, punctuating each movement with alternating steps, until it rippled down the line for eighteen counts and gradually increased in speed. Then we continued to punctuate our movements with alternating steps and switched to our arms pointing up and right, down and left, up and left, down and right, each time stretching out the arm on the designated side and bending the other arm across our chests in the same direction, and then arms bent at the elbows pointing up and finally down by our sides. As we were doing this we had arranged ourselves into three diagonal groups. In the same beat and still punctuating with a step the front group bent over and placed their arms out toward my center group, we did the same to the back group, and they did one more step toward the edge of the stage and sent it back up the line. After it reached the front, we ended by kicking up our right legs and dropping to the ground with our left legs bent behind us and arms stretched out. Our sorors cheered for us and I could hear them EE-YIPing as I lay on the ground exhausted and thankful that the next section was our fraternity tribute dance, which I considered somewhat of a break from the high intensity of the show thus far.

Nadly popped up and asked if we heard the sound of someone trying to contact us so we all stood up trying to figure out what was going on. Samantha pointed out that there was a radio, it played a very quick snippet of the songs associated with each of the fraternities in Miami, FL in deference order,<sup>17</sup> and we arranged ourselves in four groups, one on each side, one in the front, and one in the back, as we imitated each musically designated fraternity. *Dope* by Tyga featuring Rick Ross (2012) played and each group did a pose to represent the fraternity they were focusing on, again in deference order.

Alphas: Trenesse squatted down and crossed one arm over her chest and propped her other arm on it while quickly pulsing her hand up and down as if is the head of a snake and Dreka squatted into an ape pose.

Omegas: Samantha and Nadly both kicked out their left legs leaning on the other as it was bent at the knee, twisted their torsos around to the left, and placed their left hands at the base of their back and their right hands at the base of their neck with their elbows up.

Sigmas: Curtina and Felicia held the Sigma hand sign (thumb holding down middle and ring fingers) up with their right hands.

Iotas: Nikki and I squatted with our backs to each other and pretended to hold a bow in our hands with one hand slanted toward the ceiling and the other bent at the chest.

The lights flashed yellow, purple, blue, and red to represent the available colors of the fraternities, and when the beat dropped each group performed their own sequence in tribute to the organization they were representing. All of these fraternities cheered from the audience and I could feel the excitement on stage build back up as we danced. We ended in a final pose and the track said “SGRho music” as it switched to *Body Party* by Ciara (2013) for our Kappa tribute, which we performed separately out of respect for our

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<sup>17</sup> Each organization respects the chronology of the order in which each one was founded.

unofficial Indiana Love bond.<sup>18</sup> While the introduction to the song played blue lights shined on stage as Trenesse and Dreka shimmied and did Kappa kicks, which involved smoothly kicking their knees up and out and back in to their bodies and back down while standing in the front of the stage. When the beat dropped the lights flashed red and they faced the left side of the stage and shimmied toward the front, rotated on one foot toward the back, and as they came back to the front the two groups on the next row joined in and continued until my group in the back joined in. While we did this, the Kappas did their siren call as a sign of approval, which made me even more excited because I knew I had a solo part coming up soon. During this siren the Kappas yelled “Whoo!” for seven counts and “Ooo-ooo” over the eighth count, and yelled a call and response “Whoo!” eight times. To begin our transition to a line at the front of the stage, we did another movement called “bows,” which is short for elbows, with fists together making a circle outward from the body, turned to one side repeating that same motion with the arm closest to the audience, stood still again with both arms together, and turned to the other side repeating that movement once again with the arm closest to the audience. Then we switched to a different shimmy where our arms were down with hands clasped together and shoulders shaking quickly as we moved to a line in the front of the stage. In the line we hopped into a squatted scan where we slowly leaned our bodies in one direction with hands on the knees, and this movement was rippled down the line toward me. Everyone slapped their thighs, I popped up and shimmied for eight counts, and I hopped into a squatted shimmy that rippled down toward Curtina at the other end. She shimmied for eight more counts,

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<sup>18</sup> Kappa Alpha Psi and Sigma Gamma Rho were both founded in Indiana so while we do not share any official bond recognized by either organization we make reference to an unofficial bond called “Indiana Love” that represents this portion of our histories specifically in terms of our shared historical experience of extreme racial tensions.



sent the squatted shimmy ripple back to me, and I stood up and held the Kappa sign at waist level and looked off into the distance. The music ended and I could hear all of the Kappas and SGRhos cheering for us and doing their calls.

I placed my hands in front of me like poodle paws and wiggled down to pick up my cane to cue the next step and to adjust my hair and clothes. As I tapped the floor four times each stepper picked up her cane and we began our cane step. The lights switched to yellow and we stomped and tapped our canes on the floor as we transitioned to a V formation with the point in the center back. I jumped over Nadly and saw Stefanie was not there to toss a second cane to me so I made a quick frustrated decision to go pick up the cane and finish my sequence. While I was doing this Samantha and Felicia tossed their canes across the stage to each other and I heard the crowd screaming because Samantha dropped her cane after catching it, which is a stepping taboo. They all moved into a line with a space left open for me and I placed my second cane back on the floor, moved back into the line, and cued the next segment with four taps. The lights flashed blue and yellow and we began a sequence called “chaos” where we were all doing something different with our canes and interacted with each other by rolling on the ground, hopping over people, and swinging the cane over another person. My last movement was a roll under Curtina and she did not hop over me so I laid there in disappointment because I knew that looked terrible to the audience. After we finished our sloppily performed chaos we squatted down in our line with legs closed and Dreka did a cartwheel across the front of the stage toward the left and landed in a split as Felicia did one across the back toward the right and balanced on one leg, held her other leg up toward the ceiling, and they both held out the hand sign.

Finally, our exit song *Karate Chop* by Future featuring Lil Wayne (2013) played and we all danced to our last formation while the lights flashed yellow. Samantha and I both carried our canes to the front corners of the stage while the rest of the team performed a stroll between us toward the middle of the stage and they exited halfway through our cane performance. Since we have the best mastery of twirling the canes we performed a complex routine that began with one cane and after we picked up a second cane we each performed a different routine and ended together with our canes placed on each of our shoulders, held onto the hooks, and pranced off in opposite directions.

After everyone had exited the stage we ran back on to grab our props and Samantha and I made eye contact to share a look of disappointment because we knew the team did not perform to the best of its ability. The steppers started asking us how we thought the show went and we refused to answer until we got all of our stuff from the dressing room and found a private corner of the hallway to talk. They were surprised by our lack of confidence in the show and I tried to rush to take the props out to the car so that I could have a moment to myself to deal with my frustration. After being increasingly annoyed with the security guards at the door who initially did not want to let us back inside despite our wristbands, Samantha and I very slowly made our way to the section on the side of the stage where the rest of the team was watching the other performances. I chose to stand in the hallway and wait for all of the sorority performances to finish because I never watch the competition due to my nerves regarding what place I think we will get when they announce the winners.

After everyone performed Tiwa got on stage and announced the second and first place winners for the fraternities and the sororities. My suspicions were confirmed and

our organization was not called, meaning we placed third or fourth, and I found Jazmin so that we could leave. In the car, I talked to her about how disappointed and tired I was and we decided to go to bed so that we could save our energy for the next day's events.

1.4 Saturday, June 7, 2013

Saturday afternoon marked the highlight of the festival as the actual picnic happened on the campus of Morris Brown College, an HBCU located in the predominantly black Vine City community in Atlanta, GA. Regarding the selection of the location, Tiwa explained:

So we found the perfect idea to have Atlanta Greek Picnic on the plot of Morris Brown. And just for the simple fact that there's nowhere else in Atlanta you have the plots that we are able to use at a historical college. So that kind of gave the basis for where Atlanta Greek Picnic was born

He was referring to the Greek plots located in a central location at Morris Brown College as the justification for the location of the Saturday picnic. Each organization has a designated plot, usually located around a tree, where the letters and symbols are painted around the area to identify the organization. Within black Greek life only members are permitted to touch items that carry the letters or certain symbols and colors identified with the organization, and plots carry a similar prohibition. Usually, only members are permitted to occupy the space designated as their plot, and often members of the brother or sister organization are also invited into that space.

As is custom, my sorors from Miami, FL designed a grey t-shirt that said "BLOOD SWEAT TEARS" in three lines with the top and bottom rows in yellow and the middle row in blue. Connected to the "T" in "TEARS" was a string of ten white glitter circles and two red circles with plastic red jewels attached on top of them, representing our symbol of ten pearls and two rubies, and a yellow and blue striped cane hanging off of the "S" in "TEARS." I had to wait for them to get to the picnic to bring

my shirt so I wore jean shorts with a black tank top and carried a cane from the step show to signify my affiliation until they arrived.

Jazmin and I entered the huge field. To our left there was a stage with a three-foot tall gate in front of it and an elevated DJ booth on its left side with a few men hanging around, including the picnic hosts Jae Murphy, a Kappa from Howard University who has hosted the picnic the past couple of years, and Big Tigger, a radio personality and former host of BET's Hip Hop music video show *Rap City* (1989-2008). Music was playing loudly over the DJ's speakers and ahead of us to our right was the SGRho plot. We went over to discuss my expectations about the work ahead for the rest of the event. As we walked over I explained the restricted space rules to Jazmin so that no one would bother her about not being a member who might be touching any of our items. At the plot there was a tall tree with the Greek letters ΣΓΡ spray painted in yellow in a descending diagonal order surrounded by a large stripe of blue spray paint. About six feet in front of the tree there was a three-foot tall round mustard yellow vase with a blue rim, yellow roses growing out of it, and white rocks around the base. In front of that there were seven blue and yellow bricks lining the top of a seven-foot by four-foot blue number seven in brick pagers which was outlined in yellow brick pagers and more white brick pagers. To the left there was a yellow bench with two blue support legs.

Since we arrived around the time the event started there were not many people there so we used that to our advantage and took the opportunity to interview vendors and eat lunch. There was a paved pathway that extended around the field, and along the opposite side across from us a variety of vendor booths had been installed to sell paraphernalia, shoes, jewelry, food, and drinks. One vendor named Tariq Mix who sells

black Greek inspired paintings—as we approached him he was sketching a black man wearing a black and gold Egyptian pharaoh hat—agreed to be interviewed. He explained that he was not a member of any fraternity but that he goes out of his way to incorporate the voices of fraternity and sorority members in his paintings. He explained:

“How I did it was basically I go to each organization and I build a relationship with, you know, someone in those organizations. And I want to be very careful how I represent these Greek organizations. Again, because I know it's something near and dear and I know that representing you guys is a lot so I make sure that I go to someone. For instance, with this painting, this one is called "Origin of Old Gold." Now normally I'd name my paintings but I let the person who wanted it customized name it, in this instance, because I don't have a history of all the Greek cultures. So this one is called "Origin of Old Gold." I have it capture the sphinx in the back, the head wrap, and of course some of the hand signs that you guys do.”

Symbolism is a key part of black Greek life so Tariq Mix made sure to respect the quasi-propriety each organization has over its symbols. In our other interviews I found that most vendors were not so preoccupied with this form of deference. Those who were not members were instead more concerned with making sales and those who were members were using their membership as a platform to boost their sales as well. As we lingered around the vendors' booths I was periodically stopped by sorors who asked where I purchased the gold tape for my cane because most SGRho canes are usually wrapped in blue and yellow since stores do not sell electrical tape in gold. I explained to them that it was purchased online and told them the name of the website. I also noticed there were a

lot of Atlanta, GA police officers wandering around and I wondered to myself if all of this security was really necessary. I suspected that this was just another opportunity for them to police our black bodies.

Finally, someone announced that the stroll-off competition was about to start over the speakers so a crowd formed near the stage gate. Stroll-offs are competitions where a team from each organization has the opportunity to perform a routine that they have created either on a stage or in a designated space that is positioned in front of the audience and the judges. The routine is performed to a series of snippets from popular songs and a different routine is used for each song. Similar to step shows, teams will include an entrance, an exit, tributes, and disses into their routines. Stroll-offs usually lack the theatricality of step shows because of the difference in regulations and space. Teams are also allotted shorter time limits for their performances that are typically five to seven minutes so there is no time for excessive skits, elaborate costumes, special effects, and props.

The panel of alumni judges from each organization was seated in front of the gate facing the front of the stage, all of the teams congregated behind the stage waiting for their turn to perform. Jazmin and I made our way over to the left side of the stage behind the gate. Jae Murphy got on stage to introduce each team and to interact with the audience between each performance. After about half of the stroll teams performed, the Sigma team was announced and they scattered across the stage dressed in black shorts, socks, and sneakers with blue t-shirts that read DMV<sup>19</sup> Blue Magic in white letters with STROLL TEAM in black letters outlined in white on the front and line names and

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<sup>19</sup> DMV stands for DC, Maryland, and Virginia

numbers<sup>20</sup> in white on the back. They stood with their feet apart, head and arms down with hands clasped together and waited for the music to start. Some of the Sigmas and Zetas in the front section of the crowd held up their hand signs in support of their fraternity brothers and there were a number of camera phones raised in the air to record the performance.

The first song, *I'm Different* by 2 Chainz (2012) began with a simple staccato tune, played on a piano, the beat of which they accentuated with their movements. The majority of the performers made a variety of intense expressions on their faces to boost the entertainment level of their simple movements, and during the elongated space before the last note of the first phrase in the music they slowly tilted their heads to the side and make an evil face. They performed a different set of movements to accentuate the next phrase and nodded their heads while lip-syncing the first line of the song: "Mustard on the beat ho." They continued with their arms bent upward in a U shape accentuating the beat of the song with their movements and pivoting right and left, still wearing intense expressions on their faces as they lip-synced their remixed version of the song that said, "I'm Sigma, yeah, I'm Sigma" three times instead of the original "I'm different, yeah, I'm different" lyrics. When they got to the final line which said, "Pull up to the scene with my ceiling missing" they chanted over the music animating their words with a variety of jumping movements, and the Sigmas and Zetas in the audience started cheering.

When the next song *Dope* by Tyga featuring Rick Ross (2012) began they hopped into their next formation with one hand in the air and they stopped and hopped to each

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<sup>20</sup> While pledging, each initiate is assigned a number based on their location in the line of pledges. After the pledge process is finished each member is assigned a line name.

side of the stage in half time with the opposite arm stretched out. During this routine they incorporated stepping as they clap under their legs. The Sigmas and Zetas in the audience continued the cheering from the previous song into about the first ten seconds of this routine. The last line of the snippet “Ask her how my/how my tastes” played and they held up their hand sign, began to walk around in a circle around the stage, and stopped with their hands over their mouths.

They all lip-synced a line by rapper Rocko from *Umma Do Me* (2007) that said, “You just do you. Umma do me,” “Ball” by T.I. featuring Lil Wayne (2012) started, and as they all balanced on one leg with the other crossed over they yelled “P B S let’s go!” to cue the next routine where they hopped side to side moving their arms in a choreographed routine. After clapping their hands under the lifted leg, they reached behind them to touch the stage, did a series of claps under their legs, in front of them, and behind them, rocked to each side, and hopped back onto one leg holding up their hand sign. They did another half time hop on both legs while yelling over the music “This way!” (to the right side of the stage), “That way!” (to the left side of the stage), “This way!” (to the front of the stage), and “That way!” (to the back of the stage), clapped under their leg, spun around, and clapped under their leg again. As the bridge of the song played they did the Dougie, a popular dance move where you rock your body side to side, looking in the opposite direction, and alternate your arms between being bent up and out. They went back to clapping under their legs and touching the stage to end the song.

*All Gold Everything (Remix)* by Trinidad James, featuring 2 Chainz, T.I. and Young Jeezy (2013) played and they flexed their arms front to back as they transitioned to their next formation. A voiceover played where one of the performers interrupted and



announced, “We’re from the DMV. Let’s show them how we do it up north.” They all slid their hand down their faces and revealed a grit face<sup>21</sup> and Baltimore Club music started playing. The audience cheered and yelled “Hey!” “Whoo!” and “Yes!” to the beat of the song. This type of music has an extremely fast tempo so the team alternates hopping twice on each of their legs and performs a routine that involves a series of choreographed arm movements. Halfway through the song the middle section of five performers did a different routine as they yelled “Awww blue!” and chanted over the music. They all switched to slowly rocking right and left in unison as that song faded out and *Do It* by Mykko Montana featuring K Camp (2011) faded in. As they continued to rock, they animated the opening lyrics to the song:

We can start off on this floor: swept arms across the floor  
End up on that bed: arms stretched out, hands together and opening up to each side  
Rubbing through my head: swept each hand across top of head from front to back  
While I’m all between your legs: bent over with arms out as if they were holding someone’s legs open, some sticking tongue out.  
Imma hit it from the front: two bounces with arms bent upward, leaned torso to the front  
Back: leaned torso the back  
Side: leaned torso to the right  
Side: leaned torso to the left

When the last line of this section “Girl I love the way you” played, they held their hand sign up, spun around in a circle, the hook that repeated the phrase “do it” six times played, and they did the Sigma walk, during which time the Sigmas and Zetas in the audience cheered and started chanting over the music as a sign of their approval. This movement involved slightly bending the knees, rapidly twisting the ankles and heels left and right so that the entire leg shook quickly as they slowly rocked from side to side, and

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<sup>21</sup> Gritting is an exaggerated frown.

sweeping the hands over the head as they did a body roll from their necks to their waists. They stopped and did the popular dance called “cooking” where they held one arm out as if it is holding a bowl and pretended to stir with the opposite wrist while nodding the head and rocking left and right, and resumed their traditional hopping and stepping stroll movements as they transitioned into three lines with three people per line.

The next song was *We Still in This Bitch* by B.o.B. featuring T.I. and Juicy J. (2013), and in the three lines the back row rippled an arm movement to the front where they stuck out their right arm, swung their left arm across their body clockwise, and clapped their hands together. The middle row did the same thing in the opposite direction and the front row did it a final time in the same direction as the back row. The team yelled “Blue!” and one member from the line on the left side joined the center line, they all turned their back to each other, locked arms, and the two on each side lifted their legs up kicking and making silly faces as the other two holding their weight rotated around in a circle. When the beat dropped they rotated in a line around the stage while bouncing their arms up and down and they finished their routine and chanted “Phi Beta Sigma” over the music.

The next section of their performance to the song *Dance Like a Stripper* by M.E. (2011) was a tribute to the sororities. Four members of the team faced the front and the person on the left held both of his arms down with his hands bent out and head up as if he was an AKA. The next person did a Delta pose with his right arm down and out, left arm up and out, and head turned to the left. The next person formed a Z with his hands for the Zetas. The person on the left formed a Sigma with his hands for the SGRhos. The other performers were facing the back of the stage shaking their hips at the audience as if they

were imitating female strippers. As they all turned around everyone gave a thumbs up to the audience with the exception of the person in the middle that rolled up his shirt, leaned on one leg with his hips out, and placed his hands on his waist.

As the bass of *R.I.P.* by Young Jeezy featuring 2 Chainz (2013) played they transitioned to their next formation scattered across the stage and began their next routine when the lyrics started. They rocked to the left and right with their arms in an L shape holding up their hand sign, stopping in the center each time with their hands in the air. They held up their arms with their hands crossed and holding up the hand sign they pivoted around in a circle. They continued to hop, spin, move their arms around, and clap under their legs as the song finishes. They ended with another formation change, a jump in place with arms slightly bent at their sides, hands in fists, and a scream.

The audience cheered and the Sigmas chanted as they pretended to walk off the stage and turned around as a phone ringing sound effect played and they all turned back around to lip-sync a line from Meek Mill's *Dreams and Nightmares* (2012) that said, "Hold up wait a minute. Y'all thought I was finished?" and when the song mixed into *Back That Thang Up* by Juvenile featuring Mannie Fresh and Lil Wayne (1998) they went back into a routine with their traditional movements similar to those that have already been performed with the audience still cheering in approval of the unforeseen extension of the routine. They ended this segment with three low-fives, some to other team members and some to their own selves. They yelled "Blue Phi!" at the crowd and as they turned around to walk off the stage the Zeta's yell "Z-Phi" in a high pitched voice followed by the Sigmas in the audience finishing the call by yelling back "You know!" and the Zetas yelled "Z-Phi" one more time.

After the final teams performed, Jae Murphy announced that he wanted some people from the crowd to come to the stage to do the Harlem Shake while the judges' scores were being tallied. First, he chose a man and a woman from the audience to do the original dance Harlem Shake to *Special Delivery (Remix)* by G. Dep featuring Keith Murray, Ghost Face Killah, and Craig Mack (2003), one of the songs that brought the dance to the mainstream in the early 2000s. This dance involves a quickly shaking your shoulders with loose fists extending out from gently bent elbows and periodically sticking one shoulder up momentarily. After a few minutes of Jae Murphy and the others dance battling he invited more people to come to the stage to do the new Harlem Shake. This new version gained popularity through a variety of posts on YouTube and is performed to a House music song by the same name. During the buildup of the beat of the song there is usually one person wearing a mask dancing wildly alone and when the beat drops the room is suddenly filled with other masked people dancing frantically until a growl that ends the segment of the song. Since this was an impromptu version at the picnic, there were no masks and no shift from a singular person to a crowd. Instead, a crowd ran on stage and everyone contained himself or herself for the second part of the segment during which they all danced frantically.

After this distraction was over Jae Murphy announced that the AKAs and the Sigmas won the stroll off and their sorors and frat brothers cheered in the audience. I finally got in touch with my Miami, FL sorors to get my t-shirt and we all met up at the SGRho plot. The younger sorors went off to socialize and look at the items the vendors were selling while Jazmin and I stayed at the plot with Samantha, Mawi, and Maggie. The Kappa plot was next to ours and there was one very tall Kappa dressed in black

giving twirl lessons. I attempted to learn a new trick and beat my legs up with my cane in the process, as I was somehow never able to extend it far enough away from my body. When I finished with my twirl lesson I decided to get some interviews of non-black members who I noticed walking past the plot. Everyone seemed very receptive to answering my questions about their experiences and we collected interviews until the camera battery died. Shortly after this point the event was over and everyone headed out of the field to occupy their time until the parties later that night.

That night we went to the “Official AGP After Party” at the 755 Club at Turner Field. As usual, Jazmin and I arrived shortly after the event was scheduled to begin and there were not many people there. We were directed to the elevator so that we could go up to this long room that overlooked the baseball field. The DJ had his equipment set up at the far left end near the door we walked through and there were some people seated at a few small tables in the middle of this side of the room. Down past the tables there was another section with a bar along the wall to the right and a few steps leading up to another section of tables on the opposite side. Back near the DJ there was a crowd on the dance floor strolling so we joined them and recorded some of the stroll lines. After about an hour we went out into the lobby and ate some hors d’oeuvres before leaving to go to the “I Love the 90s” Alumni Party at 595 North. There were about ten people inside this small club so I made a quick decision to return to the original place where we could get a better representation of a black Greek party. Upon returning, we ran into my Miami, FL sorors and the bartender announced that the bar is free for the next ten minutes. Everyone rushed to the bar to quickly get as many drinks as they could before they had to pay and we picked a table across from the bar to drink. Once everyone finished Nikki and Curtina

announced that they wanted to do the “sexy stroll” and I decided to lead the line through the crowd since I did not know the stroll. I faced them with my arm in the air holding up our hand sign as they slowly rocked their hips side to side while bending down and patted their thighs to the rhythm of the music. I considered catching on to the simple movements of the stroll and eventually decided against it because of how difficult it was to maneuver through the crowd of other stroll lines and people dancing. When the song changed I went back over to Jazmin whom I discovered was guarding purses. I apologized and took them from her so that she could move around freely. When the party ended, everyone spilled out down the stairways into the parking lot to go home. I said goodbye to my sorors who were driving back down to Miami, FL the next day, and Jazmin and I left.

1.5 Sunday, June 8, 2013

That afternoon was the “AGP Close Out Day Party” at the 5 Season’s Brewery, which had a small turnout due to the rain. We went upstairs to the roof where everyone else was and I immediately ran into an Iota from Baltimore, MD that I met after a step show at Morgan State University and with whom I took a couple of pictures. We went back into the open space full of short tables on the far side and I noticed a large group of SGRhos and Kappas that had taken over the tables located on the side closest to the stairs. On the opposite side there was a small group of AKAs, a couple of Iotas, and a few Sigmas from Miami, FL who were strolling in the open space. Everyone was dressed casually with many of the women wearing maxi dresses and sundresses and the men wearing jeans, khaki pants, t-shirts, and button up shirts. There was a room behind this space with a bar along the left wall and tables on the other side, many of which were filled with Sigmas and Zetas. The DJ and Tiwa were in the far corner. Most people were socializing, with

the occasional stroll line dancing in the middle of the patio. After taking a big group picture everyone decided to go home.

## 2. CONCLUSION

This ethnographic description unambiguously emphasizes the role this festival plays in consolidating the national black Greek community. This discursive space participated in the creation, perpetuation, and transformation of a variety of identities as they are placed in contact with each other and even evaluated during competitions (Forman 2002).

Participants had a specific set of organization-based identities that were activated by their engagement with this black Greek context. This activation was motivated by a desire to successfully blend with the in-groups, underscoring the impact of environment and interaction, specifically the notion that we sense place through our ability to inscribe upon “the material and social stuff gathered there” (Gieryn 2000:472; see also Altman and Low 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; McDowell 1999; Rotenberg and McDonogh 1993; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner and Tajfel 1982; Walter 1988).

As I will show in the next chapter, the significance of the processes of black Greek life I have described in this chapter has to be found in their obvious and unambiguous reproduction of the values of respectability as historically defined by the black middle-class. This preoccupation of black Greek life with black middle-class values is made most evident when one considers the networking event catered toward young black Greek professionals that takes place every year during the Picnic. This attachment to black middle-class values emerged as well as during the aforementioned semi-

structured interviews, during which participants uncovered their individual engagement with respectability.

Many of the staged performances revealed the double standard about eroticism, which appears as a form of misogynist patriarchy, accompanied by the imposition of feminine conservative sexuality. As demonstrated through the description of the Sigma stroll performance, it is considered acceptable for fraternities to make overt references to sexuality. Still, as demonstrated through pieces of my SGRho team's step show performances and more transparently through other performances, which I discuss in the subsequent chapters, there are moments at which sororities subvert this expectation and instead present their own demonstrations of sexuality. The performances under scrutiny in this research are therefore not simply reproducing traditional respectability. They are also contributing to their transformation.



### CHAPTER 3: BLACK IDENTITY SCRIPTING PROCESSES

As many scholars have shown, performances provide the opportunity to performers to consciously negotiate between the available racial, gender, and sexual scripts he/she has selected to construct his/her identification (Adair 2013; al Faruqi 1978; Boddy 1989; Broch-due et al. 1993; Coombs-Schilling 1989, 1991; Cowan 1990; Deaver 1978; Heath 1994; Kapchan 1994; Lindisfarne 1994; Oware 2009; Shay 1995; Talle 1993; Tsing 1993; Wagner 1997).

In this dissertation, I am primarily concerned with choreographed performances that operate as a catalyst for identification processes. Choreography reinforces the narratives surrounding dance because: “not only is dance always being mediated by words as it is taught, scripted, performed and watched but dance is also often highly formalized and stylized; even untrained dance is culturally learnt and culturally located” (Nash 2000:658). Dance often exposes gender/class conflicts regarding sexually provocative dance movements and it operates in relation to class, race, gender, etc. as well as to erotic sexuality (al Faruqi 1978; Cowan 1990; Deaver 1978; Heath 1994; Kapchan 1994; Savigliana 1995; Shay 1995; Wagner 1997).

The exploration of fraternity and sorority performances reveal black identities at the confluence of traditional middle-class values with Hip Hop aesthetics. Contemporary constructions of black middle-class masculinities and femininities are based on the traditional politics of respectability, which have developed as a response to the negative historical stereotyping of black people. Black popular culture, on the other hand, has had for objective to deconstruct the conservatism that dominates middle-class values, particularly in relation to sexuality.

Black fraternity members are confronted with damaging mainstream depictions of violence and hypersexuality. For example, T. Elon Dancy describes a four-dimensional model of black masculinity that honors violence and aggression: “(1) ‘Cool’ (postures or gestures of calmness and detachedness particularly in anxious moments), (2) ‘hard’ (hypermasculine and aloof), (3) ‘down’ (defending issues, realities, and concern across African American communities), and (4) ‘real’ (culturally authentic to a social construction that is ‘black’ and ‘man’)” (2011:102; see also DeSantis and Coleman 2008; Jones 2004; Ray 2011). Black sorority members encounter gendered expectations of respectability within their respective organizations, at home, and through damaging mainstream depictions of black feminine sexuality. Black middle-class femininity has been constructed as a response to the historical representations of defeminization based on the physically unattractive maternal character named “Mammie” from the movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the angry black female character named “Sapphire” from the television show *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951-1953), and the hypersexual Jezebel persona based on the Biblical figure by the same name who represents promiscuity and using one’s beauty to manipulate men (French 2012; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009). Here, I investigate several demonstrations of black middle-class genders and sexualities through costumes and coordinated attire, choreographed performances, and interview commentary, as well as how these black identity scripts are regulated through expectations associated with the specificity of performance spaces.

#### 1. PRESENTATIONS OF HEGEMONIC BLACK MASCULINITY

While black masculinities follow the Euro-Americo-centric model of hegemonic masculinity, they are also “by necessity collective in nature” as black men are confronted

with racism (Akbar 1990; Connell 1995; Dancy 2011; McClure 2006; Ward 1990). Black men must therefore create spaces for emotions and vulnerability that align with the hegemonic masculinity model and also allows them to manage their subordinate racialized position in society (Dancy 2011). Ricky L. Jones (2004) explains that ritualized aggression, which perpetuates the aforementioned four-dimensional model of black masculinity established by Dancy (2011), offers an outlet to address the vulnerability that results from that subordination. Ritualized aggression is instilled through the initiation process as pledges carry their “authentic self” or “core identity” and they are instilled with the “fraternal self” that represents the organization’s collective identity (Jones 2004). Ritualized aggression also validates one’s membership since non-pledged members are often not respected.

Many of the fraternities extend their subscription to the ritualized violence and aggression narrative into their choreographed performances that are high in intensity and often include acrobatics and other demonstrations of physical strength. Many of the fraternities will grit their faces as they perform, which signifies that they pledged before being initiated into their organization. All of the fraternity step shows had some type of violent or aggressive theme. For example, the members of the Kappa Alpha Psi (Kappa) step team were secret agents, the members of the Phi Beta Sigma (Sigma) step team were football players, and the members of the Iota Phi Theta (Iota) step team were homicidal cyborgs. As manhood is one of their cardinal principles the members of the Omega Psi Phi (Omegas) are recognized as one of the most robust fraternities, which is made evident in their traditional hopping style of performance during the step show.

During their step show performance, the Omega hop team was dressed in black collared shirts and dress pants, purple and gold striped ties, their signature gold military boots with purple laces, and camouflage army vests. Before cueing the first hop with a chant, one of the Omegas did their distinct barking sound to punctuate his arm movements, slapped his face several times, and bended over to shout. The first routine was marked by high kicks with claps under the legs, flexing the arms, stomping, and hopping to transition around the stage. The team stopped and bent over with their right arms extended out while gritting their faces and one of the performers in the center back jumped over the two in the center front to cue the next hop with another chant. After rearranging themselves into a line from the front to the back of the stage they performed an elaborate ripple routine while chanting “ripple” and “Que Psi Phi”<sup>22</sup> as they moved. At the end, the person in the back ran in front of the line to drop down into a half split facing the right and then up and back down into one facing the left. The line behind him was holding up the Omega hooks with arms up, elbows bent outward, wrists bent in toward their faces, and hands pointed outward, and they bent down to varying heights so that they were ascending upward toward the back. The Omega who was standing in front of them turned around and jumped on top of the line into their raised arms and they all lifted him above their heads so that he was face down with his feet extended toward the audience and his head toward the back of the stage.

As the audience cheered in admiration of the stunt one of the Omegas did the barking noise to cue the next hop. The one in the front of the line yelled, “It’s time to,” and every other person in line joined him to repeatedly chant, “ripple.” As they chanted

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<sup>22</sup> Que (pronounced like the letter “Q”) is often substituted for the Greek letter Omega in reference to members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity.

they released their hands so that the others were left holding the Omega in the air, and they fanned out to both sides of the line and back to the center to switch with the other group. After repeating this cycle one additional time the last group stayed out to perform a different beat as the center group spun around in a circle. As they yelled an extended “ripple” over the last two beats, the other group joined them back in the center so that they could switch and come back to the line. To end the step, they said “tick, tick, tick, tick” as they rocked the elevated Omega from side to side, and then they threw him off to the right. He landed on his feet while loudly yelling, “boom” as he immediately began the next hop routine, and the audience cheered loudly.

After finishing the next hop one of the Omegas walked around the stage while singing a chant, during which he was joined by different sections of the rest of the team: “It’s so hard, so hard, so hard to pledge Omega (*Group 1: Omega Psi Phi*). So hard, so hard to pledge Omega (*Group 2: Uh-Que Psi Phi*). So hard, so hard to pledge Omega Psi Phi.” They all joined in saying, “Well, well, well” and repeated the chant while performing the next physically intense routine. They stopped in three columns and sang, “Que Psi Phi” to the same tune while alternating their arms between holding clenched fists at their waists to throwing Omega hooks above their heads. This song was then incorporated into the next hop during which each group performed a different sequence that was cued by the Omega in the front of the center group. He faced the team and pretended to direct the group like a choir director, jumped and spun around in the air, and landed in a half split with his right hand on the ground and his left arm raised as an Omega hook. More singing, chanting, acrobatic stunts, and high kicks accompanied the

last physically intense hop routine and they strolled off the stage to *R.I.P* by Young Jeezy featuring 2 Chainz (2013).

Overall, the Omega show was extremely physically intense in terms of their hopping style of performance, execution of stunts, and their ability to incorporate chanting and singing as they hopped which made their routines even more exhausting. In addition to the chant about how hard it is to pledge Omega they also sang the following two verses during their show:

Singer #1: Somebody tell me why, (All: zoom, zoom, zoom) why were we treated so bad. (All: zoom, zoom, zoom) Oh I want to know, I need to know, I got to know why were we treated so bad. (All: zoom, zoom, zoom) Oh I want to know, I need to know, I got to know why were we treated so bad. (All: zoom, zoom, zoom)

Singer #2: All of my love, my peace and happiness, I'm gonna give it to Omega. All of my love, my peace and happiness, I'm gonna give it to Omega.<sup>23</sup>

The Negro Spiritual style of these chant songs seems to align with the Omega founders' anti-elitist aim of establishing an organization that did not discriminate based on status. These chants recognize the history of the systematically enforced devaluation of black people in the United States while also making reference to the ritualized aggression that is inherent to black Greek-letter organization (BGLO) initiation processes. Regarding the Omegas' athleticism, Fred, an Omega from Maryland who participated in the stroll competition, commented,

Omega Psi Phi promotes strong black men, both physically and mentally. One thing that we like to stress is fitness, you know, being Omega strong, being fit.

You know, and if your body's fit then your mind is more open to being able to

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<sup>23</sup> Many other organizations have their own versions of the second verse that is altered so that it includes their own name.

process different things and so that's what we like to really promote. Fitness as well as, you know, being mentally tough.

Keith, another Omega from Washington, D.C., echoed this description saying,

I would say that there's no one image of an Omega man. You have the one image where he's masculine and, you know, cut and ripped and I think that's the manhood side of it. But we're also very intellectual. If you sit down and talk to us and get to know us we have a lot of knowledge.

Fred and Keith are both sure to underscore that Omega masculinity is a combination of both physical and intellectual ability. While scholarship is another one of their cardinal principles, both men are sure to address their dominant stereotype of physically demonstrated hypermasculinity.

As a black middle-class phenomenon, elitism has been a significant characterization of all BGLOs. Dancy II (2011) explains that black fraternities occupy a space of “community patriarchy” due to their supposed elitist position in the wider black community as leaders and providers. As I explained in “Chapter 1: The Development of the Black Middle-Class and the Formation of Social Status Organizations,” the members of Alpha Phi Alpha (Alphas) and the Kappas, which are the only two National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities to have been founded at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), are often recognized as the most elite organizations of the entire group. They are praised for being the most superior old-guard fraternities and also criticized for having the most discriminatory recruitment practices (Graham 1999). While it is not my intention to qualify this characterization of either organization as being valid I would like to point out the moments where these two organizations do circulate

narratives of elitism. For example, although they are not the only fraternity to incorporate scholarship as an official aim or principle of their organization the Alphas are the primary one that uses it as a defining trait of prestige and status. Regarding the key characteristics of the fraternity, Roodgery, one of the Alpha steppers from Georgia, commented,

I would say what separates us is the motto of being the first at all things. If you want to be a leader you have to be the first person to do something and that just portrays more leadership, to be first.

Cedric, another Alpha from Georgia, added,

The thing that separates Alphas from other fraternities is like if you look through history Alphas are usually more involved in the political side and the social side of things, as you get Thurgood Marshalls, Martin Luther Kings. That's what they're more present at. You know, Ques and Sigmas are more present in entertainment and then, you know, the Kappas are kind of all around. So you know in that regard, since I wanted to be a college professor, that social aspect really fits me. I'm going to be honest about the Iotas. The Iotas have TC Carson from *Living Single*.

The Alphas portray themselves as a fraternity of leaders and activists, and while all BGLOs have notable members from various backgrounds Cedric dismisses the Omegas, Sigmas, and Iotas for being more prominent in the entertainment sector.

To further illustrate their claims to scholarship and respectability, toward the end of the Alpha's stroll competition performance one of the team members pulled his fraternity graduation stole out of his pocket and put it around his neck for the remainder of the show. They also have a traditional performance style that is characterized by almost



robotic arm and hand movements that are commonly punctuated by one or two members blowing whistles similar to the way a marching band drum major would. Their performances are very militaristic in style and their meticulous precision demonstrates their preoccupation with a staid brand of masculinity.

The Kappa teams also demonstrated their subscription to elitist black masculinity during their step and stroll performances. In the middle of their stroll performance the Kappa team threw money into the audience as part of their routine to *Money Baby* by K Camp featuring Kwony Ca\$h (2014), thus demonstrating their concern for financial status as a marker of superiority. This performance of elitism is illustrative of Peter Wilson's discussion of reputation and respectability, during which he explains, "Money is but a means to the procurement of the signs of accomplishment" (1969:76). Also, the Kappa step team performed a "diss" skit, or a routine to disrespect or tease another organization, to mock the other fraternities about halfway through their show, and while the purpose of this skit is to participate in the competition between fraternities over which one is the best there is also evidence of elitism, particularly in reference to the Sigmas and the Omegas.

To begin, the lights on the blacked out stage came up to reveal the Kappa step team lined up along the back of the stage with four men dressed in the colors of the other fraternities holding their arms and heads down, and the audience briefly laughed in anticipation of what was to come. The *James Bond Theme* by Monty Norman (1962) played in the background and a voiceover began that involves one of the Kappa steppers performing a monologue about finding a representative of the other fraternities to "take them out."

### Alpha diss

- “First day on the job. This should be easy.” The imitation Alpha was wearing a gold t-shirt and dark jeans that are cuffed at the bottom lifted up his head, smiles, and pulled his pants up high so that he looks nerdy.
- “Let’s start with these guys in the black and gold.” The imitation Alpha bent his right arm upward, bent his wrist so that his hand is pointed toward his face, and fanned himself.
- “Ha! Found him in the study room going ape.” Kappa circled around the fake Alpha. “So I took him out.” Boom sound effect played as Kappa pretended to upercut the imitation Alpha who fell dramatically to the ground.

### Sigma diss

- “Next, I have to find this blue guy.” The imitation Sigma was wearing a blue t-shirt tucked into his blue and white plaid boxers that are pulled up above his dark jeans that were rolled up to his knees and he is not wearing any shoes. He held up the Sigma hand sign with both hands and as he shuffled his feet left and right and his knees in and out the audience laughed loudly.
- “I just knew he’d be line dancing at Joe’s Crab Shack.” The Kappa folded his right arm and placed his left hand on his face as he shook his head.
- “Typical behavior. So I took him out.” Boom sound effect played as Kappa jumped and pretended to scissor kick the imitation Sigma who fell backward so that two of the Kappas behind him could catch him to lay him on the ground.

### Omega diss

- “Ugh!” The imitation Omega was wearing a light purple t-shirt and khaki pants squats down, threw up the Omega hooks and stuck his tongue out. Then he pretended he was a dog and placed his hands on the ground as he kicked one leg in and out behind himself like a dog kicking up dirt.
- “I didn’t even have to look for this next one. Caught him running around in the street barking and carrying on, ugh. So I took him out from a distance” Kappa pretended to shoot the imitation Omega who fell backward to the ground.

### Iota diss

- “See, all done” The imitation Iota was wearing a brown t-shirt and khaki pants and started jumping around and waving his hands to get the Kappa’s attention.
- “Oh wait, isn’t there someone else?” The Kappa crossed his right arm and rubbed his left hand down his chin as if he was thinking. The imitation Iota continued to jump, stomp, and point at himself while the audience laughed loudly.
- “Hmmm, nah I think that’s everyone but let me clear the area just in case” The Kappa pretended to shoot around the stage twice and the imitation Iota fell backward and one of the other Kappas caught him.

The Kappas tend to portray themselves as suave “Pretty Boys” so they teased the Alphas for their emphasis on scholarship by presenting the nerd stereotype, and they also mocked the Alpha’s unofficial snake symbol because the imitation Alpha placed his arm up as if he is going to do their signature snake arm movement and fanned himself instead. The Sigmas were criticized for being unsophisticated through the way the imitation Sigma is dressed, barefoot with his shirt tucked into his boxers, his movements which they called line dancing, and their decision to place him at an informal seafood restaurant. The Omegas shared a similar criticism as the imitation Omega pretended to be a dog in reference to the organization’s unofficial Que Dog symbol,<sup>24</sup> and the Kappa stepper decided to shoot him from a distance. Lastly, since the Iotas are often teased for being the youngest and least popular organization, the Kappa pretended to be unaware of their existence. The Kappas therefore demonstrated the way elitism is a factor of black fraternal masculinities based on their preoccupation with income and respectability through valuation of sophistication and refinement.

### 1.1 Black Masculine Eroticism and Performative Phallic Symbols

While every fraternity may demonstrate some version of eroticism the Kappas are generally perceived as one of the most hypersexual organizations, particularly in reference to their choreographed performances. At the end of their cane routine to *Believe It* by Meek Mill and Rick Ross (2012) they pulled women’s lingerie out of their pockets and held them up for the audience to see before throwing them into the crowd. Also, their traditional style of movement is usually very fluid and they perform a less brawny brand of masculinity that is instead suave and sexual. For example, the Kappa stroll team glided

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<sup>24</sup> The Que Dog is unofficial bulldog symbol that is associated with the members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.

and rolled their bodies as they moved, and they included slow standing and low squatted shimmies. Five of the ten fraternity performances included some specific performative reference to sex, which is also exhibited through their explicit song selection:

Alpha Step

*Body Party* by Ciara (2013)

Yeah, right there

No, right there

I was having fun

I hope you're having fun too

My body is your party, baby

Nobody's invited but you, baby

I can do it slow now. Tell me what you want

Baby put your phone down. You should turn it off.

Cause tonight it's going down. Tell your boys it's going down

We in the zone now. Don't stop

You can't keep your hands off me

Kappa Step

*Next Friday* (2000)

Uncle Elroy: I'm faded, feeling X-rated.

It's Mr. Nasty time.

Suga: Oh Mr. Nasty time!

Music from *Anywhere* by 112 (1998)

*Ready* by Fabolous featuring Chris

Brown (2013)

Bed, no

Don't need a master room, don't need to set the mood

She like, "yeah, yeah"

One touch, one touch, she gon' give me all the love

*The Nasty Song* by Lil Ru (2009)

See girl I know that you a freak

She slidin' down the pole

The way she lookin' at me

I'm givin' her my dough

So won't you put that pussy on me

Yeah girl, I said won't you put that pussy on me

Kappa Stroll

*IV Play* by The Dream (2013)

I can give a fuck about the foreplay

I want it now

I'm talkin' straight sex

Stop fuckin' around

I can give a fuck about the foreplay

I want it now

I'm talking straight sex

Stop fucking around

None of these bitches ain't got nothin' on you honey, body bumpin'

I'm just saying, I'm all open on you

Sigma Stroll

*Do It* by Mykko Montana featuring K Camp (2011)

We can start off on this floor

End up on the bed

You rubbin' through my head

While I'm all between your legs

Imma hit it from the front, back, side, side,

Girl I love the way you do it, do it, do it, do it, do it, do it

Girl I love the way you do it

Iota Stroll

*How Many Drinks?* by Miguel (2013)

Frustration watching you dance

Invitation to get in them pants

Come closer baby so I can touch

One question, am I movin' too fast?

'Cause I ain't leavin' alone

I feel like I could be honest, babe

We both know that we're grown

That's why I wanna know

The Kappas were the only organization that did this during both the step and stroll competitions and they were also the only ones who used songs that required censorship per the guidelines of these competitions, which they failed to do.

The phallus was a common symbol throughout the erotic fraternity performances, and through these routines they participated in the competition to most pleasurably interact with vaginas. I would like note that while this theme is based on female sexual satisfaction the underlying focus is male virility, which can be misogynist as women are relegated to penetrable bodies rather than participants in the physical pleasure that is experienced during sex. Hegemonic black masculinities are inherently patriarchal and therefore create a hierarchy of power between black men and women even within the dominant discourses of racial oppression (Armstrong et al. 2006; Boswell and Spade 1996; Jenkins 2012; Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990). I would also like to underscore the fact that while they are commonly characterized as one of the most sexually explicit fraternities, the Omegas did not include any routines into their staged performances that would demonstrate this.

The Kappa teams performed their own ways to invoke the phallus as a symbol of black masculinity that were particular to their organization. During the Kappa step show the team grabbed the hooks of their canes in their left hands, rotated their left arms around to the back, and placed the canes between their legs. They shimmied<sup>25</sup> their upper-bodies while holding onto the portion of the cane that was extended in front of them with their right hands so that it moved in a circular motion along with their shimmying shoulders, and then they released that hand to tap the cane on the stage

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<sup>25</sup> Shimmying involves rotating one's shoulders to the back alternating between each shoulder

between their feet. The Kappa stroll team wore red sleeveless shirts with an “ATL Nupes”<sup>26</sup> logo on the front and “Finesse the Box” on the back. “Box” is a slang term for the vagina and finessing can refer to either the tongue or the fingers, which are both representations of the phallus in this sense. They also incorporated turns into their routine to ensure that the audience and judges saw the back of their provocative shirts. They eventually took their shirts off and performed the rest of their show shirtless. At the end of their performance Jae Murphy came on the stage and announced that he had the “golden ticket” as he held up condoms in gold wrappers.

At the step show, the Alpha team performed a phallic-centered sorority tribute during the second half of their *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993-1996) themed show. During this description I will discuss a variety of phallic symbols that are common throughout the five sexual fraternity routines, making reference to the other fraternities as they become relevant. Also, the Alphas are not generally considered to be one of the most hypersexual fraternities but I am using their routine as a model to discuss the phallus as a symbol in erotic fraternity routines since they incorporated the most popular ways into a single routine. The tributes began with the following skit that referenced each sorority in founding order with the exception of the members of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKAs) who were referenced last because the unofficial Lyle Love/Phirst Pham<sup>27</sup> bond between the organizations:

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<sup>26</sup> Kappas often refer to each other as NUPEs, which is an acronym for a phrase that is only known by members of the organization.

<sup>27</sup> AKA founder Ethel Hedgeman married the president of the Alphas’ Beta chapter, George Lyle (Evans 2008; Kimbrough 2003), leading to the inter-organizational bond known as Lyle Love. As the first recognized black sorority and fraternity they are also referred to as the Phirst Pham, stylized with the Ph based on the Greek letter Phi that is included in the Alphas’ name.

Alpha #1: Alright guys, let's get in Alpha formation Oh Six. It's time to take 'em down. Guys, what are you doing? It's time to fight the next monster!

Alpha #2: (red lights on stage) Chill bro! I just gotta like the Delta Ranger's new pic on Instagram. She's got this new crimson battle suit lookin' forta-licious. (Deltas in audience cheer and do sorority call)

Alpha #3: (blue lights on stage) Y'all see the Zeta Ranger's pic though? Let's just say somebody throw me a straw because uh, I'm thirsty. (Zetas in audience cheer and do sorority call)

Alpha #4: (blue and yellow flashing lights on stage) But y'all can y'all say power up? The SGRho Ranger must have had ninjas in her pants 'cause that body is kickin'! (SGRhos in audience cheer and do sorority call)

Alpha #1: (pink and green flashing lights on stage) Well fellas, while y'all are likin' pictures on Instagram I got a date with the Ah-kah Ranger<sup>28</sup> (Stepper 1 and additional stepper stomp and stand in ivy stance with feet together, head up, arms at sides, wrists bent so hands point outward; AKAs in audience cheer and do sorority call)

Alpha #5: You guys, I got it! Why don't we just throw them all a party?

With the exception of the reference to dating the AKAs, this skit was a direct signification of the sexualized black female body as the team reacted to the fictional photographs that were posted on social media by a representative of each sorority. The members of Delta Sigma Theta (Deltas) often refer to themselves as having fortitude so the Alphas combined that word with delicious to mark her "crimson battle suit" as sexually appealing. Alpha #3 explained that after seeing the Zeta Phi Beta member's (Zeta's) photograph he was "thirsty," a slang term that meant he was extremely attracted to her. Finally, they made a pun about ninjas being in the Sigma Gamma Rho member's (SGRho's) pants because her voluptuous body was "kickin'." As Alpha #4 said this he

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<sup>28</sup> AKAs are sometimes referred to as the phonetic pronunciation of their acronym, Ah-kah.

moved his hands in a downward motion along an invisible female hourglass shape, highlighting the big breasts, small waist, and wide hips.

As the introduction to *Body Party* by Ciara (2013) played, dim lights shined on stage, and women in the audience cheered. The cheering faded away as the Alphas arranged themselves into a triangle with the point at the front of the stage. Some of them rubbed their hands across their mouths and the Alpha that was the front point of the triangle slowly spun around in a circle. When the first verse of the song began and they started the routine the women in the audience cheered loudly and continued cheering throughout the entire routine. The Alphas brought their left arms up with elbows pointed out toward the left and wrists bent so that their hands were pointed away from their bodies and they pushed that arm to the left as they squatted down and leaned to the left. They brought the right arm up to join the left and repeated the same motion on the right. This movement represented them spreading a woman's legs apart and their hands were centered around their faces to indicate that they were placing their mouths on the vagina to perform cunnilingus, thus demonstrating that the tongue is an extension of the phallus.

Other fraternities incorporated similar movements into their routines for this same purpose. In "Chapter 2: Atlanta Greek Picnic as a Quasi-Diasporic Black Greek Space" I described the Sigma performance during which they did a quicker leg opening motion with their hands and stuck their tongues out between them as the lyrics of the song said, "While I'm all between your legs." During their stroll performance, the Iotas placed each hand in front of their face, holding up their hand sign of the thumb sticking out, fingers pointed up, and pointer finger bent down, and they swept their hands away from their faces to reveal their tongues that were quickly flicking up and down.



While still in that squat, the Alphas placed their right hand inside their left elbow and scooped their upper bodies toward the floor, beginning with their extended left arm, and back up into an elevated squat with their left elbow propped up on the right hand and their wrists bent so that their hands were pointed at the audience. As they slowly sank down into a lower squat they quickly pulsed their hands up and down to represent the tongue of their unofficial snake symbol and moved their shoulders to the left and back to the right on the last beat. They continued the snake movement with the same shoulder moves on the beat as they leaned to the left and back to the right. That section moved from the tongue to the hand as a phallus as both the pulsating hands and snake arms alluded to contact between the vagina and both the hand and the penis, respectively. Next, they placed their fists on stage between their legs to signify their unofficial ape symbol and then placed each hand behind them so that they were in a bridge position. They closed their legs and quickly thrust their hips in the air before lowering down into a seated position and doing a backwards roll so that they were on their stomachs. At that point the cheering that had faded down a little got loud immediately. While on their stomachs the Alphas repeatedly lifted their legs in the air and slowly rolled their bodies down beginning with their heads and ending with their feet.

Variations of hip thrusting were a common trend throughout the sexual fraternity routines. The Kappa step team got into the same bridge position that the Alphas did, lifted each foot up, out, and back down to the floor, and did a roll with their hips up into the air while holding out with their left hands the Kappa hand sign of the thumb and pointer finger touching with the other three fingers up. Both the Kappa step and stroll teams incorporated the other aforementioned body roll that begins with the legs in the air.

The Sigma stroll team thrust their hips to the front, back, and each side as the lyrics to the song for that routine said, “Imma hit it from the front, back, side, side.” The Iota stroll team winded their waists as they pulled back an imaginary bow and arrow on their right sides, clap, placed their right fists on their left elbows and bend their left arm up as if it is a shield, and clapped.<sup>29</sup> They did a rhythmic step to the right and back to the left and then went back into winding their waists to each side with their arms bent upward so that their fists were on their chests. They reached out and aggressively slammed their arms and hands on their crotches as if they were penetrating a woman who was bent over in front of them. Penetration was the focus of all of these fraternity routines because their motions were concentrated around their pelvises.

The Alpha step team hopped into a squatted position facing the right side of the stage with their fists between their legs, and then they slowly rose up and clapped before doing a slow ape walk. With the left hand in the air and the legs slightly bent, they took a step to the front crossing their back right foot in front of the front left foot and then stepping forward with the left foot as they swept their arms away from their bodies. They took a quick step back, raised their left arms back in the air, did a quick pelvic thrust, and repeated this sequence one additional time. The performer in the front turned to his right, stuck his right foot out, and clasped his hands close to his body as if he was blowing into his hands to warm them up, and this movement rippled back to the last row. They all turned to the front and did a quick shiver with their hands across their chests as they squatted down and back up. These last movements made reference to them being the “Ice Cold Brothers” since their organization was founded during the winter in New York.

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<sup>29</sup> The bow and the shield are both performative symbols for the Iotas.

I find it interesting that Jordan, an Alpha stepper from Georgia, downplayed the eroticism of the Alpha performance during his interview, asserting:

I know for step shows or performances the main thing on the score sheet is no profane acts. So the crowd expects it to happen just per different organizations. For our organization I've never seen a show where we, you know, had too many explicit actions. I think it just goes back to the way Alphas carry themselves. I can get down but at the same time I know there's more important things to life as far as your image and upholding a certain light and standard in the black community because I already am a black man. I already have these things against me. Would I go back and make myself add another detriment to myself? Certain organizations may be more, I guess, like I said explicit.

Later during the interview he described the sorority tribute as nostalgic due to their *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993-1996) theme and explained that the team made sure that they did not “oversell” the sensuality of the tribute. While this was certainly not the most explicit routine it was by no means completely innocent. His response contributed to the staid Alpha masculinity that I described during my earlier conversation about elitism through his narrative of non-graphic eroticism in order to combat damaging stereotypes of black masculinity. He even somewhat condemned the other fraternities that are notorious for including that type of conduct in their performances.

## 1.2 Homophobia and Sorority Tributes as Cross-Gender Performances

Because of the intimate, non-romantic same-sex homosocial relationship between fraternity members, homophobia and misogyny are common themes among black fraternities. Homophobia and misogyny are also the result of a preoccupation to subvert

any possibility of being characterized as having a non-heteronormative relationship with each other (Adams and Fuller 2006; Bird 1996; Chang 2006; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Collins 2005; Dancy 2011; DeSantis and Coleman 2008; Flood 2008; Hill 2009; Jenkins 2012; Kelley 1996; Kimmel 1994; Kitwana 2002; Literte and Hodge 2011; Oware 2009; Perry 2004; Pritchard and Bibbs 2007; Rose 2008; Sedgwick 1985; Sharpley-Whiting 2007). In fact, because of the widespread and well-known homophobia among black Greeks, those who might not have a fully heteronormative sexuality may conceal their sexualities to increase their chances of being selected for membership, and they may even continue to pass as heterosexual even after initiation (Dancy 2011; DeSantis and Coleman 2008; Kimbrough 2003; Literte and Hodge 2011). Roodgery commented,

I would say that from my experiences of a few people that wanted to become Greek that weren't heterosexual, they tried to keep it to themselves while they were attempting to achieve their goal of being part of the organization until afterwards where they quote on quote came out. So I would say that [homophobia] does have an effect on Greek life.

I also had the unique opportunity to interview Mario, a Latino homosexual Iota from Florida who explained that while his chapter has accepted him despite his sexuality he has found difficulty with others black Greeks who have not been as tolerant. In response to this situation, he explained, "I try to be an ambassador for homosexuals and show that we're okay and that we don't want to, you know, talk to you. We just want to be your brothers and we're okay and we're great people." According to Mario's experience it seems as though fraternity members are uncomfortable with his homosexuality primarily

because they are worried that it will conflict with their own heterosexuality or that his homosexuality could be associated with them. As an “ambassador for homosexuals” he promotes tolerance on an individual level by demonstrating that he is capable of having non-romantic homosocial relationships with his fraternity brothers.

There is one significant component of black fraternity choreographed performances that disrupt the dominant narratives of homophobia by involving cross-gender performances to pay tribute to sororities. In “Chapter 2: Atlanta Greek Picnic as a Quasi-Diasporic Black Greek Space” I described the tribute that the Sigmas offered to *Dance Like A Stripper* by M.E (2011) during their stroll performance. Four members stood at the front of the stage holding a pose to represent each sorority and the back line faced the back and bent over to wiggle their hips at the audience. During this routine the performer in the middle of the back line lifted his shirt before twisting around to the front to reveal his impersonation of the scantily clad black female body. The four-second sorority tribute successfully objectified black women through the song selection, which encourage women to perform their heterosexuality through stripping for male amusement.

During their step show performance, the Iotas performed a tribute to the sororities that focused on traditional sorority performative movements and popular dances associated with black women. During this tribute routine the majority of the team members looked unenthusiastic to be performing black femininities, which seemed to be a defense mechanism aimed at not being labeled as an effeminate fraternity. Oftentimes, when fraternity performers display an expert mastery of black femininities during their

sorority tributes they are pejoratively labeled as homosexuals because they have stepped too far outside of the boundaries of black heteronormative, homophobic masculinity.

The sorority tribute segment continued to build on their *Terminator* (1984) theme and began with a video of a mad scientist referencing the four sororities and instructing the team of Iota cyborgs to go back in time and “show them some respect.” The blacked out stage was then illuminated to reveal the entire team standing in a straight line across the middle of the stage with their arms at their sides, the interlude to *Don't Leave Me* by Blackstreet (1997) said, “What we gon’ do here is go back, way back, back into time,” and the team performed a 1990s R&B themed tribute section in deference order.

*Creep* by TLC (1994) began, the lights on the stage turned pink, every other person in the line stepped out waving the AKA hand sign of a closed hand with the pinkie raised, and sassily walked to the front of the stage while the AKAs in the audience cheered. The line in the back did the ivy stance and the performers at the front of the stage pretended to scoop their imaginary hair out of their faces and hold up mirrors to each other with wrists together and one hand parallel to the ground as the base and the other perpendicular as the mirror, and others spun around in a circle while fixing their imaginary hair.

When the beat dropped they all did the ivy stance and alternated their hands wiping across their forehead and back down. As they went back into the original stance with both arms down by their sides they alternated their shoulders lifting up and down as they took a step to the right side of the stage, crossing one leg in front of the other as they rocked their shoulders and walked. They went back to the first movement, this time holding their hands in front of the faces as imaginary mirrors before bringing it back

down to their sides, and then switching that to a sweep from the forehead to the back of the head and back down. The group did a signature dance from the music video involving spreading the legs a couple feet apart, rocking the knees in and out, and swinging alternating arms across the front. They ended with a rhythmic walk to the left with the right arm down as an ivy and the left hand back as the imaginary mirror, and then another rhythmic walk back to the right with the left arm in a downward ivy and the right arm up with the hand pointed outward in an elevated ivy. They ended by putting both arms back down into the original ivy stance and then waving the AKA hand sign in the air as they walked back to join the rest of the line in the center of the stage.

As the AKA tribute group walked to the back of the stage, the back group walked to the front to do the Delta tribute. The lights switched to red, *Loungin* by LL Cool J featuring Total (1996) played, and the group formed the Delta hand sign with thumbs out and touching at the tip and the rest of the hand straight up and meeting in the center to form a triangle. They rocked their arms from left to right while still holding up the Delta hand sign as they walked to the front of the stage, and the new back line stood still and holds up the Delta hand sign with elbows bent and arms across their bodies parallel to the floor. As the hook of the song played, the group at the front of the stage put their hands behind their backs, bent over at the waist, and did three rhythmic steps to the right and then to the left, stopping to stand up straight and clap before switching to the other side. They spread their feet and bounced their legs as they stuck their arms out and rocked them up and down to the right and then to the left. They twisted to the right and scooped their right arm down and out to the right side, did the same with the left arm, and then repeated this motion with their arms pointed down this time. They all stopped and did the

duck walk in place by keeping their feet apart, placing their arms down near the sides and holding them about a foot away from their bodies, bending their wrists so that their hands are bent outward, stomping the right foot, and bending into a squat as the stomp with the left foot and look over their right shoulder into the air. The Deltas in the audience cheered and the performers held the third squat and clapped on the last beat of the phrase. They held out the Delta hand sign to the right and to the left and ended by quickly popping their waists and hips front to back and doing different movements with their arms.

As that group walked back to the center line the lights turned blue, the song switched to *Return of the Mack* by Mark Morrison (1996), and the back group held up the Zeta hand sign, middle and ring fingers touching the thumb with pointer and pinky fingers up, waves both arms in the air left and right, and they walked to the front of the stage. The new back line crossed their hands over their chests and forms a dove symbol with their hands by clasping their thumbs together and holding their fingers out to represent the wings. The front group formed a Z with their hands by crossing the left arm across their chests and pointing the thumb to meet with the thumb that was pointed down on the other hand that is stretched across their bodies. They bounced this Z up and down, they clapped, they held the right hand down as they punched it with their left hand and elbow, and then they held the Zeta hand sign out to the left and then to the right. The group took four steps to the right as they held the Zeta hand sign out with both hands and extended the right arm out and bent the left arm across the front of their bodies and bounced their arms up and down with each step. They stopped to clap and did the same thing to the left side and clapped. As they continued to hold the Zeta hand sign, they swept their arms from the center of their bodies outward as they rocked their right foot



front and back. They formed the Z with their hands again and twisted it to the left, held for one beat, and then to the right and held for one beat. They ended by holding out the dove symbol to the right, the left, straight up, and then forming the Zeta hand sign with one hand and kissing it before throwing it up in the air and turning to walk away.

The lights turned yellow, *Candy Rain* by Soul for Real (1994) played, and the back group bent their elbows upward and their wrists downward forming poodle paws, and quickly shimmied their shoulders left and right as they walk to the front for the final tribute to the SGRhos. The back row stood with their hands in poodle paws and the two in the middle crossed their arms over each other and held up the SGRho hand sign. The front group held the SGRho hand sign out with the right hand bent out from the waist, they switched to the left hand, they did it with both hands, and then held it in the air. With the back of their hands facing the audience, they flicked their wrists and pinkies outward twice to the right, twice to the left, once to the right, once to the left, threw their arms up, and bend down to slapped their hands on the stage. As they stood up and jumped backward twice they held out the right hand, rotated the left arm to the back, and slapped their hands in the front with each jump. They held the SGRho hand sign with their hands, continued to hold their right arms out, and with their left arms bent by their waists they thrust the left sides of their bodies front and back and clapped once. They flicked the sign again to the front, turned around to flick it to the back, and turned back to the front, clasped their right hands over their left fists, and alternated pointing one elbow down and pushing the other one out and across the body while walking to the front edge of the stage. They ended by forming the poodle paws again and shimmying to the front and to the back.

These tributes demonstrated the Iota's interpretation of each sorority's femininity beginning with the ultra-feminine AKAs who were represented through a prance-like walk and a focus on physical beauty through holding up imaginary mirrors and playing with their imaginary hair. The Delta tribute demonstrated another type of femininity that was less dainty and included a greater emphasis on the hips, waist, and breasts through dancing. The routine still indicated a focus on the physical appearance of the black women but it was more concerned with the shape of the body and how to move it in an appealing manner rather than just physical beauty. The Zeta tribute was a more central femininity on the gender spectrum where the majority of the movements can be seen in fraternity routines, particularly their brothers the Sigmas.<sup>30</sup> The routine included a punching motion and a variety of gender-neutral movements that are only made specific to the Zetas because the group was holding up their hand sign. Finally, the SGRho routine exhibited a combination of the Delta and Zeta routines as it included some gender-neutral movements, an elbow punching gesture, and a variety of motions that highlight the curves of the black female body.

The portrayal of black sorority femininities is reminiscent of the Jezebel image as a black female sexual trope, according to which black women have been defined as sex objects engineered to benefit specifically white men (French 2012). Black women experience gendered racism as we are oppressed due to our race and gender, and our

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<sup>30</sup> Sigma Founder A. Langston Taylor worked with a group of female students to form Zeta Phi Beta, leading to their status as the only organizations to define an official affiliation in their national constitutions (Kimbrough 2003; Neuman 2008). Thus, Sigmas and Zetas are the only two "constitutionally-bound" brother-sister organizations in the NPHC. Other organizations make unofficial claims of affiliation that are not recognized in their constitutions. For example, "Indiana Love" represents the connection between Kappas and SGRhos since both organizations were founded in Indiana.

negative stereotyping operates in relation to preferred images of white femininity (Essed 1991). The hypersexualization of black women's bodies therefore perpetuates the system of gendered racial microaggressions, or "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults" (Sue et al. 2007:273). In what follows, I describe the two dominant strategies black sorority members are using to circumvent this oppressive male gaze: rejection through conservative sexual morals and redefinition through embracing sensuality.

## 2. MANIFESTATIONS OF BLACK FEMININE SEXUAL SCRIPTS

Black middle-class femininity is confronted with contradictory normative sexual codes as black middle-class women are expected to be sexual, but not too sexual, as they must abide moral regulations that expect specific and "appropriate" behaviors in certain spaces (French 2012; Hernandez 2011; hooks 1992; Literte and Hodge 2011; Thompson 2009, 2011). Bryana H. French argues that black women maneuver within a context that:

overemphasizes Black women's sexuality, prioritizes male desires over female's, and pushes the belief that [female] happiness relies on heterosexual romantic partnerships, [and this] creates a dynamic that makes it difficult to have desired, consensual, genuine, and healthy sexual experiences [2012:49; see also Skeggs 1993].

Sorority members are expected to adhere to contradictory normative sexual codes according to which they are "expected to display and promote their sexual attractiveness, yet women who are arbitrarily judged to be too sexually available can be ostracized" (Literte and Hodge 2011:681; see also Hernandez 2011; Stomblor 1994).

Black sororities circulate narratives of respectability and the white middle-class 'cult of true womanhood' in order to combat racialized images of black female hypersexuality and undesirability (French 2012; Hernandez 2011; Literte and Hodge 2011). Members of each sorority discussed the degree to which sex is taboo in black sorority life and the accompanying expectations to suppress sexuality.

Charlotte (Georgia AKA): "I see it like if we're wearing paraphernalia or somewhere representing the organization then I don't think our sexuality needs to be out that much...I think a lot of people just need to take into account that we're representing. It's not just us anymore. It won't be like "Oh there's Charlotte being so out there." It's more of like "those AKAs." We just need to take into consideration that we're representing a whole organization, not just ourselves anymore."

Brittany (Maryland Delta): "There's a limit. I'm sexy and guess what, my jeans are all the way up to my waist and you can't see my stuff...A Delta is a Dreamgirl, so we want to show it to you. But we're going to show you the way that it's really not portrayed in media...A Dreamgirl can dress however she wants, comfortably and respectfully, and still have guys turn their heads and say, "What's your name." So I mean there's a limit to being sexy."

Kristen (Georgia Zeta): "When you cross, when you probate,<sup>31</sup> when you first come out, there's this overnight celebrity that happens and it's instant. The second that mask is taken off your face, everybody knows who you are and they're

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<sup>31</sup> A probate is presentation show during which new members who may or may not have already been inducted into the organization are presented to their campus community through an elaborate demonstration of memorized information, stepping, and speeches.

watching every little thing you do. If they catch word of a rumor that you're at some frat house past midnight it's whispers and rumors and this, that, and the third.”

Trenesse (Florida SGRho): “I feel that as a female in a Greek organization, it's really hard to be who you are because, I mean, me personally I'm very comfortable with my sexuality and I am who I am. And it's like in certain situations I feel that I'm not allowed to express myself because of who I am. When you do become Greek you're no longer Trenesse. You become Trenesse, the SGRho. So I feel like in that sense, a lot of Greek females aren't allowed to be who they are because they have to suppress it since people attach a certain stigma to certain behaviors and they don't want it to be attributed to the organization... We're not allowed to be ourselves completely because we're leaders so people tend to look up to us. So sometimes we have to fit, I don't want to say a stereotype. But just like any leader you can't be who you are 24/7 because people are looking at you all the time.”

The SGRho respondents also discussed the double standard that exists regarding sexual expression. Claudette, a member from Maryland, commented,

I've noticed there's a different standard between fraternities' expectations and sororities'... We take the pledge that you're representing your organization and you don't want something to reflect negatively upon our organization. So we do try to stress that doing that to excess could damage your reputation as well as our organization's reputation. In respect to fraternities, I've noticed that there's a lot less of that... I'm literally seeing men from different organizations with shirts that

say, "Yes I eat the box" in their colors and "Yes I lick it" and all kinds of different literally overt statements about how they give oral sex. And to me that is obviously branding that whole idea that they come to ATL Greek Picnic to have sex. And just being in the hotel setting, literally men are just lined up in the hallways at the hotel grabbing and cat calling with their "I eat the box" shirts on. These ladies' discussion of the rejection of sex in order to be seen as respectable instead of being seen as sexually promiscuous and immoral aligns with the Sister Savior trope of black femininity because it invokes a politics of respectability and reserved sexuality in order to resist negative sexual scripting, as well as the Diva trope because it rejects the male objectifying gaze in order to assert a black woman's own power to define herself as a middle-class black women whose goal is to be adored as she is concerned with class-status and respectable beauty (Stephen and Phillips 2003). The Delta and Zeta step team performances were most exemplary of this type of traditional femininity in their performances that primarily focused on stepping skill, the wearing of conservative costumes, and the performance of modest eroticism.

The Delta step team wore slightly loose silver and black turtleneck body suits with long-sleeves that covered their entire bodies from the neck down with military boots that were painted red. To conceal their hips and busts they wore black halter vests and black tutus over the body suits. The right sides of their faces were painted silver with black designs and everyone wore a high ponytail and a black headband. They began their show with a skit to introduce their theme during which a scientist was pitching a line of Delta robots to a company executive. The executive was given a remote and was instructed not to push various buttons because they would activate different aspects of the

robots that may still have some defects that needed to be addressed. The scientist left the stage to take a phone call and out of curiosity the executive pressed the “S” button that she was told stands for stepping. The Delta step team, standing motionless in red life-size Barbie doll boxes, was immediately activated and the flashing lights on their headbands started to blink as they robotically stepped out of their boxes toward the front of the stage. Each movement was accompanied by a sound effect and as the team’s movements increased in speed *Wild Boy* by MGK featuring Waka Flocka Flame (2011) played and they began a choreographed robotic walk the rest of the distance to the front of the stage. When the beat of the song dropped and the hook started they threw their flashing headbands off to the sides of the stage, began a high-intensity gender-neutral dance and the audience who had been cheering since the Deltas had been on the stage immediately screamed louder in approval of the shift in style.

The entire performance was extremely fast-paced and high in energy especially in comparison to the other sorority step performances, and they demonstrated their ferocity through the angry facial expressions the team had on their faces. In the middle of their first step they stopped to aggressively yell an inaudible chant that was drowned out by the audience’s cheering. At the end they held their hand sign at chest level and jumped into a squat that swept from left to right, during which the Deltas in the audience did their “OO-OOP” sorority call. While the rest of the team held this hand sign pose, the performer in the back right of the stage aggressively yelled “What!” at the audience and went back into the robotic power down that the rest of the team started.

The Delta step team’s aggressive style was reminiscent of the fact that sororities also undergo a ritualized aggression process similar to that of the fraternities, and we

participate in the perpetuation of the pledged versus paper narrative. Sororities participate in that narrative because of the patriarchal gender hierarchy, or the positioning of women in a subordinate status to men based on gender, that allows fraternities to set the precedent for black Greek authenticity. Although hazing is illegal, members who do not participate in the underground pledge process are often pejoratively referred to as “paper” because they have only participated in the official new member orientation process of their organization that involves some amount of paperwork. Additionally, both men and other women criticize sorority members if we are not sufficiently feminine, yet we are simultaneously expected to withstand the violence we encounter during the pledge process, although there is a commonly held belief that we cannot ever pledge as hard as the men due the misogynist connotation between femininity and frailty.

The Delta step team also incorporated two dance segments in the show that were very conservative in style. The first routine lasted about eight seconds, the first half of which was a hip-popping dance to the strip club anthem *Bandz A Make Her Dance* by Juicy J (2012), and the second dance was a longer routine to *One In A Million* by Aaliyah (1996). It began with a robotic arm routine with sound effects that was interrupted by the Aaliyah song and a body roll to each side, and then they began a feminine syncopated arm routine that included one hip pop. While the second routine was definitely intended to be sexy based on the slow R&B song selection and feminine dance moves it was very conservative and quick in comparison to some of the other sorority dance segments. By contrast, the AKA step team wore a sheer leotard with leaves covering their breasts, hips, and a diagonal striped portion of their stomachs, and they performed a hyperfeminine, hypersexual dance routine to the strip club anthem *Pour It Up* by Rihanna (2012) which



involved an abundance of hip shaking and popping while they were either facing the side of the stage or turned completely around to face the back.

The Zeta step show was also exemplary of the middle-class cult of womanhood construction of respectable black femininity through their conservative performance style. Their prisoner themed costumes consisted of black and white striped hats, blue turtlenecks with 1920 written in white across their chests, black satin flared high-waist skirts with black organza underlays, black and white striped shorts, and black military boots, therefore covering the majority of their bodies. As their sorors and the Sigmas in the audience cheered and chanted, an introductory video played that flashed mug shots of each team member while the introduction to the popular TV series *Law and Order* (1990-2010) played followed by a news reporter voiceover:

*Law and Order* (1990-2010) introduction: “In the criminal justice system the people are represented by two separate, yet equally important groups: the police who investigate crime and the District Attorneys who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories.”

News reporter voiceover: “We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you this breaking news update. Former police officers incarcerated for their criminal acts involving the Z-List cartel escaped from imprisonment while being transported to a maximum-security prison. Be on the lookout for these criminal masterminds. They are armed and dangerous.”

Three spotlights shined on the stage as the introduction to *I'm Different* by 2 Chainz (2012) played, and each of the five seated steppers rhythmically held up their fake newspapers that each have a letter written on the back of them so that they spelled out “Z LIST” while the two remaining steppers pretended to sweep the stage. The audience momentarily cheered loudly and they began their entrance dance by moving their props to the beat and lyrics to the song until the next segment of the song began. When the hook of the song began they all stood in front of the stage and looked out in random

directions and struck different poses to the beat of the song. Then they arranged themselves into a straight line facing the right side of the stage and closed the line in a bit. Starting with the stepper in the back of the line, they each bent over and placed their hand on the back of the person in front of them. They then turned toward the audience with their finger in front of their mouths as if they are saying “Shhh.” As two of their sorors removed the props from the stage, the steppers arranged themselves in two staggered lines facing the audience and performed an arm routine involving holding their sorority hand sign out in different directions while they popped their hips to the front and back and then stuck them out to each side.

They transitioned into two lines toward the back of the stage and did another arm routine, and this time each person in the line extended their arms out in different directions. They folded their right arms in across their chests and extended their left arms out while holding up their hand sign and began to transition to a line across the stage. Then they spun around and continued to move while forming a Z with their arms by holding the right one down with the hand bent outward and the left arm bent upward with the hand bent outward as they continue to transition into a curved formation with the center three steppers in a line at the front of the stage and the two on each side positioned behind that line into two rows. Still with their arms in a Z, they crossed their left foot in front of the right and slightly extended it down to the left, tapped their foot on each side behind them with each arm, clapped above their heads and under their raised leg, and struck different lookout poses in various directions. Beginning with the steppers at each end of the line they each bent their left leg upward, fold their right arms in, and extended their left arms outward holding up their hand sign to the final syncopated beat of the

song, and the audience cheered loudly. They ended by placing their legs back down with their feet slightly spread apart, holding their hands behind their backs, and tilting their heads to the left on the final beat of the song.

After a brief pause the performer in the center of the stage cued the first step by beginning the following chant with “Zeta goes so hard” while forming a Z with her hands.

Zeta goes so hard it’s sad. You know we shut it down.  
With our beats, they’re so unique. We’re the baddest in this town.  
The rest, we just surpass you. You can never take our shine.  
Watch us step it up and turn it out. The Zeta-ry<sup>32</sup> is mine. Z-Phi!

The rest of the team joined her in the chant and hand motion, and they all began to walk around the stage to a new formation as they finished the first line of the chant. They did a step to the second line during which the three performers in the front got down on their knees and laid their heads and extended arms on the floor. As they continued with the third line of the chant the front row stood back up and they all walked to their next formation of one column of three between two columns of two, and they did another step over the final line during which the middle column did a more complex step.

The two side columns extended their arms toward the center column diagonally downward with the outside elbow bent diagonally upward and that hand folded in toward the other arm. The stepper in the front of the middle column cued the next segment of the routine with a stomp with the left foot, a clap in front of her body while wiggling her ankles, stomping the right foot outward while forming a Z with her hands and looking to the right, another stomp inward with the right foot, another clap with wiggling ankles, and the rest of the team joined her with an outward stomp with the left foot, and a final

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<sup>32</sup> Zeta-ry is a play on the word “victory.”

clap. They repeated that sequence while saying the first line of the following chant, during which the side columns performed a different variation of that same beat.

We are the sorors of Z Phi B,  
Founded at Howard in nineteen twenty.  
We're stepping out in our blue and white.  
Those sexy ladies of Z Phi B are here. We're turning it up.

When they said "nineteen twenty" they placed their right hands on their waists and held up their hand sign as they extended their left arm out to the left and then straight up, sat their hips back on their left legs. They stomped with each foot as they extend their arms to each side, and resumed the initial sequence while saying the third line of the chant.

When they got to the final line they sat their hips slightly backward with the right foot slightly extended forward and did another arm routine while holding up their hand sign, crossed their hands over each other with thumbs connected to form a dove symbol, and extended their arms in opposite directions and circling them in a counter-clockwise direction. They ended by turning their heads to the left, placing their right hands on their waists, sitting their hips on their right leg, and bending their left arm upward with the hand bent outward.

The column to the left performed a sequence, and then they all said, "Z-Phi, we're turning it up" as they transitioned into a new pose similar to the first one but this time pointing the inside arm toward the center column who did a different sequence. They all said, "So sweet,<sup>33</sup> we're turning it up" as they transitioned into the original pose with everything switched to the opposite side so that they were facing the column on the right who did a third sequence. The right column continued their sequence as the other two turned their heads toward the audience and everyone said, "Z-List, we're turning it up."

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<sup>33</sup> The Zeta call and response sorority call is "Z-Phi. So sweet."

Finally, each column did their sequences at the same time and the audience cheered in admiration. When they finished that segment of the step they all said, “Do you know what it takes to be a lady of Zeta?” and the side columns turned to face their respective sides of the stage and then inward toward the center as they all performed a new sequence together. They ended by saying, “Whoop! Nothing can hold us back,” while spinning around in a circle, and then they transitioned to a new formation with three steppers across the middle of the stage, two steppers on the sides of them positioned on a row in front of the middle line, and two behind them positioned on a row behind the middle line. While in this formation everyone held up a Z with their hands and the audience cheered loudly.

The Zeta step team’s entrance and exit dances did not include any erotic overtones, and in contrast to the high-intensity, gender neutral, aggressive style of the Deltas, the Zeta team’s overall performance style was feminine and fun as the women smiled at the audience and incorporated twists, snaps, and graceful poses into their seemingly effortless steps. Also, although tributes are often a tool to ensure higher scores from the judges that are members of those organizations the Zeta step team was the only one that spent almost half of their show on them. The entire middle portion of their show was a tribute to the fraternities that included dances, chants, and steps, thus demonstrating the womanist goal of “creating and sustaining strong relationships with black men” which has the potential to be liberating but instead perpetuates narratives of patriarchal heteronormativity in black sorority life (Literte and Hodge 2011:682). In fact, whereas only four of the ten fraternity teams performed sorority tributes, seven of the eight sorority performances included some form of fraternity tribute. Also, unlike the

fraternities' tribute routines, the sorority teams' routines were less of a cross-gender performance but rather sequences of moves associated with each fraternity usually with some form of feminine flair like hair flipping or interrupted completely with sorority moves. The only component of these routines that seemed to invoke masculinity is the grit facial expression that is most commonly associated with Alpha and Omega tributes, but this has become a crossover characteristic as demonstrated by the Delta step team.

### 2.1 Hyperfeminine Sexual Entrepreneur

French (2012) calls for an open discussion of sexuality that creates a network of narratives that give black women a voice and deal with defining black female sexuality (see also Haugen 2003; Oware 2009). Theresa Renee White argues that the “whole series of signifiers is linked to promote a new, liberated contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, self-expression, and a quest for individual fulfillment” (2013:611; see also Attwood 2006). The “sexual entrepreneur” challenges the black middle-class norm of conservative femininity and it is able to participate in and transform the sexual scripts that are associated with black bodies and assert her sexual autonomy as she takes control of her own sexuality and the power to determine when to engage sexually (French 2012; Harvey and Gill 2011).

Thus, I question Wilson's notion that “women then always subscribe to a value system based on respectability and only partially, perhaps reluctantly, to a value system based on ‘reputation’” (1969:78). While there is certainly the possibility that the women who promote the acceptance of open demonstrations of black female sexuality may still subscribe to some form of respectability politics, they are certainly not reluctant to oppose that system of subordinate and conservative black female sexuality. In fact, as

demonstrated through the aforementioned interviews' excerpts about the double standard for men and women regarding sexuality, they appear to be more reluctant to succumb to the pressures of perpetuating respectability politics.

In the case of black sorority performance, sexuality can be a tool to secure favorable scores from fraternity judges because a team of choreographed dancing women can appeal to their sense of eroticism, but it can also have an adverse affect if the sorority judges feel alienated by the hypersexuality. However, the sorority judges are usually not the primary concern since it is assumed that they will automatically give unfavorable scores to other sorority teams in order to give the team representing their own organization a better chance at winning. Eroticism among sorority members can also be indicative of the latent competition regarding which sorority is the best; they are validated through the opinion of the black men they encounter

The AKA and SGRho stroll teams demonstrated their sexual entrepreneurship in a variety of ways during their performances. While these two teams were certainly not the only ones to incorporate some element of sensuality into their performances they did have the most overt performances of eroticism, and unlike the Deltas and Zetas that eroticism seemed to dominate the entire performance to some degree. In fact, I suspect that the AKA and SGRho stroll teams were the first and second place winners, respectively, because the stroll competition was based on dancing, which is almost entirely consumed by female eroticism. On the other hand, the Delta and Zeta teams were the first and second place winners of the step show based on their superior demonstration of stepping skill, which has little or nothing to do with sensuality.

The AKA stroll team demonstrated their stereotype for being the ultra-feminine “Pretty Girls” who are concerned with beauty standards through their attire. Everyone on the team had long hair and they were wearing very short ripped denim shorts, tank tops that read “CALI MADE AKAS” in white with the “AKAS” line in pink on the black tank tops and the green tank tops and in green on the pink tank tops, and pink, green, or black camisoles underneath. They were also the only stroll team that wore any form of heels during their performance. Their entire routine was extremely feminine through their incorporation of mirrors with their hands, hair flipping, and ivies, and it is also erotic as they closed the line formation in to roll their bodies close to each other, squat and pop their hips and breasts, and slap their thighs as they pop their chests in and out.

Almost halfway through their routine they performed an even more overtly sexual routine to *Body Party* by Ciara (2013). With their arms in the air and one palm over the other with thumbs out to form an ivy leaf, they turned to the front and half of the team slid one hand down the other arm as they bent down to the ground and the others wiggled their waists left and right, and then they all stood up and arranged themselves in a line facing the right side of the stage. When the beat dropped they took several steps forward, running their hands from their hips upward to their heads and thrust their hands in the air holding up their sorority hand sign. They continued to walk forward and brought their arms down to the back of the stage and then quickly twisted to the front, extended their left arm outward, and bended their right arm to their chest, still holding up the hand sign. They scooped their left arms around the back of their head along their hair as they quickly rolled their bodies to the back of the stage, and then they held their right hands in front of their faces like a mirror as they snapped their hips into a seated position. They



scooped their right arms along the back of their heads as they rolled back to the front of the stage, and crossed their wrists over each other holding up the hand sign and sat back into that seated position, this time facing the audience. They rolled their hips as some flipped their hair, others did a “come here” motion with their fingers, and others ran their hands along their bodies, and then they all stopped and held up the ivy leaf symbol with their hands in front of their faces. They slowly bended down with their legs facing the right and their torsos facing the front, dropped their arms down and rolled their heads and bodies around to face the left, slowly stood up while slightly bending at the waist and rubbing their hands up their legs, and they rolled backward starting with their heads to stand all the way up. They placed their left hands on the shoulder of the person in front of them and placed the right hand on their hips and took four steps backward making sure to roll their bodies and lift their alternating knees up high in between steps. They took two more steps in place as they released their arms to run them along their bodies upward and into the air, they stopped and abruptly placed their arms down at their sides in the ivy stance with their heads up in the air, and they slightly bended at the waist to roll their hips toward the back of the stage and around toward the audience. They stood back up and crossed their hands over their chests to touch their opposite shoulders, uncrossed to touch each hand to its own shoulder, and then held their hand sign out toward the audience. They popped their hips twice as they slightly bent downward, stood back up to sweep their hands back and forth across their thighs, and roll back up. They placed their hands in the air, down on their thighs, stretched their arms outward, and pointed at the audience and did the “come here” motion while winding their hips. They abruptly stopped again in the ivy stance with arms down and heads up and began the next routine.

With the exception of the numerous shimmies, the majority of the SGRho stroll performance was not particularly erotic but their attire left me feeling like there is a looming sense of sensuality regardless of how they were moving their bodies. The team wore royal blue and black leggings, pearl necklaces, black military boots, and long black turtleneck tank tops that were cut into lengthwise strips below the bust exposing their stomachs and hips. The first half of their routine was marked by an emphasis on popular dances that were not entirely gender-specific. The last line of *Karate Chop* by Future featuring Lil Wayne (2013) said, “Michael Jackson, Billy Jean. Who bad?” and introduced a routine to Michael Jackson’s “Bad” during which they performed a routine with moves from his music videos.

That section acted as a prelude to the subsequent erotic routine to *Bad (Remix)* by Wale featuring Rihanna (2013). The first spoken line of the song was “Ladies, I still don’t think they know who’s bad. I think it’s time for us to show them.” Arranged in a close horizontal line across the stage they rippled a dip body roll from left to right where they bent over at the waist and rolled their torsos so that they were facing the right side of the stage when they came back up and then altogether they placed their hands on the back of their heads and thrust their hips backward toward the person standing behind them. They stretched their left arms out, placed their right hand on their hips, and slightly bended over as they slowly twist to the left. Then, they bent over, crossed their arms on the back of the person in front of them, and popped their chests up and down one time. They rolled their necks out toward the audience twice, stopping in the middle to pop in between each roll, then they stuck out their right legs, bended all the way over touching their feet, and slowly glided their hands up their bodies to their hips as they rolled back

up, ending with their hands out by their chests and facing forward. They placed their hands on their waists and slowly rolled their heads around toward the left, stretched their left arm out and point down and crossed the right arm over it also pointing as they used their left feet to step and rotated their bodies around so that the left leg is in front. They did two body rolls and then stepped their right legs out so that they were facing the left, snapped their heads and torsos so that they were also facing the left, placed their hands on their knees, and leaned with their shoulders to the back left and then the front right twice. They bounced on their right foot and kicked their left foot out as they turned to the opposite direction and close the line in more, and they leaned backward on each other and placed their hands on their legs to shimmy toward the audience and back. They bounced their bodies up and down three times and jumped up with their feet spread apart and snapped their fingers in the air. They placed their hands on their hips, winded their waists and looked to the right and then to the left, and then the routine was interrupted with a siren to begin the next routine. The last song of the performance went back to the style of the first half with an emphasis on popular dances, shimmying, and holding up the sorority hand sign.

These routines operate within a paradoxical space in which black women are able to participate in the sexualization of our own bodies as we present specific body parts as ‘sexual and cultural commodities,’ which in turn qualify voluptuous black female bodies as the “prototype for male affections” (Balaji 2010:13). Still, we do have agency in how we will market our sexuality and for what purpose. Regarding Hip Hop video vixen Melyssa Ford and her agency as a sex symbol in male rap videos, Murali Balaji comments,

The sense of liberation and empowerment Ford feels in exhibiting her body, which echoes [Audre] Lorde's call (1984) to use sexuality as an instrument of agency and emancipation, does not have the same impact on her audience, which largely views her as Jessica Rabbit, the music video vixen. However, Ford believes that education and discourse on sex roles will help to de-stigmatize women who appear in music videos [2010:16-17].

Regardless of intent, there is a disconnection between the performer who views it as a sense of liberation, and the audience who views it as self-objectification. This is a result of the way the male gaze dominates female bodies even if our performance of sexuality is a mode of resistance where we control how our sexuality is presented.

One thing that is striking about both performances was the way each team employed close physical proximity in order to suggest some form of pseudo-lesbianism. While same-sex sexual interactions between women who are perceived to be attractive seem to disrupt the patriarchal heteronormative sexualization of black women's bodies in actuality they perpetuate that narrative because it appeals to male ménage à trois fantasies. This male-dominated Nicki Minaj-esque<sup>34</sup> identity construction participates in the oppression and over-sexualization of black female bodies through an emphasis on "near nudity, lesbian chic, and more-than suggestive depictions of sexual activity" (White 2013:614-615). This pseudo-lesbianism is performed primarily to fulfill the sexual fantasies of the male spectators to encourage positive crowd reactions and higher scores from male judges. In fact, black sororities promote a black feminine sexuality that participates in the heteronormative project and is therefore largely homophobic by default

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<sup>34</sup> Nicki Minaj is a female rapper that is known for emphasizing her curves, bisexuality, and sexual prowess in her lyrics.

through their emphasis on racial uplift and a concentration on the black family that excludes alternative models and the Christian influences in BGLO development that perpetuate homophobic narratives of deviant behavior (Literate and Hodge 2011).

### 3. CONCLUSION

With this chapter, I have shown how black fraternity and sorority step and stroll performances reproduce black middle-class respectability politics through staged performances. BGLOs engage in the reproduction of black middle-class values, as demonstrated in the staged performances I have described: black fraternity members subscribe to hegemonic masculinity through ritualized aggression and adherence to the “fraternal self” (Jones 2004). This is shown in their violent performance themes, high-energy movements, and references to harsh treatments. They also emphasize the relevance of homophobia in black Greek life through their lazily performed sorority tributes. Misogyny is also a dominant theme within black fraternal life, and this was made evident through the centrality of the phallus as a symbol of virility that sexually subordinated black women’s bodies as well as the impersonation of black sororities as a form of tribute. Additionally, as I explained above some of the fraternity performances incorporated some presentation of elitism through either diss skits or performance style, which reminded the audience that this black Greek space was one based on respectability and reputation.

Some black women perpetuated female conservative sexuality through their style of dress and a quasi-rejection of the performance of eroticism. Both the Delta and Zeta step teams incorporated little or no eroticism in their performances and were sure to cover their bodies from the neck down. I have also shown how black women disrupt their

sexual subordination through hyperfeminine sexual entrepreneurialism and pseudo-lesbianism. The AKA and SGRho stroll teams, subverted this through their employment of Hip Hop models in a way that critically engaged female sexual desire and “respectable masculinity.” Through hyperfeminine sexual entrepreneurialism, these women created a space for black female sexual politics that acknowledged their agency through erotic self-representation. Pseudo-lesbianism also disrupted the patriarchal heteronormative sexualization of black women. It simultaneously participated in male voyeurism to gain favor among black men BUT this was done for the black women own benefit: they were aware of the way they engaged the sexualized their bodies.

This analysis provides an overt demonstration of the way black identities operate within a system of opposing forces, namely respectability politics and some supposedly non-respectable component of black popular culture, particularly as it deals with sexuality. But the intent is to qualify black popular culture as operational within the realm of respectability. Those who are adopting a behavior that is perceived to be in conflict with black middle-class values are not necessarily opposing respectability but rather participating in its potential transformation. Specifically regarding this analysis, sexual entrepreneurialism and pseudo-lesbianism, therefore, are not necessarily the antitheses of respectability politics but rather potentially complimentary.

#### CHAPTER 4: BLACK GREEK SYMBOLS, MIDDLE-CLASS RESPECTABILITY, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Paraphernalia, or those items designed with the official and unofficial symbols, colors, and/or letters of an organization, are used to signify membership. Signifying, or the “indirect method of communication whereby the speaker builds meaning intended for a restricted audience using signals that only the intended audience will be able to recognize and decode” (Jeffries 2011:18), is essential to understanding in-group interpersonal communication. Signifying through clothing or jewelry is key to transforming the physical body into the social body, where one’s position in society and identification processes can be understood through the presentation of certain symbols (Van Wolputte 2004; Whitehead 2002). Additionally, stylizing the body is indicative of the underlying social drama to represent one’s self through one’s own body while negotiating among predetermined scripts, and it is therefore an “exercise of power and the practice of resistance” (Whitehead 2002:195).

Non-members are not permitted to adorn or touch any of these items because they carry a sort of sacredness to the members of the organizations, many of whom underwent an intense pledge process for membership to earn the right to have access to these items. Barbara M. Starke, Lillian O. Holloman, and Barbara K. Nordquist (1990) explain that wearing the symbols of an organization can be a right of intensification, or phenomenon that strengthens the commitment to membership for those who have already been inducted, because we are signifying our membership to ourselves and to those who recognize the symbols. They also assert that paraphernalia acts as a ‘quasi-uniform’ for black Greeks to indicate specific activities. There are even formal and informal guidelines for certain events and the way certain pieces are worn, such as only wearing

the official pin with specifically defined professional clothing, never wearing paraphernalia in spaces where alcohol is served, and limiting the number of items an individual may wear at one time (see also Hernandez 2011).

Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst (2010) explain that we also participate in self-regulation because we think we are being watched. Members from each organization expressed a sense of self-surveillance when they are in public, particularly when they are wearing paraphernalia. The biggest concern was the way individual agency is suppressed because one's actions can reflect negatively on the entire organization. We can see an example of this notion in Sarah's recount of a conversation during which her Delta Sigma Theta (Delta) prophytes, or older sorors, warned her line about the implications of their behaviors after they were initiated:

I try to make sure I'm on my best behavior. I mean, first off my character doesn't allow me to do anything that I wouldn't do whether I was a Delta or not, you know what I'm saying? But in the event that I get into a situation where I have to respond a certain way I still try to do it politically correct because, hey, I'm still representing an organization. I'm still representing my chapter. I'm still representing all these people who brought me in. You know what I mean? So I don't want to do anything to give them a negative light because the first thing they told us when we crossed was, "Hey, it's no longer just you. It's you the Delta." You see what I'm saying? So whatever you do it's you the Delta that did that. So you decide you want to get in an altercation, it's Sarah the Delta that got in a fight. It's no longer just Sarah. So I try to remember that, especially if I'm out.



As Sarah explains, once members are initiated they are socialized to adhere to their organization's standards of behavior and dress (Hernandez 2011). Brittany expressed similar concerns but focuses in on the negative, body-shaming stereotypes that circulate about members of Zeta Phi Beta (Zetas).

I love this question only because everybody knows the stereotypes of Zetas. We're big, black, fat, and ugly. So I like to prove people wrong, that's my whole thing. I've always been into proving people wrong. When I was in school and I stepped out of my dorm room I made sure I looked presentable because I don't agree with walking around looking like a bum when you're supposed to be a role model for other people. It should not go like that at all. And then of course being a Zeta walking around looking like a bum doesn't really help the stereotype. So that's my main thing.

As Sarah and Brittany explain, members adopt some form of the “group of one” mentality, according to which “an individual embodies a set of characteristics that are ascribed to other members by association (Hernandez 2011:217). Finally, Cedric and William discussed the way their affiliations with Alpha Phi Alpha (Alpha) and Iota Phi Theta (Iota), respectively, have encouraged them to mature in reference to the way they present themselves.

Cedric (Alpha): So every time I wear the letters I think, “okay you have to be disciplined now.” It's one of those things where, accept it or not, perception is reality, you know. So it's, “okay you need to decide right now what you're about to present.” So in that regard, that's what it all means to me. What are you

presenting? Why? How are you going to do it? Is it fair to everybody? You know, so Alpha represents to me the maturity of growing up.

William (Iota): Well, as an alumni I'm really conscious about my behavior in Greek settings because I'm no longer an undergrad. As an adult you're expected to behave accordingly and professionally and maintain your bearing and discipline when in public. For example, the consumption of alcohol while wearing paraphernalia, that's not something that is encouraged by our fraternity. When our letters are seen we understand that we reflect the entire Greek community. And so we expect our members to be as positive and be an example and a force for good when they are wearing their letters.

Cedric and William also echo Wilson's assertion that "with age and social maturity...[men] move into a value and status system based upon respectability" (Wilson 1969:78).

As a collection of organizations with a mission to be leaders and role models for the black community, black Greeks are expected to continue to publicly reproduce the middle-class politics of respectability through attire and behavior. As I explained in "Chapter 1: The Development of the Black Middle-Class and the Formation of Social Status Organizations," during the antebellum period free people of color advocated a Victorian-based model of black middle-class codes of conduct to challenge slavery and racism (Ball 2012; Wright 2011). This model became the foundation for the development of black middle-class identities vis-à-vis Jim Crow laws of disenfranchisement and institutional racism (Akbar 1990; Connell 1995; Dancy 2011; Jewell 2007; Literte and Hodge 2011; McClure 2006; Summers 2004; Thompson 2009; Ward 1990).

Also, social media has intensified self-surveillance because members do not want their national headquarters to find out about anything illegal or damaging, nor do they want to be ridiculed by our peers. Users therefore monitor the image they are portraying to their audience and the belief that someone is monitoring them who could either potentially use certain information against them or who would be offended by certain information (Hernandez 2011; Hogan 2010; Marwick and boyd 2010). For example, the @greekshenanigans account was created on several social media platforms specifically to mock members who do anything that clashes with the norms that govern black Greek life. As users participate in digital spaces of collective identity construction they consider their “actual self,” or who they are, their “ideal self,” or who they want to be, and their “ought self,” or who they think they are expected to be (Higgins 1987; Siibak 2009). They tend to exaggerate their identities in digital spaces because of the lack of direct interaction with others to fit their conceptualization of the best group member (Campbell 2006; Farquhar 2012; Smith and Kollock 1999). Joshua M. Hall (2012) explains that if we are cognizant of our self-objectification we may be able to control or at least influence how this phenomenon is occurring. Therefore, black Greeks employ the “third person consciousness” where we consider our relation to the spatial and temporal world and how we will be perceived, as well as how we perceive ourselves (Hall 2012).

#### 1. EMBODYING AND INSCRIBING BLACK GREEK IDENTITY TROPES

In “Chapter 3: Black Identity Scripting Processes,” I outline a variety of available tropes that are being used to demonstrate contemporary black middle-class masculinities and femininities based on the historical development of respectability politics that I outlined in “Chapter 1: The Development of the Black Middle-Class and the Formation of Social

Status Organizations.” In addition to staged performances, paraphernalia can be used as a tool to present the way a series of themes have participated in the definition of black Greek identities. Also, while these components may overlap between fraternities and sororities, their presentation may differ because of the way the body carries a “range of cultural meanings centering on biological sex, social gender, gender identity, and sexuality” (Johnston and Longhurst 2010:22).

One major theme throughout black Greek paraphernalia trends during the festival was the elitist image these organizations tend to promote, particularly in relation to the competition between the organizations. For example, a group of Alphas from Alabama designed a black t-shirt with a yellow image of the state encircled in a yellow band with the words “STATE OF ALPHABAMA” printed on it in black and the Greek letters of each undergraduate Alpha chapter in the state written in yellow in the unoccupied black space within the band around the state’s image. Their usage of the term “Alphabama,” a combination of “Alpha” and “Alabama,” is a parodic representation of their perceived superior status in their state as it suggests a swallowing of “Alabama” due to the omnipresence of the “Alphas.”

Additionally, one of the Kappas had a red shirt with “Save the Kommunity Smack A Perp!!!” printed on it in white. The “K” in “Kommunity” is outlined in white with a diamond shape and a large white “Ψ” is underneath the text. “Perp” is a slang term for perpetrator, or someone who is pretending to be a member of an organization. In fact, it has become a trend for black Greeks to use social media to post images of people who are falsely posing as members of these organizations. A user of one of the more popular accounts will typically post an image of the person either wearing paraphernalia or with

their affiliation written in their biographical caption along with the chapter of which they are claiming to be a member. Subsequently, members will normally comment that the individual is not a part of their chapter. To avoid further ridicule the user who has been identified as a “perp” will often take any evidence of their perpetration down, lock their account so that only their followers can see it, or delete their account altogether.

In this same vein of exclusionary elitism, the Deltas from the Lambda Alpha chapter designed a baseball style white t-shirt with red sleeves, a red collar, and the Greek letters for their chapter written on one sleeve in white. “IF (image of hand pointing at the reader to signify the word “you”) AIN’T WITH ΔΣΘ” is written on the front of the shirt in black with the organization’s Greek letters written in red, and “YOU CAN’T SIT WITH US!” is written on the back in black letters outlined in red. The back of the shirt makes reference to the cult comedy *Mean Girls* (2004) during which one of the popular high school girls screeched that line at a former friend who was attempting to join the group at their lunch table.

Lastly, a member of Sigma Gamma Rho (SGRho) posted a photograph of the front and back of her black tank top on Instagram, the text of which makes reference to *Rich As Fuck* by Lil Wayne featuring 2 Chainz (2013). The front of her shirt has a curved line of five white circles, two red ones, and five more white ones, representing the sorority symbol of ten pearls and two rubies. Beneath that is written, “LOOK AT YOU, NOW LOOK AT US,” all of which is written in blue except the word “US” which is written in large yellow letters below the rest of the text. The back of the shirt reads “ALL MY POODLES LOOK PRETTY #AF” in yellow letters. The “#AF,” written in larger

letters below the rest of the text, is a social media abbreviation for the phrase “as fuck,” a grammatical modifier that adds intensity to the preceding statement.

All four of these shirts are indicative of the bourgeois characterization of black middle-class organizations that has often been criticized by members and non-members, alike. While these organizations have accepted the charge to “uplift the race” through their community service efforts, the elitist image of superiority and paternalism continues to come into focus. Another type of exclusivity was demonstrated through ritualized aggression. These semi-public and private narratives of pledging that have come to influence a great deal of black Greek culture for both fraternities and sororities reinforce the politics of belonging to these organizations; the boundary shifts from members versus non-members to pledged members versus non-pledged members.

One of the Phi Beta Sigma (Sigma) chapters designed a white t-shirt with “SONS OF FIRE & BRIMSTONE” written in blue on the front with an image of Mario from the eponymous Nintendo video game throwing a light green fireball outlined in blue. They also changed the color of Mario’s standard red shirt to a light blue color, which he wears with a white hat over which they placed a blue “Σ,” a pair of blue overalls, and brown boots. The “fire and brimstone” directly refers to one of the descriptions of hell in the Bible, thus equating their masculinity with the suffering and violence that are inherent to pledging.

As a more obvious reference to pledging, a group of Zetas created blue and black t-shirts which have “MADE RIGHT” written in bold white letters at the top and a white horizontal paddle beneath it with “ZETA PHI BETA” written on it in the color of the designated shirt. The word “made” is a slang term to indicate pledging and they drive

their point home with the incorporation of the paddle, which is used to hit initiates during the pledge process.

One of the most popular ways to signify one's pledged identity through paraphernalia is by wearing a tiki<sup>35</sup> in the shape of one's line number<sup>36</sup> in the colors of the organization. An SGRho Instagram user posted a photo of herself at one of the vendor tables holding up a blue tiki in the shape of the number three with a yellow border and the Greek letters "ΣΓΡ" in yellow on the bottom right side. Another common way to demonstrate this is through line shirts or line jackets which typically have the organizations letters on the front, the chapter, school, and semester initiated on the sleeves, and the individual's line name, the group's line name<sup>37</sup> and his or her line number on the back. The Iota stroll team wore a version of this with the words "We so OWt<sup>38</sup> YO League" written on the front of their white tank tops in brown and their shield in the upper right corner. Their line numbers are written on the back in gold with their line names written underneath in brown.

Additionally, corporeal inscription is a common practice in black Greek life because members will often get tattoos and, more commonly, brands of their

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<sup>35</sup> Tikis are small wooden medallions in the shape of some particular symbol often painted in the colors of the designated organization

<sup>36</sup> During membership intake initiates are typically arranged in height order and given a number based on where they fall in that line.

<sup>37</sup> Each member is given his or her own line name and the entire line is given a name. For example, one Kappa's line name is High 5 because he is the fifth person on his line, and name of his entire line is ResurreKtion 6, representing the six members that were initiated on his line.

<sup>38</sup> The word "out" is stylized as "OWt" as a reference to their call-and-response call "Ow-Ow...Ole!"

organization's symbols on their bodies. Four of the respondents, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi (Kappa), two members of Omega Psi Phi (Omegas), and a Sigma, discussed their brands with me during their interviews:

Jamal (Kappa): I think it definitely symbolizes not only the process that I went through. It also symbolizes my frat. It's like I can look at my brand and think about when I got it, how I got it, and why I got it, you know what I mean? I can have a moment and see that it's a K and a diamond and see that it makes me think about Kappa. And I can have a moment to think about who gave me the brand, my prophytes, and who was there with me when I got it, you know? It hurt everybody at the same time, you know what I mean? It was painful at the same time for everybody but it was a bonding experience.

Fred (Omega): Yes, I do have a brand. Branding is something that we take very serious. We do it because of how thoroughly immersed we are within the spirit of Omega. And that's not like some religious or extra spiritual thing. That's just, you know, living by the motto and by the cardinal principles, and just the hardship endured by the founders and by the early members. So we wear brands in remembrance of them. Being made into the organization, you have to be thoroughly immersed in that history and so you kind of put yourself in the shoes of those people long before the organization was even started. You know, it roots back to slavery. So, you know, feeling that and being thoroughly immersed in that spirit, it allows us to embrace the pain of a brand, if you so choose. It's not something that you have to do. It's a choice.



Keith (Omega): Initially I wasn't going to get a brand, but witnessing my LBs getting branded and doing that process with them, it's kind of like why shouldn't I get branded. Like everybody's getting branded except me. You know, I didn't want to feel bad. And being the tail you're last on the line so just kind of like you've protected the line all this time and everybody's getting branded and you're not getting branded. So I chose to get branded. I got these 2 with my LBs on my chest. And one of my coaches, he was an Omega as well and we got the leg hits together. I actually have 2 leg hits, one on the other leg. But we actually got leg hits together after we took a road trip to Detroit. If I'm blessed and fortunate enough to have a son and he chooses to pursue Omega Psi Phi and he decides to get branded, I'll definitely get a brand with him. I'm pretty sure my nephew is going to be an Omega. There's no question about it. But if he decides to get branded I'd definitely get a brand with him.

Darin (Sigma): I do have brands. I got one on my chest from when I first crossed. This one was like a year later or something. I got this one when I graduated. So it kind of tells kind of a story of where I was and all that good stuff. [I got it because] I wanted one. I thought they were cool. I mean there's no "Oh man, the founders." I just thought they were cool man.

Jamal and Darin both explained that their brands remind them of their state of mind at the time they received them. Also, although Darin did not associate his brand with a deeper sense of connectedness to his organization, the others did discuss some sort of emotional bonding with their organizations and their fraternity brothers. Jamal explained that he has reflected on the significance behind the symbols and Fred related his brand with the

“spirit of Omega” and the struggle the early members experienced during the Jim Crow era when the organization was established as well as the antebellum black slave experience. Also, while Keith was not initially planning to get a brand, he explained that his role as the tail, or last person in his line, made him feel a sense of responsibility to endure that pain with his line brothers.<sup>39</sup> During the pledge process, the tail is typically expected to undergo the most physical stress on his or her line and to protect the rest of the line. He also indicated that if his younger family members join his fraternity and decide to get branded he would agree to do it with them.

Branding therefore represents an example of the degree to which ritualized aggression continues to impact the creation of the “fraternal self,” or an organization’s collective identity, following initiation (Jones 2004). Also, Alan D. DeSantis and Marcus Coleman (2008) explain that the first maxim of black masculinities involves being physically strong and dominating. The black male body must therefore be capable of withstanding extreme conditions as violence is used to bond members. While branding is more common among men, as confirmed through my research, I do know two women who are branded that were graduate students with me in Miami, FL. One of the Zetas had ZΦBΣ branded on her thigh, in reference to the bond between Zetas and Sigmas.<sup>40</sup> An SGRho had a poodle paw, in reference to the sorority’s poodle mascot, with her line

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<sup>39</sup> Members of a pledge line refer to each other as line brothers.

<sup>40</sup> Sigma Founder A. Langston Taylor worked with a group of female students to form Zeta Phi Beta, leading to their status as the only organizations to define an official affiliation in their national constitutions (Kimbrough 2003; Neuman 2008). Thus, Sigmas and Zetas are the only two “constitutionally-bound” brother-sister organizations in the NPHC. Other organizations make unofficial claims of affiliation that are not recognized in their constitutions. For example, “Indiana Love” represents the connection between Kappas and SGRhos since both organizations were founded in Indiana.

number in the middle branded on her lower back. Thus, while sorority members may undergo a similar process of ritualized aggression their sexed bodies result in their brands being located in places that are designated as feminine, such as the thigh and lower back, instead of the less gendered spaces of the arm or leg.

The last major theme frequently shared through the paraphernalia worn by members of both sororities and fraternities was eroticism. Some members of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKAs) designed long tank tops in two shades of pink with “PSilent<sup>41</sup> BUT Deadly” written in green above a large green “Ψ,” and they cut the shirt into lengthwise strips below the bust exposing their stomach and backs, thus revealing their scant destroyed denim shorts. Similarly, a Zeta wore a white t-shirt with the following text in four lines, the first three of which are written in blue and the last is in black: “ZETA PHI BETA/SOOO SWEET/SINCE 1920/U.O.E.N.O.” The last line is a reference to the song *U.O.E.N.O* by Rocko featuring Future and Rick Ross (2013), the title of which is a quasi-acronym for the phrase “you don’t even know.” The sides of her shirt were cut off from the shoulder to the waist so that her blue bra and the sides of her body were exposed. Both the AKAs and the Zeta transformed their shirts to expose their bodies and consequently reject the usual conservative middle-class script of black femininity often promoted through such organizations.

In “Chapter 3: Black Identity Scripting Processes” I explained that misogyny is inherent to homosocial fraternal interactions as a mechanism to avoid any non-heteronormative characterizations (Adams and Fuller 2006; Bird 1996; Chang 2006; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Collins 2005; Dancy 2011; DeSantis and Coleman 2008; Flood

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<sup>41</sup> “PSilent” is a combination of their chapter name, Psi, and the word “silent.”

2008; Hill 2009; Jenkins 2012; Kelley 1996; Kimmel 1994; Kitwana 2002; Literte and Hodge 2011; Oware 2009; Perry 2004; Pritchard and Bibbs 2007; Rose 2008; Sedgwick 1985; Sharpley-Whiting 2007). As a result, the men incorporated more explicit erotic references in their paraphernalia. For example, an Omega was carrying around a purple t-shirt with “IHQP 4 Pussy” written on it in yellow, meant to be read as “I hop for pussy”. In addition, a group of Mississippi Kappas designed a grey tank top with a red and white American-style flag, a white Playboy rabbit logo in the center of the upper left red box, and “MISSISSIPPI NUPE”<sup>42</sup> written in red and white, respectively. On the back there is a red image of the state of Mississippi with a Ψ in grey, “SMOOTHEST STATE IN” written above the Mississippi image in white, and “NUPE NATION” written below it in red and white, respectively. While the Omega shirt makes a direct reference to sex through the incorporation of the word “pussy” which is a slang term for the vagina, the Kappa shirts make a slightly less obvious reference to sex by incorporating the rabbit symbol from Playboy, the popular pornographic brand, in the design of their shirt.

Through paraphernalia black Greeks participate in the embodiment process where individuals are able to perform cultural scripts both deliberately and subconsciously; it gives meaning to the self and to the perception of one’s self by others (Butler 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Nash 2000; Van Wolputte 2004). Catherine Nash (2000) explains that embodiment is a foundational concept because bodies (and objects) are inscribed upon and are therefore a primary tool in performing cultural scripts both deliberately and subconsciously. Inscriptions on the body are performative acts to indicate meaning and analyze the composition of difference where the body is “construed as a surface ripe for

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<sup>42</sup> Members of Kappa Alpha Psi often refer to each other as NUPEs, which is an acronym for a phrase that is only known by members of the organization.

signification and/or as a metonymic switch point between individual and society” (Morris 1995:579). The body also interacts with spaces and other bodies, which are also inscribed upon, therefore causing all of these scripts to operate in relation to each other (Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Nash 2000; Thrift 1996, 1997, 1999; Van Wolputte 2004).

## 2. COMMODIFICATION AND CONSUMPTION OF PARAPHERNALIA

Black Greek material culture has been heavily commodified in a variety of direct and indirect ways. While members designed some of the paraphernalia I saw at the festival for their entire group of sorors and fraters, much of it is sold either in Greek clothing stores and/or on the Internet via company websites and social media. I mentioned in “Chapter 2: Atlanta Greek Picnic as a Quasi-Diasporic Black Greek Space” that three larger companies, Zeus’ Closet, stuff4Greeks, and FratBrat Apparel sponsored the festival and offered a 15 percent discount to anyone who showed their VIP or VIP Elite card. This was also an excellent marketing opportunity because they were mentioned at each event by the hosts.

Vendors were also invited to register a booth at the step show and picnic to sell their products to event attendees. Lissa from One Greek Store based out of Gainesville, FL explained that they had been attending the festival for several years. She also mentioned that while they make items for any organization they specialize in making items for Divine Nine<sup>43</sup> organizations, many of which are customizable. Customization

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<sup>43</sup> The National Pan-Hellenic Council originally consisted of the four sororities and four fraternities that were founded prior to its organization in 1930 who became known colloquially as the Elite Eight. Upon accepting the Iotas into the council, the group was renamed the Divine Nine.

attracts an abundance of patronage because members are able to incorporate such key identifiers as their lines names, line numbers, chapter name, and chapter taglines.<sup>44</sup>

Members of the organizations who used their affiliation as an entrepreneurial opportunity created some of the companies that were represented at the festival. I spoke with a Zeta named Johani who was helping her soror sell tikis, paddles, and other items at the step show. She explained, “We came two years ago just to enjoy [the festival] and she saw how profitable it was for the vendors, so she decided to try it out for herself for the first time last year. It went extremely well so she decided to come back.” Raphael, a Kappa from Michigan, created a line of Kappa t-shirts that he sold at both events. He explained that his most popular selling item is a white shirt that has the Kappa hand sign in red on the right with the phrase “If “YO” girl wants the NUPES... “YO” problem” with everything written in black except for the word “YO,” which is written in red each time. In addition to Raphael’s fraternal entrepreneurialism, this shirt is indicative of the way black Greek stereotypes are reproduced and circulated through commodification. This shirt pulls from the “smooth playboy” persona that is often associated with Kappas who are said to get a lot of attention from women.

There were also several companies that were selling items that were not targeted at any particular organization but received the most attention from AKAs because their logos and products aligned well with their hyperfeminine stereotype. During my interview with Omega from So Pretty Couture she explained, “My brand represents all females no matter their race, ethnicity, or whatever. But being that I’m an African

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<sup>44</sup> Many chapters have a tagline associated with their name. For example, the SGRho’s at Florida International University are called the “No-no-no-notorious Omicron Theta chapter” in reference to the 1998 “Notorious B.I.G” track by rappers Biggie Smalls, Puff Daddy (P. Diddy) and Lil’ Kim.

American female and I attended an HBCU I usually try to target places where I know I'm familiar with the culture that's going to come, you know, because I can sell what I'm selling easier." While she had a variety of color options for her "Pretty Girls Club" and "Pretty Girls For Life" t-shirts, they appealed to AKAs more than any other organization due to the incorporation of the phrase "Pretty Girls" which is a tagline that is often associated with that sorority. While they are not the only organization to refer to themselves specifically as pretty, they are the only one to use that exact phrase. Instead, the Zetas and SGRhos will often opt for the phrases "Pretty Kitties" or "Pretty Poodles," respectively, as a way to incorporate their mascots.<sup>45</sup>

The vendor representing the brand Pink Kiss also appealed to the AKAs because of the bright pink and green color scheme that was used to promote the "pretty meets gangster" clothing line. Tiffany, the representative I spoke with, was wearing a bright yellow-green loose, cropped tank top with "STONER GIRL" written on it in black with a pair of black spandex shorts. She explained that the top-selling items were the high-waist acid wash skirt and the "Fuck Your Brand" tank top, so although they were selling a variety of non-Greek items the first impression attracted more AKAs than anyone else.

Finally, Marietta, another non-Greek vendor, was promoting her women's shoe line called Miss Mary Mack. She explained that she offers a customization option where consumers can request a specific print or design on their high heeled or flat shoes. Also, even though she had not sold anything she was interested in getting contact information from potential consumers who would order from her website after the festival and tell their friends about the line. Marietta also received the most attention from AKAs and I

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<sup>45</sup> The kitty is an unofficial mascot for Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Their official symbol is the dove.

suspect that this is because of the hyperfeminine stereotype that is often associated with them. On my campus there was even a rumor that they were not allowed to wear flat shoes in our student union, and while this was highly unlikely to be true the rumor was able to circulate because of their public image.

In addition to renting booths, some vendors used social media to promote their items. In the “Introduction” chapter I explained that hashtags (#) are used to link a variety of posts together by topic. Many users posted photographs of their items and incorporated #agp2013 in the caption so that when people search that hashtag their post would be included in the results. Some would also post photographs of members wearing their items or members would post a photograph wearing an item and include the company’s username in the caption so that their followers would know where to purchase it. The Instagram user @\_custompinz posted several photographs of members wearing her customizable pins made from fusible beads. These tiny cylinder-shaped plastic beads come in a variety of colors that could be arranged in any design and then melted with an iron so that they fuse together. Some of the designs include an Alpha pin of the year 1906 in black with a yellow background outlined in black, a Delta pin of their hand sign in red outlined in white, and a Kappa pin of red and white cane outlined in black.

Another common trend was for different companies to post photographs of representatives at the picnic from the company account and use #agp2013 in the caption. The Hip Hop Atlanta radio station Streetz 94.5 posted a photograph of four representatives holding up t-shirts with the radio station logo and their organizations hand signs. Kansas City Greek Picnic posted a photograph of an Omega, a Zeta, and an Alpha with their backs facing the camera while holding their organizations hand signs in the air



and wearing t-shirts in their organization's colors with their Instagram usernames printed on the back. Finally, Chicago Greek Weekend posted a photograph of three Alphas wearing "Chi Greek Weekend" t-shirts posing with the picnic host Big Tigger and holding up their hand signs.

As demonstrated above, this festival was an excellent promotional opportunity for attendees to find out about other Greek picnics that are happening around the country. In fact, one of the representatives for Chicago Greek Weekend recognized my cane from the step show because it was wrapped with shiny gold tape instead of the yellow electrical tape that is more commonly used, and he approached me to ask if my team wanted to participate in their step show. I gave him the step team's contact information and at the end of July we drove to Chicago and won first place with a revamped version of the show that we used to win the California Greek Weekend step show at the end of June.

### 3. THE PERFORMATIVE NETWORK SPATIALITIES OF THE CANE GANG

Finally, I would like to discuss the way social objects are able to enact specific sets of interactions between individuals based on the narratives that surround them. While there are an abundance of black Greek objects, such as the tikis, paddles, and military boots, I am going to focus my discussion on the object with which I am most familiar: the cane. Specific black Greek-letter organizations (BGLO) has inscribed upon the cane to invoke a set of narratives that signify membership and place particular groups of people in contact with each other in specific ways. The cane signifies who is and is not a member of the group, and in turn this group consciousness gives significance to the organization. It is therefore a physical manifestation of scripted collectivities. For some, the cane is

also indicative of the relationship within and between different organizations and it therefore enacts interactions among these groups of people.

Multiple organizations have adopted the cane as a social object and each has created its own private, semi-public, and public narratives surrounding its significance. Out of respect for each organization's desire to be discrete I will only deal with those narratives that have been made public in this analysis. The primary organizations that carry or perform with canes are Kappas and SGRhos. Sometimes, Sigmas and Zetas will use canes but this is less common, and some other organizations may carry canes but this is extremely rare and generally less accepted among black Greeks.

One of the primary purposes of the cane is profiling where Greeks can be seen with canes hooked onto pockets, belt loops, bags, purses, shoulders, or carried in their hands. The colors the cane is wrapped in signify the individual's membership in a specific organization and this act perpetuates the cane as a symbol for them even though it has not been officially adopted by any organization. As with other black Greek social objects, only members are permitted to touch the cane. Depending on the chapter's relationship with their brother or sister organization, they may also be permitted to touch each other's canes. Though it is not common, some canes are even wrapped in the colors of both organizations. This point is more applicable to the case of Kappas and SGRhos since Zetas and Sigmas have the same colors.

Some vendors have been selling canes that have already been wrapped and members can request custom designs that include, for example, their line numbers, the organization's name, or other personal identifiers. During the picnic I interviewed Howard, a Kappa who owns Kanework Kanes, an Atlanta-based company that sells pre-

wrapped, customizable canes for Kappas, SGRhos, and Sigmas and staffs for the other sororities. During his interview, Howard discussed the complexity involved in wrapping and customizing his canes.

It's really great because I'm doing it hands on right in front of people and they get a chance to actually see me doing it. Most of the time people don't actually know how to wrap canes so it gives them a chance to see it and actually get a custom cane right in front of them. The most popular selling item is a checkerboard cane. It's one of the most difficult things to do. It takes a long time. Another popular one is this one right here. My three diamond cane gives them a chance to customize it with their information on it.

Most Greeks wrap their canes themselves, especially if they are for performance purposes due to the amount of damage that can be done to them, but many will purchase canes if they want to have a more complex design. Similar to Johani and Raphael, Howard has used his social capital to capitalize off of the opportunity to participate in fraternal entrepreneurialism.

The other purpose of the cane involves choreographed and improvised cane performances. There are two ways the cane is used: the first is called bopping, where members will incorporate twirling and dancing to music usually during staged stepping or strolling performances. The actual bop move involves variations of tapping the cane outward in front of the body and bringing it behind or beside the body. Due to their private narratives that involve the cane, Kappas are the most dominant cane masters, but SGRhos and even other organizations will often perform with them. Due to variations in skill levels, my step team decided to only have the two more experienced twirlers

perform a more complex bop that incorporated two different choreographed routines where each of us twirled two canes at a time in the front corners of the stage while the others performed a stroll routine toward the back of the stage between us.

In addition to bopping, performers will step with canes by tapping them on the ground, their bodies, or other canes to create a beat. They will also toss the canes to each other to demonstrate a higher skill level. Many routines incorporate multiple beats that complement each other in order to increase the level of complexity and entertainment. It is considered taboo to drop the cane on the ground, so performers are pressured to have an expert mastery of cane work when they perform in public spaces. While it is not common for Zetas to perform with canes, they decided to incorporate a simple cane step into their step show as a tribute to the Kappas.

While SGRho canes signify the unofficial bond that we have with Kappas, Kappa canes carry a different narrative that does not represent this relationship, therefore underscoring the notion that social objects may be associated with a multitude of narratives that may at some times contradict each other but are still able coexist. To further illustrate this point, during my interviews with Claudette, an SGRho, and Bayo, a Sigma, and Tyrone, a Kappa, they each discussed their organizations' connections to the cane, and while none of these narratives complement each other, they still participate in the multiple-context relative designations of the cane in black Greek life.

To begin, Claudette commented on the way it represents the historical connection between SGRhos and Kappas.

I love the cane because of the history that it has. One thing about the Sigma Gamma Rhos that ushered me into the organization, they always talked about how

we stand alone. We don't need a fraternity to validate us, but at the same time we do have a history with Kappa Alpha Psi. And when it comes to the cane I think that to me that represents that special part of our history, the beginning of our relationship with Kappa Alpha Psi. So regardless of if anyone would say, "We don't have Indiana Love here" to me, that's fine. But you can't be ignorant to the fact that we do have a connection with them as black men besides the Greek relationship. We as black people, as a fraternity and sorority, we have a relationship and for me I love it. So for me it's very precious, that symbol that we have. And again it's important that we didn't need it but it was wonderful to have that relationship and I think that's what makes it more special.

During Claudette's discussion of the significance of the cane for her as an SGRho she was clear to acknowledge the way the cane operates as a social object to invoke a specific history between Kappas and SGRhos. All of the sororities maintain a connection to a fraternity that usually deals with the founding of the organization, but SGRhos promote a narrative of black female independence that does not require the assistance of a fraternity. It is also interesting to note that while many SGRhos carry and perform with canes, the organization has not officially accepted this as a symbol, further perpetuating the notion that this group of women does not promote an explicit relationship with any fraternity. Still, the insistence on members of the sorority to use the cane as a social object that represents "Indiana Love"<sup>46</sup> and Claudette's subsequent reference to the way the cane has been used as a form of protection for women specifically from racist white men in Jim Crow Indiana implies a subliminal dependence on black masculinity. While these

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<sup>46</sup> "Indiana Love" represents the connection between Kappas and SGRhos since both organizations were founded in Indiana.

narratives of independence circulate verbally, SGRhos are still maintaining their connection to Kappas through the cane. In fact, I developed a great deal of my cane performance skills by working with a Kappa, and the fact that I learned from him allowed me be considered an authority on cane work.

During my discussion of paraphernalia with Bayo, he discussed the narrative of the cane that circulates among Sigmas. He stated,

Many people say "Oh yeah you all carry canes. The Kappas carry canes." The cane is actually from a military background. Many people who were in the military, the commanders, had canes. Now commanders who were a part of Kappa Alpha Psi and Phi Beta Sigma were wrapping canes in their Greek colors also to show that they were high level-ranking officers in the military. So another way to kind of show off your organization was the cane thing. Now as far as stepping with the canes, that didn't begin until the 1950s and 60s when canes started being incorporated into stepping. So at first, it was more of a ranking thing to show that someone has a military background. Now in 2013 you kind of see it as just I'm a part of the organization.

One thing that is important to note regarding Bayo's discussion of the history of the cane is that Kappas do not share this same narrative of signification of both military ranking and membership in a black fraternity. The Kappas maintain a completely different set of private and semi-public narratives. Regarding what he could share with me considering his interpretation of the symbolism behind the cane, Tyrone commented,

The cane represents a few things to me. When I was joining Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. the first thing that I learned that was associated with the cane was

the idea of being a gentleman: how you dress, how you act, how you walk, and the way you hold yourself in public. A lot of the members of the fraternity and during its founding, you see that they were key members in the community. A lot of our founders were doctors, lawyers, or different people that held high positions, and the idea of being a gentleman is something that was associated with that. When you saw gentlemen walking down the street, you saw them walking with canes. The second idea that comes to my mind is that Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. is a Christian-based organization. The cane itself is shaped as a "J" which can be seen as Jesus Christ. When we tape our canes we include three things that represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Tyrone echoed Bayo's respectability narrative but emphasizes a different construction of masculinity. Rather than focusing on military service and ranking, Tyrone invoked the black dandy imagery of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and argues that the cane is a required accessory for gentlemen. Additionally, he discussed the way it evokes the Christian nuances of Kappa Alpha Psi, therefore appealing to earlier narratives of piety as a characteristic of respectable middle-class black masculinity. Later during our interview, Tyrone explained that he does not think any organization besides his own and SGRhos should carry canes because others do not understand the significance that is associated with it, therefore demonstrating the way a symbol's private narratives can designate it as a sacred object.

In sum, the narratives presented here surrounding the significance of the cane in black Greek material culture are indicative of John Law's (2002) notion of fluid continuity. The boundaries surrounding a fluid object must be mobile, but there also must

be some sense of continuity in order for the fluid object to maintain its network definition so the fluid space cannot change all at once. While the narratives each organization circulates regarding the cane may not necessarily support each other, specifically in the case of Kappas and Sigmas, they are still able to exist within their own designated mutually exclusive spaces.

This analysis of paraphernalia and collective identification processes highlights the reciprocal relationship between an object's ability to maintain its social significance in relation to its network of relations. It also promotes a non-Euclidean understanding of space that is not necessarily physical but rather incorporates an object's network spatiality, or its set of interactions that operate in relation to each other, and underscores the reciprocal relationship between the way individuals and objects create the social world (Law 2002). Individuals and groups of individuals create the social world through their participation in the simultaneous transformation and perpetuation of their realities (Harré 2002). Social objects only maintain their sociality in their particular social context (Harré 2002). They may also invoke a set of multiple context-relative affordances, or objects that may be associated with a multitude of narratives that can be pulled from different sources, and the specific contexts determine which narrative will be invoked (Harré 2002; Law 2002; Pels et al. 2002).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Due to the explicit association between an individual and his or her affiliation, paraphernalia creates a space where members are sure to demonstrate their respectability through self-regulation. This creates a "third person consciousness" which represents the relationship between one's self and the relevant spatio-temporal world (Hall 2012).



Members consider the perception of others and our selves, which perpetuates some form of self-objectification. We experience a denial of individual agency and instead become representatives of our respective organizations. We pay careful attention to how our organizations are being represented in order to combat any negative stereotypes that may be circulated.

Paraphernalia is also used to demonstrate a variety of tropes that may be associated with each organization based on those that have been developed through the creation of black middle-class respectability politics as confronted with Hip Hop models of black femininities and masculinities. Elitism is portrayed to perpetuate these organizations' images of respectability and to define the boundary between members and non-members. Ritualized aggression is employed to perpetuate the narrative of the post-initiation "fraternal self" (Jones 2004), and in the case of fraternities, hypermasculinity through corporeal inscription. Although some sorority members do get brands this happens less commonly, and when this does happen the brands are typically located in an area that can be identified as feminine and sexually appealing (e.g., upper thigh and lower back). This point demonstrates the patriarchal and heterosexual conception of black masculinity that is correlated with the sexed subordination of black femininity. Additionally, black masculine eroticism perpetuates misogyny and heteropatriarchy, which combats non-heteronormative characterizations in a space of non-romantic homosocial relationships. Sexual entrepreneurialism, by contrast, opposes the association between respectability and conservative sexuality that is imposed on black sorority members.

The commodification and consumption of black Greek material culture reifies the stereotypes and characterizations of each organization that are perpetuated through clothing. Greek-letter organization (GLO) paraphernalia companies include a customization option to appeal to the way members present their “fraternal selves” (e.g., line names, line numbers, and chapter taglines). In addition, BGLO members may use their membership as an entrepreneurial opportunity to form their own paraphernalia companies. Also, items that are not paraphernalia may attract members of certain organizations based on colors, phrases, or symbols that may be associated with them. This process of commodification and consumption therefore

Paraphernalia acts as a social object that allows members to identify social networks. It invokes specific narratives, which may contradict between organizations but continue to exist because of the boundary that exists between organizations. Therefore, the commodification and consumption of black Greek culture through paraphernalia is a tool for self-objectification that participates in the simultaneous perpetuation and transformation of tropes that are associated with the respectability politics of each organization. It presents a space to visually demonstrate the fraternal self through clothing and social objects, which in turn place in motion specific sets of interactions between bodies based on affiliation.

## CHAPTER 5: REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF DIVERSITY AND COLOR-BLINDNESS IN BLACK SPACES

When I was a neophyte I used to spend my afternoons with my line sisters<sup>47</sup> hanging out in the student center on our main campus to socialize with other black Greeks and to wait for someone to play music so that we could stroll in the walkway. Students would often stop and stare in amazement at lines of choreographed black Greeks, and one day one of my line sisters refused to get up and stroll because she felt like a monkey in a cage performing for white students' entertainment. Although she mentioned white students specifically, the university is a Minority Serving Institution or MSI for being the first in the United States to award BA and MA degrees to Hispanic students. She was actually referring to the white and Latino students who are more familiar with mainstream white campus culture. There were also more than a few instances when students would jump in the back of stroll lines because they thought it was just a meaningless choreographed dance, not realizing that what they were doing was extremely disrespectful. As on most campuses, the non-black students are unaware of the existence of black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) and our traditions.

Up to this point in my analysis I have discussed a variety of boundaries that have been established and breached at different historical moments. These organizations were birthed out of the exclusivity of white spaces and provided black people with access to their own elite spaces, which also created a social class boundary. A very small sector of the population had access to education when these organizations were founded, so requiring college enrollment or completion in order to join adds an element of exclusivity. Also, there is obviously a gender distinction since fraternities only initiate

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<sup>47</sup> Members of a pledge line refer to each other as line sisters.

men and sororities only initiate women. This distinction is intensified when we consider gender roles and the impact of hegemonic black masculinity. Black Greek identity performances operate as a manifestation of historical black middle-class respectability politics and Hip Hop models of black femininities and masculinities. The fundamental aim of respectability politics and, by extension, BGLOs is the humanization and valuation of black people through adopting and performing mainstream middle-class values, originally through a context in which black people were not permitted to operate in a substantial way within white spaces. Since then, that boundary between black and white spaces has been legislatively lifted while remaining largely intact symbolically. In this chapter, I explore the experiences of non-black people of color, black immigrants, and mixed race people. I also consider the experiences of white members, and I go a step further to consider the way their participation in black spaces can become problematic as they adopt a dominant position while simultaneously excluding black people from white spaces in which they appropriate black culture.

Historically, black students have been excluded from white clubs and organizations, and even today there remains a degree of de facto racial segregation since black and white students may not be able to relate to each other culturally (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Hughey 2007; Schmitz and Forbes 1994). Black and white Greek-letter organizations (GLOs) are based on a different organizational ontology regarding values, background, and education where black Greeks tend to be more politically liberal, more preoccupied with community service and professional goals, and more concerned with high academic achievement (Berkowitz and Padavic 1999; Hughey 2007; Whipple et al. 1991).

Additionally, while the negative aspects of hazing are associated with both black and white GLOs, the membership intake practices are structurally and symbolically different (Hughey 2007; Kimbrough 2003). BGLOs tend to be highly selective when they invite interested students to join their organization and in most cases members are expected to participate in an extensive underground pledge process where pledges learn an in-depth history of the organization and undergo some degree of physical trauma that acts as a bonding experience for everyone on the line. White Greeks, on the other hand, go through a less intense intake process that may include a brief pledge process (Hughey 2007; Kimbrough 2003).

Regarding predominantly white GLOs, they tend to maintain a Eurocentric worldview that is often reinforced when they reside in Greek housing because they are usually isolated from any social injustice since it does not directly impact their social position on campus (Astin 1977; Hughey 2007; Morris 1991; Wilder et al. 1986). Also, white Greeks continue to have racial exclusionary practices with their membership, as seen in the case of the white sororities at the University of Alabama who rejected a black woman based on her race and were exposed in the campus newspaper (Scherker 2013). Due to her impressive resume the student was being considered for membership by several chapters on her campus and all of them ultimately rejected her, which they attributed to pressure from their alumnae and advisors (Scherker 2013).

When non-white members are accepted into white GLOs it is based on a paradoxical combination of racial assimilation and the performance of racialized schemas that interest white members (Bryson 1996; Hughey 2007, 2010). There was even a black

member of a white fraternity on my campus whose line name<sup>48</sup> was “Token,” and every time he wore his line shirt<sup>49</sup> with that name on the back I wondered why he would participate in his own racialization. Also, the black participants in Matthew W. Hughey’s (2010) study of non-white members in white GLOs explained that community service is coded as a ‘lack space because it is assumed that black members have an automatic connection to poverty due to their minority status. This results in their internal segregation and those black members who are uninterested are perceived as deviant and unauthentic (Hughey 2010). Still, when non-white members are faced with racial schemas they interpret them as just being a result of their own personalities or the personalities of others rather than a product of racial hierarchies (Hughey 2010). They tend to dismiss the thought that anti-black racism continues to show its ugly head in a great many social spaces, including more or less secret organizations such as theirs.

BGLOs therefore continue to exist in order to create a space to combat the social isolation many black students experience at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Harper 2008; Little 2002; McClure 2006; Williamson 1999). Regardless of its efficiency their mission has always been for members to use their middle-class privilege to ‘uplift the black community’ (Gasman 2011; Neumann 2008). Indeed, a shared black middle-class identity is at the core of BGLOs. Still, it is inevitable for membership to become more diverse in racial composition as society continues to embrace multiculturalism and

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<sup>48</sup> Each member is given his or her own line name.

<sup>49</sup> Line shirts have the organization’s Greek letters on the front, the line name and line number on the back, semester of initiation abbreviated on one sleeve (e.g., SPR 09), and the school and chapter on the other.

those formerly rigid boundaries of isolation become more permeable, but what does this mean for the direction in which these organizations will continue to develop?

Here, I explore the moments at which these racialized constructions of class, gender, and sexuality come into conflict with outsiders who do not identify with the group racially. These varying sets of identity constructions foster a complex set of processes based on conflicting racial models. This conflict becomes particularly intensified in the case of white members who may be viewed with some suspicion due to the historical trajectory of United States race relations specifically regarding the legacies of the degradation and exclusion of black people by their white counterparts. I begin with a discussion of some of the non-black members' experiences, many of which relate to tokenism coupled with some form of assimilation. This analysis also includes the experiences of black immigrant and mixed-race members who recognize their positioning within this African American<sup>50</sup> phenomenon. On the other hand, there are those who deny the impact of race through claims of color-blindness, which, in turn, may potentially have a detrimental impact on black people.

#### 1. MULTICULTURAL MEMBERSHIP IN BLACK GREEK-LETTER ORGANIZATIONS

When non-black members are initiated into BGLOs they may experience a process of tokenism and assimilation similar to that of non-white members in white GLOs. They tend to have heterogeneous backgrounds where some join because they grew up around black people while others are just intrigued by the values of the organizations, especially as it relates to their personal liberal social aims (Hughey 2007). Non-black minority members tend to join in order to politicize their own racial and ethnic backgrounds and

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<sup>50</sup> In my discussion of black immigrants I use African American in order to differentiate between black people born in the United States and those that were born elsewhere.

define themselves as people of color as they align themselves with socially aware black Greeks (Chen 2011; Hughey 2007, 2008a). During my interviews with several non-black members they demonstrated what Hughey (2008b) labels ‘cultural capitalism,’ which are those members who believe their membership gives them an opportunity to develop their own racial selves in relation to black popular culture.

Mario, a Latino member of Iota Phi Theta (Iota) from Florida that I mentioned in “Chapter 3: Black Identity Scripting Processes,” researched both Latino and black fraternities before making his decision to become an Iota. Since becoming a member he nicknamed himself “Ocho” to represent his line number<sup>51</sup> and Latino background. Mario explained that even though he is not able to pass as black phenotypically he does behaviorally according to himself and other members, therefore essentializing blackness and credentialing himself as an authentic representative of black identities. Kristen, a non-black member of Zeta Phi Beta (Zeta) from Georgia, was unimpressed by the Panhellenic Council’s (PC’s)<sup>52</sup> intake process in which some of her friends participated and opted instead for Zeta based on their involvement in the community. She was also impressed by the fact that unlike the predominantly white sororities black Greek membership lasts beyond the undergraduate years and that membership also provides an opportunity to bond with other members even outside of the college environment. In fact, about half of the members I interviewed were members of alumni chapters who are still active in their organizations and I was initiated into a graduate chapter in which I have been consistently active. White GLOs, on the other hand, do not have alumni chapters

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<sup>51</sup> During membership intake initiates are typically arranged in height order and given a number based on where they fall in that line.

<sup>52</sup> The Panhellenic Council (PC) is comprised of the predominantly white sororities.



and consequently view Greek life as a strictly undergraduate experience (Hughey 2007). She states, "I can go outside the grocery store and find a member of my sorority or a Sigma or even another black Greek. There's a bonding factor to it, you know, regardless of everything. And I could see that on campus and with people. And it was just, it's a good feeling."

Another group of multicultural members includes those members of BGLOs who claim some variation of black identity but do not identify as strictly African American. In this section, I use the term African American to refer to black people born in the United States with no direct known or recognized connection to any other country and or racial/ethnic group. Eugene Robinson (2010) identifies three oppositional groups within the black community in the United States: (1) poor versus elite, (2) native born versus black immigrants, and (3) black versus multiracial. Due to the similar class background of BGLO members I was only able to include individuals who identify with the latter two of the three oppositional groups.

As a black immigrant Bayo, a Nigerian member of Phi Beta Sigma (Sigma) from Georgia, has a unique relationship to his organization. Since BGLOs are an African American phenomenon continental Africans do not join in large numbers. When I asked why he elected to participate in African American Greek life, Bayo legitimated his membership with an Afrocentric argument and claims that many of BGLOs' traditions stem from African traditions:

Well as far as people know a lot of black Greek organizations actually originated from Africa. What a lot of people don't know is that if you look at the history a lot of it originates back to Africa. As you see now in modern times the traditional

styles or dances or strolls originated from African dances. If you go to Nigeria, you see different kinds of dances that look similar to some of these Greek dances. These are dances that we've been doing since maybe I would say as early as 1700s. If I talked to my grandparents about it they'll tell you. You know, so a lot of things you will see for black Greeks originated from Africa.

By qualifying BGLOs as an extension of continental African traditions Bayo has created his own space within the historical development of African American Greek life. He is able to make this discussion specific to his own nationality by mentioning Nigeria and a hypothetical conversation with his own grandparents, specifically.

Jordan, a Chinese Jamaican member of Kappa Alpha Psi (Kappa) from Florida, explained that he associated himself with other members of BGLOs upon entering college and was therefore more inclined to join one himself. Although Jordan does not self-identify as black he does describe himself as multiracial and I suspect there is an element of blackness to his identity as a Caribbean person. It is this subconscious self-alignment with a pluralized multicultural blackness that led him to join a BGLO instead of an Interfraternity Council (IFC) or Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) fraternity.<sup>53</sup> I would like to note here that even though both Bayo and Jordan identify as black immigrants to some degree, they have had distinct experiences as members of African American fraternities based on their countries of origin and current location of residence in the United States. Miami presents a very unique situation of great diversity of black subjectivities. A large percentage of the black population in South Florida is from the

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<sup>53</sup> The Interfraternity Council (IFC) and Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) are comprised of the predominantly White fraternities and multicultural sororities and fraternities, respectively. Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Phi Beta Sigma are also members of IFC.

Caribbean and Latin America. This difference in narratives is indicative of the difference in positionality of various diasporic groups. Continental Africans can make Afrocentric claims of “motherland” authenticity due to their status as being from the “homeland.” However, Caribbean people can relate to African Americans based on claims of a unified African Diasporic experience, to which Jordan's claims were more socio-cultural than ethnic or racial.

Charlotte, a biracial member of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) from Georgia, explained that while her mother is a white woman from the UK she has spent more time around African Americans through her interactions with her father’s family and attending an historically black college or university (HBCU). While her connection to her African American identity is familial she also indicates that it has been socially reinforced. Warren, a multiracial Sigma, explained that he is Venezuelan, Native American, white, African American, and Guyanese. Although he was raised in a diverse area of New York he explained that a lot of people he has encountered do not know a lot about South America so he looks for opportunities to educate people about his background through food and music. He also revealed that he was not aware that his fraternity was historically African American prior to joining. He was attracted by the camaraderie and by the welcoming invitation extended to non-black people to join. This final sentiment is resonant of the color-blind collaborator group that is discussed below (Hughey 2008b). Although he did not dismiss his own raciality he treats African American Greek life as if it is not a space that has been deliberately designated as black.

Finally, William, an African American and Native American Iota from Illinois, explains that constructions of blackness in the United States need to be expanded so that

they acknowledge and respect variation and diversity. He states, "A lot of times, when we say African American or black, there's a lot of diversity that often gets overlooked because the race is just so diverse." So while he identifies himself as a multiracial person he insists that blackness in the United States is inherently multiracial and that this point needs to be highlighted.

While the black immigrant and multiracial participants in this project are uniting their own narratives of blackness to some degree with those that are based in the United States through their membership in BGLOs, they do recognize a difference between themselves and African Americans. With the exception of Bayo who had an accent and Jordan who does not phenotypically appear to be black, all of them could have passed for African American, even though they revealed that they are multiracial at some point before or during the interviews. These participants highlighted the fact that there is a great deal of heterogeneity within what is sometimes called "the black community" in the United States, and that this diversity should be acknowledged and recognized. It is for this reason that I am skeptical of such post-racial arguments as that expressed by Touré in *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means To Be Black Now* (2011). He claims that the category of "blackness" is expanding and becoming more inclusive where all configurations are being accepted because the boundaries are constantly being renegotiated based on specificities of contexts.

In his work on Caribbean immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area in northern California, Percy Hintzen (2001) explains that they may identify with the myth of the model minority in order to be perceived favorably but also identify as black in order to gain access to the resources that are necessary for socioeconomic mobility. He explains

that their perception as “upwardly mobile, meritocratic, and foreign supports cognitive distinctions that differentiate them from African Americans...When blackness is acknowledged in self-representations, it is constructed in ways that lack the negative stereotypes that exist in the white imagination (2001:160). Black identities are defined differently as context changes because of the regional histories that may exclude mixed-race people and black immigrants (Robinson 2010). Categories are constantly being re-conceptualized based on the circumstances where it may or may not be advantageous to have an inclusive or exclusive conception of black identities; at some moments all of these people are black while at others the differences are emphasized.

## 2. PROBLEMATIZING COLOR-BLIND IDEOLOGY IN RELATION TO HIP HOP GENERATION IDENTITIES

In addition to the aforementioned ‘cultural capitalists’ Hughey (2008b) defines the ‘color blind collaborators’ as another group of non-black members of BGLOs, and he explains that their goal is to operate in a post-racial context where they have joined an organization because of what it stands for and race is not an issue. These members often do not identify with questions about their race because they dismiss race for not being relevant to their organizations and to their own mobility within the organization. The majority of the non-black participants I interviewed fell into this category and detailed paradoxical experiences of both an alleged “post-raciality” and in some cases tokenism.

When I initially approached Mike, another Latino Iota from New York, about participating in an interview about non-black members of BGLOs he asked me what I thought his background was. When I responded “Latino,” he was surprised until I explained that I have lived in Miami for several years and that I am accustomed to seeing Latinos who phenotypically appear to be white. He began our conversation from a post-

racial stance explaining that he did not consider race when he decided to join his fraternity. When asked how his ethnic background has impacted his experience as a member of a self-identified black fraternity he stated that when he meets new people they usually ask, "Who is this white boy?" Mike explained that usually people only realize that he is Latino once he starts speaking Spanish. When asked if he felt like a token person of his background he denied the word "token" and opted instead for "different," explaining that he stands out as one of the only non-black members but this difference brings "versatility" instead of discomfort. Angie, a Latina member of Delta Sigma Theta (Delta), shares a similar stance with Mike insomuch that race was not a factor in her decision to join her sorority. She explains that she is proud of her background and that her sorors have never made her feel uncomfortable for not being African American. Unlike Mike, Angie has been able to pass as African American until she starts speaking because she has an accent. At that point she is usually asked about her ethnicity and explains that she is Latina.

Malia, a Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, and white member of Sigma Gamma Rho (SGRho) from California, described a very contradictory experience during our interview. She explains, "I mean you get called out a lot. There's a lot more questions. If I'm with my sorors it's kind of like I get pointed out a lot. I have a lot more questions asked but really it's all love at the end." She explains that she is often questioned about her background and her decision to join a black sorority but also insists that black Greeks are "color-blind." Malia also explained that she has several Japanese and Hawaiian tattoos, so similar to Mario she maintains her ethnic identity through some form of cultural participation.

Brandon, a white Sigma from Maryland, voiced a similar desire as Kristen in his decision to join a fraternity that underscores community service and post-graduate bonding between members. He also participated in the Sigma step show and told me that the audience was surprised to see a white Sigma stepping. In the middle of their performance there was a skit during which the Sigma step team discussed bringing in some extra people. One of the black Sigmas who was referred to as “the muscle” was recruited first and then they debated about bringing in Brandon who was eventually allowed because he had been at all of the practices. As soon as he entered the stage the audience cheered loudly in astonishment at the white stepper since step teams are usually exclusively black. During my exploration of the social media posts using the trending topic #agp2013,<sup>54</sup> I came across three Instagram posts of Brandon and a black Zeta who I suspect might be his girlfriend based on the comments that were posted about the photograph. One of his Sigma fraternity brothers wrote a comment on one of the posts that read, “Get it frat...getting that robin thicke treatment huh?” The user compared him to Robin Thicke, a white R&B singer who married a mixed-race black actress named Paula Patton. The user’s comment very obviously emphasized the racial background of the couple that includes a white male and black female therefore demonstrating the continued relevance of race. In my interview with Brandon he also noted that he knows I approached him about participating because he is white. He explained that when he meets other black Greeks they comment on his race saying that he is the first white Sigma they have met. Still, he downplayed his racial background saying that it’s “nothing but love the whole entire time, you know.”

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<sup>54</sup> Hashtags (#) are used to link a variety of posts together by topic.

There was also a white Delta from Georgia named Paislie who was certain to promote the notion of color-blindness in black Greek life as she brought race to the forefront of many of her posts. One of her posts includes herself as well as two other white Deltas forming a pyramid where each one of them uses a hand as a side of the triangle and she captioned this post “I love my DST! <3 Sisterhood has no color!” Many commented in agreement with her stating, “It sure does not Sorors OO-OOP!” “It sure don’t! OOO-OOP” and, “Amen to that! Ooo-oop sorors!” She also posted a photograph with a white member of Omega Psi Phi (Omega) and another with a white Zeta, both of which were admired by other members for their representation of diversity within BGLOs. While these posts certainly attest to the success of racial integration in black organizations particularly as it relates to white participation, Paislie’s determination to post images of her with other white members brings into focus their racial conspicuity.

Mike, Angie, Malia, Brandon, and Paislie occupy a paradoxical position of post-racial tokenism. While they do not see race as a relevant concept to their membership those who were interviewed did acknowledge the impact it has on their interaction with other black Greeks. By adhering to the pre-determined scripts of a cultural group, these non-black members are able to “pass” and maintain their membership through cultural performance. Still, even though they may be able to efficiently perform the scripts they reside on the periphery because they possess something that differentiates them from the group.

The notion that non-black members of BGLOs operate within a color-blind social context is not only contradictory but it can also be quite dangerous in terms of its larger significance and impact on US race relations. Color-blindness is an extension of a lack of



racial consciousness that assumes a race-neutral context and ignores issues related to race, thus its denial of racial stratification in turn perpetuates that very system of domination (Crenshaw 1995, 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Omi and Winant 1994; Williams and Land 2006; Young 1994). It comes out of the commonly held belief among many white people that Civil Rights legislation officially ended racism, which has resulted in increasing political conservatism and the overturning of policies such as Affirmative Action that have been deemed unnecessary (Davis 2012; Williams and Land 2006).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains, “color-blind racism otherizes softly... instead of proclaiming God placed minorities in the world in a servile position, it suggests they are behind because they do not work hard enough... This new ideology has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order (2010:3). He also delineates the following four frames of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010). First, abstract liberalism refers to those who apply political and economic liberal rhetoric (i.e., equal opportunity, free market, no government involvement in social policy) to racial issues, and they attack such programs as Affirmative Action because they believe it gives preferential treatment to specific groups. Second, naturalization gives ‘natural’ explanations to racial phenomena (e.g., residential segregation is a result of people preferring to organize based on similar attributes). Third, cultural racism gives ‘cultural’ explanations to racial phenomena (e.g., black and Latino people are overrepresented in the prison system because they come from a culture of violence). Fourth, the minimization of racism partially or totally denies current forms of racism and their impact on people of color.

Amanda E. Lewis states, “With their claims of color-blindness, [white people] are self-exonerated from any blame for current racial inequalities, and thus people of color are blamed implicitly (or explicitly) for their own condition” (2004:636). In fact, ‘whiteness’ tends to be understood as a lack of a racial self that operates in contradistinction with the raciality of others, and it results in a denial of systematic racism (McIntosh 1989; Terry 1981; Weigman 1999; Wong and Cho 2005). This universalization of white identity as a non-racial phenomenon eclipses any understanding of the privilege that is attached to being a part of that group, and those who do recognize systematic racism are unable to define their own role in the perpetuation of that inequality (Hartmann et al. 2009). Those who do not recognize their own privilege tend to justify it through individualistic or cultural explanations rather than understanding it as a systematic phenomenon, which in turn denies the racist structural inequalities that institutionally perpetuate the subordination of people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997; Hartman et al. 2009). Conversely, racial awareness results in an understanding of the ‘three facets of racism:’ an understanding that racism is a key component to US history, an acceptance that white privilege continues to exist, and a recognition of one’s own racial prejudices (Trepagnier 2010).

It is difficult to discuss ‘whiteness’ as a collectivity because many white people fail to recognize a sense of connectedness with each other and/or they deny any type of racial consciousness (Lewis 2004). While they may perpetuate the racialization of others they fail to reflectively racialize themselves unless it is done for a strategic purpose (Lewis 2004). Instead, they often mobilize as a passive collectivity that is unified based on a particular common attribute rather than explicitly racial purposes (Young 1994).

While the exclusively white composition of a group may not be intentional it occurs due to the status boundaries as a result of institutional racism, and racialization is therefore a backdrop of their identity that cannot be denied regardless of the individual's self-identification (Lewis 2004).

As racially unaware white people continue to permeate black spaces arrhythmia arises from an inability to maintain a harmonious network of rhythms (Lefebvre 2004). As I have mentioned earlier, it is typical for groups of members from a particular chapter or region to design a shirt that everyone will wear to the picnic. The SGRhos from Virginia designed a controversial diss<sup>55</sup> shirt that read, "Signed papers? Nappy weave? Founded by men? We good." The first line written in alternating pink and green letters refers to the stereotype that AKAs do not pledge and therefore criticizes them for only participating in the paperwork side of the membership intake process. The third line refers to the history that connects the Zetas and Sigmas that resulted in their organizational connections. The final line was written in yellow and outlined in blue to signify that the SGRhos do not fall into any of those categories.

The second line, written in red and white, was pointed at the Deltas and that particular line caused pandemonium on social media made evident through the comments on several posts because a white member named Paige was part of the group wearing the shirts. Several people posted photographs of themselves with Paige on Instagram but the post on her own account resulted in a host of comments from people who were attacking her for wearing the shirt. While the line explicitly states weave the incorporation of the word "nappy" conjured up a highly negative response from the black women in other

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<sup>55</sup> Something that disrespects or teases another organization.

organizations who subsequently deleted their comments after a wave responses from other SGRhos in support of the shirt. Although Paige was wearing the shirt out of solidarity with the other members of her chapter her race was at the forefront of the conflict, particularly at a moment where there has been an upsurge in the natural hair movement. Black women are promoting a widespread rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards and calling for an acceptance of our natural hair textures that have been historically rejected and pejoratively labeled as nappy. There are several bloggers and vloggers<sup>56</sup> who deal with the negative and often traumatic experiences black women with natural hair encounter in public spaces with black men and women, and white people.

These types of racially charged controversies are expected as color lines continue to be crossed in this supposed post-racial, color-blind context. This crossing of boundaries can cause a great deal of conflict. Recently, this racially motivated arrhythmia within black spaces has played out on a national stage as mainstream popular culture and white artists continue to appropriate and participate in Hip Hop culture. Social media and the black blogosphere have been using a variety of digital platforms to address the issues many of these situations are creating for black media consumers who are offended by the lack of responsibility and concern those white artists demonstrate surrounding their role in reproducing black identities.

Bakari Kitwana (2005) states that there are four Hip Hop truths: (1) it is a black youth subculture, (2) it is a multicultural space, (3) artists tend to use their own experiences as creative inspiration, and (4) it is a product of black popular culture. He argues that these truths reveal that we are living in an ‘age of appropriation’ as white

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<sup>56</sup> “Vlogger” is a combination of the terms “video” and “blogger” and refers to those who use such video platforms as YouTube to blog.

popular music artists continue to draw from Hip Hop for inspiration. In July 2014 BBC Radio 1Xtra released a list of the top influential artists in black and urban music and three of the top four artists were white men. Black artists and fans were shocked that the UK station would name white singer Ed Sheeran as the most influential artist in a black and urban category. UK rapper Wiley, who was listed at number sixteen, tweeted his frustration stating, “I’ve never been influenced by a white artist to make black music #Never” and “We have been bumped basically. Not taking anything away from Ed...he is sick. But black artists in England we are getting bumped.”

Additionally, Greg Tate (2003) argues that Hip Hop is not only a commodity in the music industry but it also impacts the marketing of other non-musical commodities. It has resulted in the cultural commodification that has given birth to the ‘wigga,’ a slang term that refers to white people who behaviorally reproduce black identity scripts, who can be perceived as both flattery through imitation and contemporary minstrelsy (Tate 2003). Eminem, the first white rapper to win a Grammy, has been accepted within black popular culture because he is relatable based on his low-income background in predominantly black Detroit and mastery of black cultural aesthetics, specifically ‘angry black male aggression’ (Rux 2003). His bad boy persona also credentials him as authentically black in mainstream popular culture but his white body makes him less threatening and therefore more easily acceptable. He therefore “*becomes* us with supernatural powers beyond us” (Rux 2003:28).

He demonizes the maternal figure through his lyrics as he attacks his own mother as well as his daughter’s mother in order to qualify himself as an appropriate presentation of Hip Hop and black popular culture through music. Carl Hancock Rux states, “Eminem

proves that a *real* outcast has got to do more than make *Miss Jackson's* daughter cry<sup>57</sup>—you got to fuck the bitch, kill the bitch, dump the bitch's dead body in the river, and not apologize for any of it" (2003:18). Essentially, Eminem has not only participated in the continued circulation of negative hegemonic black masculine stereotypes but he has transcended them through his violently misogynist lyrics.

But what does this say about new white rappers like Seattle-based Macklemore? His style is unlike Eminem and instead he takes the frat rap approach in songs like *Thrift Shop* (2012) and the progressive white liberal approach to *Same Love* (2012) in order to align himself with the capitalist economic and left-leaning political agendas of the genre without identifying with black experiences of disenfranchisement. Kitwana recounts the following warning regarding appropriation and authenticity:

For years many Black baby boomers have been telling us hip-hop generationers to beware the culture bandit, the white kid who deftly crosses over the preconceived racial divide in style, form and sound. As long as we didn't own the labels and distribution outlets, hip-hop culture, they said—even as we stared at them incredulously—would one day be appropriated in the tradition of rock and roll, which began as anything but white and ended being identified with Elvis Presley [2005:161].

The transition from the Eminem model to the Macklemore model was demonstrated during recent musical award shows. MTV's 2013 Video Music Awards (VMAs) were sufficiently problematic and completely appropriated Hip Hop culture through its

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<sup>57</sup> *Ms. Jackson* is a song by Outkast (2001) in which the duo apologizes to Ms. Jackson for making her daughter cry over the ending of their relationship and promise to co-parent their child.

“Brooklyn” theme and simultaneous exclusion of black artists from winning any awards. Most notably, Macklemore won the award for best Hip Hop video against black rappers Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Drake, and A\$AP Rocky. He went on sweep the rap categories at the 2014 Grammys and beat out those same artists as well as Kanye West and Eminem for best rap album, best rap performance, and best rap song. After the award show Macklemore posted a screenshot of the following text to Kendrick Lamar with the subsequent caption:

Text: You got robbed. I wanted you to win. You should have. It’s weird and sucks that I robbed you. I was gonna say that during the speech. Then the music started playing during my speech and I froze. Anyway, you know what it is. Congrats on this year and your music. Appreciate you as an artist and as a friend. Much love

Caption: My text to Kendrick after the show. He deserved best rap album...I’m honored and completely blown away to win anything much less 4 Grammys. But in that category, he should have won IMO.<sup>58</sup> And that’s taking nothing away from The Heist.<sup>59</sup> Just giving GKMC<sup>60</sup> it’s proper respect...With that being said, thank you to the fans. You’re the reason we were on that stage tonight. And to play Same Love on that platform was a career highlight. The greatest honor of all.

That’s what this is about. Progress and art. Thank you #grammys

These events incited uproar with many black viewers who took to social media and blogging to voice their frustration because it was believed that Macklemore was not the

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<sup>58</sup> IMO is an acronym for the phrase “in my opinion.”

<sup>59</sup> The Heist is the name of Macklemore’s album.

<sup>60</sup> GKMC is an acronym for Kendrick Lamar’s album Good Kid Mad City.

most talented artist in any of these categories. His apology text to Kendrick Lamar was also poorly received because it was perceived as a publicity stunt.

Tate (2003) relates white appropriation of Hip Hop with Marx's and Engels's 'commodity-fetish effect' as an outgrowth of capitalism where a commodity becomes a 'magical thing of desire.' Under slavery black bodies were defined as commodities, which has resulted in "the Black body, and subsequently Black culture, [becoming] a hungered-after taboo item and a nightmarish bugbear in the badlands of the American racial imagination" (Tate 2003:4). Former Disney Channel star Miley Cyrus, the daughter of country music legend Billy Ray Cyrus, participated in the opening performance for the VMAs and was sure to incorporate her fascination with twerking, a dance involving quickly and methodically popping the hips backward. While twerking is not a new phenomenon it has gained popularity as stripper culture has come to dominate Hip Hop. Miley has decided to latch onto twerking as a method to break out of her child star persona through the viral video of her dancing on stage at rapper Juicy J's concert. During her VMA performance she wore a flesh tone pleather two-piece bra top with matching shorts and performed on stage with a gang of voluptuous black women wearing mascot heads. Black media writers, bloggers, and micro-bloggers criticized her for the way she hypersexualized black female bodies similar to the way the "Venus Hottentot" Sarah Baartman was treated, which operated in contrast to her perceived superior white feminine sexuality. She was also criticized for erasing their identities through the oversized mascot heads they wore over their own heads while she interacted with their buttocks as if they were props.



Additionally, Australian white female rapper Iggy Azalea has permeated black music with her first single *Fancy* featuring Charlie XCX (2014), and similar to Miley Cyrus, in her attempt to reproduce black popular culture scripts she has promoted the fetishization of black female bodies. Iggy Azalea is known for having a “wooty,” a slang term that refers to her large buttocks, and videos of her twerking on stage at her concerts have gone viral through social media. She has asserted the ‘visual spectacle’ of her dancing white body into a space of black aesthetics that has been plagued with pathologies that surround black female bodies and sexualities (Fleetwood 2011).

Finally, an article was recently published on Vogue.com entitled “We’re Officially in the Era of the Big Booty” (2014) during which the writer Patricia Garcia gives authenticity to Jennifer Lopez, a Puerto Rican actress and singer, for “sparking the booty movement.” In 2001 R&B girl group Destiny’s Child released their single *Bootylicious* (2001) in which they state “I don’t think you’re ready for this jelly” in reference to their curvaceous bodies, but society was not prepared for this to become a beauty standard (Garcia 2014). She credits white socialite Kim Kardashian and Jewish fitness model Jen Selter for bringing this ‘movement’ to the spotlight, and she goes on to explain that 2013 and 2014 have experienced the “total bootification of pop music” through Miley Cyrus’s VMA performance, the music video for *Can’t Remember to Forget You* by Shakira featuring Rihanna (2014), Beyoncé’s music video for *Partition* (2014), and Nicki Minaj’s song *Anaconda* (2014). She concludes by arguing that Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea’s latest single *Booty (Remix)* (2014) is the crystallization of the ‘era of the big booty’ and states, “It’s safe to say that, this time around, the world is thoroughly ready for the jelly” (Garcia 2014).

As a weighty voice in the determination of global fashion and beauty trends, this article is particularly disturbing. Black bodies have been fetishized for centuries and Garcia (2014) gives authenticity to white/light bodies and therefore not only promotes biocultural appropriation but also reminds readers that white women continue to be the standard for beauty. While white female entertainers have been praised for their demonstration of their own sexuality, black female entertainers are consistently criticized for the way they represent sexuality in the media. The latest significant headlines have been singer Beyoncé's raunchy lyrics and accompanying videos on her latest self-titled album, singer Rihanna's controversial sheer Swarovski crystal dress at the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) Fashion Awards which exposed her breasts and buttocks, and rapper Nicki Minaj's cover for her latest single *Anaconda* (2014) which is a photograph of her backside while she is squatted down wearing a pink bra top, a matching thong, and blue sneakers. Several black female bloggers and micro-bloggers have come to their defense and argued that the bigger issue is the media's policing of black female sexuality.

This denial of agency to black women regarding their sexualities relates to my early discussion of sexual entrepreneurship through performance as a response to the conservative 'cult of true womanhood' that dominates black middle-class femininity. Similar to Melyssa Ford, the video vixen I discussed in "Chapter 3: Black Identity Scripting Processes" who recognizes her agency in presenting her sexuality (Balaji 2010), these black female artists and supporting black female bloggers and micro-bloggers participate in the empowering liberation of black female sexuality vis-à-vis the hegemonic male gaze. While critics view their nudity, lyrics, and dancing as self-

objectifying negative influences on younger, impressionable generations, these female entertainers are using their artistry and performative platforms to give black women agency in the narratives that circulate surrounding sexuality.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Multicultural membership within BGLOs has resulted in a variety of phenomena regarding the significance of race between members within organizations. Racial difference is highlighted through tokenism and addressed through suspicion, or getting called out, and/or assimilation, or blending in. Non-African American members themselves deal with this through claims of authenticity where they identify a space to develop their own racial selves through black popular culture. This is complicated by the inclusion of mixed-race and black immigrant members who participate in the pluralization of black identities as well as narratives of fragmentation versus solidarity.

Those non-black members who can be identified as color-blind collaborators make claims of post-raciality participate in color-blind racism. Furthermore, white people have a lack of racial consciousness and deny race-related issues, and they can cause arrhythmia within black spaces. Therefore, they assimilate to be accepted as authentic to black and white observers and promote a color-blind liberalist agenda to seemingly align with black people without jeopardizing white privilege. Post-raciality and color-blindness are dangerous because in addition to the direct short-term micro-conflicts they feed into more substantial macro-consequences such as non-black participation in black spaces leading to appropriation coupled with the devaluation of black cultural production

Additionally, the fetishization of black women's bodies is coupled with the simultaneous denial of our agency in female sexual desire. This places white women in a

dominant role vis-à-vis black women regarding sexual agency where the former is used to define the boundary between that which is considered acceptable and that which cannot be tolerated, as well as excusing their claims to presentations of sexuality while denying similar claims from black women.

Thus, the diversification of BGLOs is creating a space that assimilates and tokenizes non-African American members who may co-opt these organizations with claims of authenticity, as well as the expansion of belonging through interactions between varying ethnic, racial, and cultural groups. Also, as white members continue to permeate black spaces they exacerbate the ability of mainstream forces to compliment the proponents of patriarchal respectability politics. Black middle-class identities and the associated values are therefore reinforced through some form of homogenization (i.e., tokenism coupled with assimilation) or disruption, which in fact illuminates key values. Racial arrhythmia incites conversation, which can in turn reinforce values.

## CONCLUSION

Black middle-class identity politics involve the recognition and unpacking of racialized presentations of the intersections between such attributes as class, gender, and sexuality. As members of black middle-class organizations, black Greeks demonstrate their associated corporeal micro-politics through performance and signification. This form of self-representation fosters a space to perpetuate and/or challenge the dominant constructions of black femininities and masculinities to which each organization subscribes. These nested identities are manifested through the symbolic boundaries that designate who is a member of the group as well as the cultural repertoires that allow members to relate to one another and the objects or commodities they have inscribed with symbolic properties.

At the most basic level the black middle-class operates in response to the racial boundary between white and black people that was historically developed through the dehumanization of black slaves during the antebellum period (Ball 2012; Wright 2011). This demarcation continues to exist through the continued systematic disenfranchisement of black people as well as the perpetuation of racially exclusive spaces (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Hughey 2007; Schmitz and Forbes 1994). In order to assert their humanity and self-worth black people developed a patriarchal Victorian model of black ideals based on piety, education, and training (Ball 2012; Wright 2011).

Due to economic stratification a boundary has developed in order to identify who is a member of the black middle-class, and black fraternalism reifies it through the creation of black elite society (DuBois 1948; Durant and Loudon 1986; Frazier 1957; Graham 1999; Kimbrough 2003). Through their aims to 'uplift the race' black Greek-

letter organizations (BGLOs) perpetuate the notion that the black middle-class occupies a paternalistic role vis-à-vis poorer black people (Dancy 2011; DuBois 1903; Frazier 1957). There is also an element of internal competition between organizations that involves organizations aiming their elitism at one another. Organizations will include disses to the other organizations during their performances through skits or choreography and they will incorporate witty phrases on their paraphernalia to qualify their fraternity or sorority as the best among the others.

Contemporary constructions of black middle-class masculinity and femininity are based on traditional models of respectability and elitism. Hegemonic black masculinity is based on the traditional model of production, misogyny, and paternalism and is manifested in a variety of embodied and inscribed acts (Summers 2004). Ritualized aggression is a mechanism through which black men are able to engage the vulnerability that results from their subordinate position in society without enacting an emasculated state of emotionality (Dancy 2011; Jones 2004). While ritualized aggression is not exclusive to black men it is not a defining factor of black femininity. Instead it becomes a more general attribute of black Greek life where although pledging is illegal it is valued as the most appropriate manner to achieve membership. During Atlanta Greek Picnic, black fraternity members performed this aspect of black masculinity through their physically intense choreography and their association with violence through theme selection. They also circulated narratives of pledging through chants and songs, the incorporation of specific words and phrases on their paraphernalia, and branding as a mode of corporeal inscription.

Additionally, due to the homosocial relationships fraternity members share with each other they enforce their heteronormative patriarchy through portrayals of misogynist eroticism that are preoccupied with women's bodies as passive objects upon which they demonstrate their sexual abilities (Adams and Fuller 2006; Bird 1996; Chang 2006; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; Collins 2005; Dancy 2011; DeSantis and Coleman 2008; Flood 2008; Hil 2009; Jenkins 2010; Kelley 1996; Kimmel 1994; Kitwana 2002; Literte and Hodge 2011; Oware 2010; Perry 2004; Pritchard and Bibbs 2007; Rose 2008; Sedgwick 1985; Sharbley-Whiting 2007). During the festival, many of the fraternity performance teams incorporated phallic-centered routines that concentrated movement around their hips or tongues, and some members incorporated sexually suggestive phrases and images on their paraphernalia. Tributes to sororities provide an acceptable space to perform femininity without breaching the hypermasculine boundary, but it must be executed within certain parameters due to homophobia within black fraternal spaces.

Black femininity has been constructed in response to this construction of black masculinity so traditional models are therefore preoccupied with domesticity, submission, and conservative sexuality (French 2012; Literte and Hodge 2011; Stompler 1994; Thompson 2009). In order to combat negative images of black women, this racialized and gendered configuration of respectability has become equated with the 'cult of true womanhood,' which is demonstrated through a rejection of sex, moderate clothing, and narratives of deference to black men (French 2012; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009, 2011). Conversely, sexual entrepreneurship provides another approach to feminine sexuality as it is confronted with hypermasculinity, misogyny, and heteronormative patriarchy (Attwood 2006; French 2012; Harvey and Gill 2011; Haugen 2003; Lindsey 2013; Oware

2009; White 2013). Some sorority members embrace their sexuality through incorporating certain dances into their routines or wearing scant and/or tight costumes and paraphernalia, all of which draws attention to their hips, breasts, and other erotic areas of their bodies; through self-objectification they are able to actively engage their sexualization (Balaji 2010; Lorde 1984).

Through performative and material culture black Greeks promote racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized identity tropes that have come to define collective black middle-class masculinities and femininities. Consequently, they participate in the delineation of the boundary between those who do and do not belong to the designated group. Due to the increased diversity and multiculturalism, this boundary has been breached racially and culturally through the induction of non-black members, black immigrant, and multiracial members. Many of these members experience tokenism while simultaneously undergoing processes of assimilation, (Chen 2011; Hughey 2007; Hughey 2008), therefore reinforcing not only their racial and cultural difference but also the hegemony of black middle-class respectability politics. Non-black members of BGLOs may also indicate some form of an essentialist understanding of “blackness,” which is complicated through the inclusion of black immigrant and mixed-race members. Although they recognize some uniting factor as a motivation to join these organizations, they do acknowledge their racial and cultural difference.

A common trend particularly among the white members is to circulate claims of post-raciality, which can have dangerous implications regarding United States race relations. Through color-blind ideology white people are able to promote a liberalist agenda without jeopardizing their own privilege through a denial of systematic racism



(Bonilla-Silva 2010; Crenshaw 1995, 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Lewis 2004; McIntosh 1989; Omi and Winant 1994; Terry 1981; Weigman 1999; Williams and Land 2006; Wong and Cho 2005; Young 1994). The permeation of white people into black spaces also creates a state of arrhythmia as they appropriate black cultural forms and fetishize black bodies, and they add value to those elements only when white bodies execute them (Fleetwood 2011; Kitwana 2005; Lefebvre 2004). Still, this form of conflict illuminates the key values surrounding black middle-class respectability politics and therefore participates in its reinforcement.

Membership in BGLOs and the performance of that membership in a variety of situations, specifically Atlanta Greek Picnic performances, contribute to and reproduce a number of values that are unambiguously identified with the black middle-class and its history. Black Greeks are by nature a space of the inculcation of black middle-class values to this generation, particularly as it relates to a preoccupation with respectability. In sum, black identities are a site of contestation as traditional norms are imposed and perpetuated while being simultaneously challenged and transformed by contemporary trends. Black people must confront mainstream values to establish agency through self-representation that is informed by both Hip Hop aesthetics and middle-class values within an ever-transforming socio-political-economic context.

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## VITA

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|-----------|--|
| 2008      | B.A., Anthropology and Latin American Studies<br>Towson University<br>Towson, Maryland                           |
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## PRESENTATIONS

Smith, Synatra A.

2010 Hip Hop as a Cultural Critique. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Council of Black Studies. New Orleans, Louisiana.

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2010 Russell Simmons Presents... Spoken Word Poetry and Its Contemporary Transformations. Paper presented at the meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology. Merida, Mexico.

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2010 Demystifying the Homeland?: Encounters of Power Between African American Tourists and Gambian Locals. Paper presented at the meeting of the Tourism and Seductions of Difference Conference. Lisbon, Portugal.

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2012 The Embodiment and Presentation of Blackness at Atlanta Greek Picnic: Black Greek-Letter Organizations in Motion. Paper presented at the meeting of the African and African Diaspora Studies Symposium. Miami, Florida.

Smith, Synatra A.

2012 The Embodiment and Presentation of Blackness at Atlanta Greek Picnic: Black Greek-Letter Organizations in Motion. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Council of Black Studies. Atlanta, Georgia.

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2013 On and Off the Stage at Atlanta Greek Picnic: Performances of Black Middle Class Identities and the Politics of Belonging. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Chicago, Illinois.