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Not on My Line
Attitudes about Homosexuality in Black Fraternities

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No issue is more controversial or taboo in black fraternities than male homosexuality. As John, a third-year brother and business major, remarked, "That shit is just wrong, you know. You can't bring that shit anywhere near us. No, no, no, no." For John and the other brothers we interviewed, homosexuality in their fraternal ranks challenges their fundamental ideas about brotherhood, loyalty, trustworthiness, and, most importantly, masculinity.

Although there has been no published research on the attitudes of black fraternity members toward homosexuality, there is compelling evidence that the black community is more homophobic than its white counterpart.[1] A number of scholars have found that blacks are more likely than whites to view homosexual relations as wrong and immoral. Similarly, Lisa Schulte found that blacks were more willing than whites to express negativity toward gays and lesbians.[2]

These differences can best be accounted for by white-black religious and educational differences. Beliefs about homosexuality and support for gay rights vary substantially by religion and by the intensity of religious feeling. Disapproval is highest among those who attend religious services frequently, who pray often, and who view religion as important in their lives.[3] Blacks are substantially more religious and are more likely to adopt a fundamental interpretation of the Bible than whites are.[4] Education also seems to have a significant impact on white-black attitudinal differences about homosexuality. Higher educational levels have been shown to result in greater acceptance of differences, a more liberal sexual attitude, more contact with gays and lesbians, and a heightened sense of democratic values and civil liberties.[5] Blacks are only two-thirds as likely as whites to be college graduates.[6] The available research, however, tells us only in broad demographic strokes how the general black population feels about homosexuality. What we do not know is how certain segments of the black community conceive of homosexuality and whether their attitudes result in discriminatory practices.

Our specific concern here is how homosexuality is viewed by black frater-

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nity members and whether these attitudes result in the exclusion of potential members. The importance of understanding the attitudes and actions of this specific subsegment of black culture is underscored when one considers the disproportionate economic and political power wielded by the members of these organizations. Their beliefs and judgments have ramifications that permeate far beyond the fraternity and into the seats of cultural and social decision making.[7]

We used two methods of gathering data. First, we conducted eighteen face-to-face, audiotaped interviews with thirteen student and five alumni members of the four oldest black fraternities—Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, and Phi Beta Sigma.[8] All members were active brothers affiliated with one of three educational institutions in the South: a primarily white state university, a primarily black state university, and a historically black state university.

Since this topic is fraught with legal and confidentiality concerns, the authors and the interviewees agreed to a series of guidelines designed to protect the latter's anonymity. Consequently, the interviewees in this study were assigned pseudonyms; their organizations, when the nature of the interviews allowed, were referred to by arbitrary, noncorresponding Greek letters (Beta, Gamma, Eta, and Theta)[9]; and their affiliated universities were ascribed arbitrary, non-corresponding roman numerals (University I, II, and III). Additionally, any third-party names or identifying events that might jeopardize the anonymity of our subjects were changed or removed. Finally, to facilitate the readability of this chapter and to avoid needless repetition within the text, only the subjects' pseudonyms are referenced. See table 15.1 for each interviewee's pseudonym and fraternity and university affiliation.

We also gathered data through an online questionnaire soliciting the opinions of black fraternity brothers from around the nation.[10] An invitation to the Listserv was sent to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) national Listserv, where members were encouraged to share the invitation with other NPHC members. Respondents to this questionnaire had the choice of either sending their answers to a groupwide Listserv, which was maintained and monitored by us, or e-mailing their responses directly to us.

We received sixteen completed, thoughtful, and highly credible questionnaires from members of black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs).[11] Although subjects were not asked to disclose any personal or demographic information, four of the sixteen respondents voluntarily told us that they were homosexual; two are openly gay; two are covertly gay. All four admitted, however, to "passing" as heterosexual men while pledging.

Although the online questionnaire format inhibited our ability to engage in

Table 15.1. Interviewees' Pseudonyms and Fraternity and University Affiliations

Name	Organization	University	Status
John	Beta	I	Student
Michael	Beta	I	Alumnus
Raymond	Beta	II	Student
Greg	Beta	I	Student
Mark	Beta	II	Student
Ron	Beta	III	Alumnus
Alex	Gamma	II	Alumnus
Robert	Gamma	II	Student
Muhammad	Gamma	III	Student
Benjamin	Eta	I	Student
Leroy	Eta	I	Student
Wallace	Eta	II	Student
Martin	Eta	III	Alumnus
Fred	Eta	III	Student
William	Theta	I	Student
James	Theta	II	Alumnus
Jefferson	Theta	II	Student
Brian	Theta	III	Student

extended conversational exchanges with our subjects, it afforded certain other advantages. First, since no names or demographic information (e.g., fraternity or university affiliation, regional location, age) was supplied by the respondents, anonymity was guaranteed. Second, these questionnaires allowed us to gather more data, widen the scope of our investigation, and expand the geographic range of the study. Given the nature of the Internet, our survey was available to anyone with access to the World Wide Web, regardless of location.

In what follows, we detail how these thirty-four men conceive of black masculinity in relationship to sexual orientation, view homosexual integration in their organizations, and justify their homophobia and exclusion of black gay men from their fraternities.

Defining Masculinity

To understand how these men view *homosexuality*, it is first necessary to understand how they conceive of *masculinity*. As Julia Woods asserts, these two ideas

have created a symbiotic relationship in contemporary America.[12] Masculinity is conceptualized, first and foremost, in binary relationship to homosexuality: to be "manly" is to be virile, attracted to women, and hyper-heterosexual. As other authors have warned, however, we must be careful about presuming a universal notion of black manhood.[13] Wizdom Powell Hammond and Jacqueline S. Mattis, in fact, uncovered fifteen masculine attributes detailed by a diverse group of African American men living in five metropolitan areas in the United States.[14]

Given the insular nature of Greek life and the highly discerning process of selecting new members, however, we should not be surprised that many of the same motifs of masculinity were shared by these fraternal brothers. Many of our subjects agreed, for example, that "real men" provide for their families, protect the people they care about, and remain active in their communities. These attributions were especially important to the older alumni brothers in our study. As James, a fifty-five-year old alumni member, claimed, "A man takes care of business, home and away. You have to have character and love for your race."

For the college brothers, however, such familial and societal concerns were far less important. Instead, many celebrated a hip-hop–inspired hypermasculinity that privileged the individual over the collective. "We don't want to be Dr. Kings or Stokley Carmichaels," asserted Raymond. "We, they [correcting himself], my brothers want to be Jay Z or Snoop or, God help us, Fifty Cent." Michael agreed that hip-hop "has an impact on every element of black culture, including college life and our organizations. Our men want to be thugs, not doctors."

Though Michael may have exaggerated the point, it is true that most of the undergraduates we interviewed conceived of ideal black masculinity as physical, sexual, hard, and street or urban smart. Most disturbingly, their ideas of manhood stood in binary opposition to anything chaste, sensitive, studious, and refined. These attributes were viewed as not only feminine characteristics but also white and gay traits. Specifically, their conceptions of masculinity may best be understood in three maxims.

MAXIM ONE: BE PHYSICALLY STRONG AND DOMINATING

All our undergraduates agreed that an important part of ideal black masculinity is manifested in the body. "Our bodies have always been important; it is the only thing that they [white society] can't take," asserted Martin. "It is why the black male is a symbol of strength, physical strength." Jefferson, a junior

communications major, concurred and claimed, "For the black male persona it is all about the body . . . what you have, what you own, what you look like, the type of image you project." Muhammad believes that this trait is the primary allure of Omega men. "I mean, let's be real, the Omegas is just that. We all know it, and I am not even a Q. They are the jocks, the athletes. They have that side covered, for real. We all respect that."

For these men, however, it is not just the body in isolation. The physicality and contact of the male body with other male bodies is equally important. It is tied into community and identity building. As one of us (Marcus Coleman) has often claimed, "If we don't touch you, we don't love you." This aphorism is especially true during "underground pledging," where physical contact is central to many of the hazing rituals.[15] "Going through it, hard, is what makes us men. If you don't get the shit beat out of you, you ain't one of us," argued Robert. "The physical part is what tests you, tests to see if you're a man, your manhood." William, being more explicit in his description of the role of physical contact, sees violence as a natural, if not necessary, extension of this first maxim. "Male against male violence is seen as being extremely masculine. Quite often there is a lot of stuff that goes on in our underground pledge processes. You know, paddling is very traditional for us. Our line got it, woooo. I have met brothers who have been hit a hundred times in one night. . . . It separates the boys from the men." It is not simply paddling that ties these men together, however. William indicated that "other things happen too. People get punched, slapped. Usually it is not in the face, but in the chest and the back and they end up with extremely bruised chests and back or arms."[16]

Because of this intimate physical relationship formed on the pledge line, gay or effeminate men are anathema. "It's just fact," Ron, remarked. "We are close, physically. I can't go into everything, you know, but believe me, you can't have a homo [he laughs], a homosexual [he corrects himself] on line. We close, face-to-face. You can't have it, believe me." Similarly, Alex worried that the dynamics of brotherhood would change with gay pledges: "I'm concerned. We bring young men together in close proximity experiencing things where they might be nude, they might be half-exposed, they are closely lined up, sometimes pressed chest to back. It is highly intolerable that someone be homosexual within that mix."

For these men, therefore, ideal masculinity is not simply about the muscular black male body as a symbol of strength and virility; it is also about physical and, at times, violent contact with one another. This male-on-male connection serves both to bind brothers together and to demonstrate a hypermasculine endurance in the face of pain. These outcomes, however, are believed to be

jeopardized by the presence of gay brothers. As John wondered, "Is that gay dude looking at me, checking me out? Is he rubbing on me in line? Is he, you know, liking it?" The body, therefore, ceases to be an extension of masculinity and becomes a possible object of unwanted desire. As John speculated, "Everything would change."

MAXIM TWO: BE HYPERSEXUAL AND PROMISCUOUS

Each of the men we interviewed also saw a man's worth marked by his ability to "handle the ladies" (Wallace). When we asked Alex what type of man he wanted in his fraternity, he responded by saying that he "looks for guys who will have a good rapport with the women. Not too pushy, but you know, they have to be able to charm, to handle himself around the ladies." In posing the same question to Fred, we received an almost identical answer: We "want guys who get the girls and things of that nature. He should be smooth with the women." Brian also wants "bros who can bring in the ladies. You got to have it. You don't want bookish guys, you want the men who can get the party started, get them to show up, you know, and keep 'em happy [laughs]."

This attribute is likely to pay dividends outside the social context. Alex told us, "The guys who are good with women have the right persona. They are more likely to get in where they want, wherever. They get placed in positions of leadership because of that 'ladies' man' kind of persona that they present." "Sure it is prized," affirmed Jefferson, "everyone wants to be able to do that . . . it is just a must with us. It is all part of having a total package, and yah, you need it to be a leader, to be respected, I guess I should say."

Just as maxim one (be strong and physical) was seen as being closely associated with the public persona of the Omegas, maxim two was perceived to be most closely aligned with the Kappa image. "Kappas are seen as the pretty boys, smooth, ladies' men," claimed Michael. "They are the playboys. That's them. Now, that don't mean we don't get the women too, right, but that's them." John, Greg, Alex, and James also agreed with this association. Brian even went so far as to say, "If you want to get the ladies, if that is your thing, then you go Kappa. They may not be the best in sports or grades, but, you know, the girls."

For the undergraduates in this study, therefore, being successful with women is as important as being strong and physical. In many ways, in fact, maintaining the body is a means to successful sexual ends. Wallace, a brother who has spent considerable time in the gym, confessed that he does "it all for

the women. They love this [pointing to his chest]. They always rubbin' on me [laughs]. I'm the man!"

This primary criterion of judging masculinity, however, would be challenged by homosexual integration into black fraternities. First and foremost, it would mean that these men would have to reconsider their traditional ideas of masculinity and brotherhood. Simply put, can a man date another man and still be masculine? Can heterosexual and homosexual men create an authentic bond of brotherhood? It would also mean that these brothers, whose activities with one another revolve around heterosexual interactions with women (e.g., flirting, dating, partying), would have to alter their social lives to accommodate homosexual lifestyles. More questions arise: Could gay and straight social agendas coexist? Would straight women be willing to attend a mixed heterosexual-homosexual function? Would gay men be willing to attend a mixed function? It is little wonder that integration is such a hot-button topic for these men. As Martin, a thirty-seven-year-old alumnus wondered, "Are we ready for this yet?"

MAXIM THREE: NEVER BE OVERLY REFINED OR ACADEMIC

For these men, masculinity involves more than what a man looks like and how promiscuous he is; it is also how a man carries himself, how he maintains an image, and how "real" he keeps it. Part of keeping it real is being hard, emotionally controlled, and "cool."[17] Most disturbingly, it also means the avoidance of being overly refined and academic—traits that these men see not only as "selling out" (i.e., not keeping it real) but also as feminine, white, and gay.

Robert, a second-year graduate student, for example, conceives of this (soft) white versus (hard) black dichotomy as a mind versus body proposition: "Intellect for white males as opposed to physical attributes for black males. For the black male persona is all about the body . . . the type of image you project. For white males, it's not as manly, it is about what you know, how well reasoned your decisions are, how economic or how efficient you are. And that shows through in financial considerations, even in academia. It shows through in writing in academia who can be the efficient and say this the most pedantic way. For us, it is about the self, the physical self as opposed to the intellectual self."

But there is more to this conception of masculinity than just the punctuation of the body over the mind. There is also what John McWhorter has called anti-intellectualism running through black male consciousness.[18] Too many of our respondents associated being academic—or what Greg called "bookish" and John called "nerdy"—with being both white and gay.

This dangerous bifurcation is also seen in the career choices brothers make once they leave campus. "Being street," according to Leroy, "means that you have not forgotten, that you know, you know? You don't want to be like the 'business type.' They are the sellouts. It is also, like I said before, a gay image." A thoughtful Alex agreed with this perception in the black community but posited an explanation grounded in historical forces. "You see, white men have been able to define their manhood by their career, but in many instances, we were limited, or thought we were limited." He asserted that because of this lack of opportunity, "black men turned to something they can control (e.g., their image, their body, their attitude). They became hypermasculine. If you are not that way, though, you are viewed as feminine. A soft brother."

As many of these men claimed, however, it is not just the positive aspects of masculinity that must be accentuated; there are certain feminine qualities that must be eschewed. One cannot be too "refined," "immaculate," or "well dressed." Benjamin, for example, sees men who are "well dressed and well versed as being suspect. You know, there is a chance he is homosexual." Raymond voiced the same suspicions: "It is almost, for a man to be refined, well dressed, . . . speaking white, unless he is over the age of forty, . . . a given he is gay or just a complete geek."

Speaking directly to this concern, James, a refined, well-dressed alumnus, related his personal experience of not fitting into this limited mold of masculinity: "There is one time when I was pledging and a big brother came in and asked me if I had 'sugar in my tank.' I said, 'Excuse us big brother, what do you mean?' 'I mean are you gay?' But this happens. . . . Just recently again, I was talking to one of my brothers and he said he thought I was gay when we first met because I was too polished and I spoke the queen's English and I am fairly reserved."

Just as with the first two maxims, this third law of masculinity was also associated with a particular fraternity. "The Alphas," Jefferson claimed, "they are the smart ones, the immaculate ones. They are very precise, and of course, there is the stereotype that they are the gay ones." Robert sees the Alphas as "bookish, straight. I think that's why people think they are more nonmasculine, feminine right. Not that it is bad, you know. It is just different."

Even the Alphas we spoke with were aware of their reputation. Some argued that this perception is new. "We are more traditional. We are Dr. King and Thurgood Marshall. The younger brothers don't know their history so that's not cool to them." Others Alpha brothers think it stems from the culture that is strategically cultivated by the organization: "We work on our image as gentlemen.

So I think a different type of brother comes to us. We are also not interested in gang bangers. So it goes both ways. We look and they look for us."

Not all Alphas, however, are proud of their contemporary public perception. "I try to flip the script," explained one younger Alpha. "People meet us [his chapter] and they think geeks or nerds. After they meet us, they say, 'I thought Alphas was like this, now I changed my mind.' So I try to work on that. I don't glorify the stereotype."

This anti-intellectual spirit, however, did not go unchallenged. In fact, an uneasy dialectical tension marked most of our discussions about academic achievement and masculinity. On the one hand, these men viewed manhood as being antithetical to a life of the mind. Being too intellectual, refined, or well-spoken cast doubt on both their commitment to the race (i.e., they were perceived as selling out to the white culture) and their heterosexual status. On the other hand, these men were proud to be at college and competitive about their grades. This sense of pride was especially pronounced among brothers who had overcome myriad social and personal obstacles to gain admission to their universities. This dialectical push and pull compelled many of these men, therefore, to walk the thin line between being too refined and too street. Chuck D, from Public Enemy fame, aptly termed this paradoxical clash of identities as life of the "college thug." We have been assured by many of the older alumni in this study, however, that "these young brothers will outgrow this stage" of life (Ron).

The Decision-Making Process

Given this tripartite, and often homophobic, conception of masculinity, we wondered whether homosexual integration in BGLOs is possible. As we suspected, an openly gay student stands almost no chance of gaining admission into a college chapter. In unequivocal terms, most brothers echoed Benjamin's sentiments: "A guy who is gay is not getting in my frat." "There is an unwritten rule," explained Alex, "that homosexuals are forbidden to be in the fraternity. It is not part of the official laws, but a part of the principles." "In the eighteen years that I have been a brother," Raymond confessed, "no openly gay brother affirming that before joining has ever joined. I am not sure if it will ever happen to tell you the truth."

Even given exceptional circumstances, like the one recently faced by Wallace and his brothers, gay men are persona non grata: "There was this great guy on

campus who [was] openly gay and he wanted to be part of a black fraternity, mine in particular. He is the most polished guy on campus. President of student government, can you believe it? He was not welcome. He knew it. We never saw him again." We heard a similar story of rejection from a former student who contacted us online. "I am openly gay," he wrote, but he thought that pledging a fraternity would be a "good thing socially." So "I submitted to the Thetas, after having done everything and beyond what they asked and expected of any other . . . I had a 4.0, was president of several campus organizations." Yet he was rejected, presumably "for being gay. They never said it, but they could not even give me a legitimate reason for the denial, especially when compared to the boys they did choose."

There was one undergraduate, however, who crafted a scenario—improbable and humorous as it may be—in which a homosexual would probably be welcome. "Let's say Tiger Woods put an application into X fraternity. . . . We can say the same thing about Michael Jordan," explained Brian. "Because of his notoriety, because of his popularity, what he can do for the brothers, you find out that he is a *little* gay . . . he would probably get in."

But what if an aspirant does not openly admit to being gay? Would brothers be any more tolerant of a prospect who remained "in the closet"? Surprisingly, a few of our subjects were "cool with it," as William put it. Some even viewed fraternity life like the military. "Don't ask, don't tell, is my motto," said Fred. "What you do away from me and behind your own locked door is your business."

For Lewis, one of our online respondents, it was about more than just remaining quiet; it was also about public image. "If he is flamboyant and feminine, then absolutely not. We have enough pressure and issues to deal with being black men in a fraternity. If he is discreet, then I don't see a problem. It's all about discretion. But I am probably out there alone on this one." Jamal, another online respondent, saw the issue of remaining in the closet differently, calling it a matter of honesty. "I would rather have an openly gay fraternity brother than a closet bisexual brother [referring to down-low brothers]. Then the relationship with the fraternity is based on deception." For Jamal, truth is more important in the equation of brotherhood than sexual preference.

Most men in this study, however, did not want a homosexual brother in their ranks, whether openly or clandestinely gay. This position, of course, raises a whole new set of problems for black fraternities. The most obvious, of course, is how to determine whether a prospect is gay. As the previous section highlighted, some search for physical characteristics, personality traits, and habits. "You can tell most of the time," said Martin. "You know the stereotypes, the way

they walk and talk. Guys who are feminine." "Generally," theorized William, "if they are too studious, clean, you know, well dressed . . . if you don't see them with women . . . that is always a pretty good sign too."

Many of the men we interviewed, however, were not as confident as they once were about their ability to identify homosexuals. "The 'down-low' thing keeps you guessing," remarked Raymond. "Down low" is often used to describe black men who have sex with other men as well as women but do not identify themselves as gay or bisexual. This is also referred to as being "on the down low," "on the DL," or "on the low low."[19] As Ray put it, "It has changed everything. You don't know anymore about anyone."

For some of the brothers, the DL has made traditional means of identification obsolete. "I kind of just gave up," claimed William. "You never know. They might be very masculine, but they might just be like that. They might go out and play a pick-up game of basketball and dunk on you and talk smack on the court, and ask you to go to bed afterwards. There is just no way to tell anymore." For Muhammad, the phenomenon has also made it a "futile effort for a guy to be hypermasculine and use that as a justification for why people shouldn't see him as homosexual. You know, 'the guy can't be gay, he has women and plays ball.' Damn, that don't mean nothing. I just give up [laughs]."

For other brothers, the DL has heightened their homophobic suspicions. Jefferson now thinks that "everyone is a possible 'fag'. The down low puts a question mark on everyone. Nobody escapes the question mark these days. I'll be honest, right, I look at everyone a little different, you know." Similarly, Fred admitted, "This whole thing has made everyone paranoid. Even if you don't want to be having it in the back of your mind they can sort of just shove it there. . . . Everything is suspect."

So where does this leave these fraternities? Since they can never be sure about the sexual orientation of an initiate, have they given up their scrutinizing search for "real men"? The answer from most was a resounding no. Most claimed, in fact, to be more diligent in their interrogation and investigation of prospects. Some have chosen a more honest and forthright approach. Michael said that when he is in doubt, he "will just ask. Not to say it is the right way to do things, but I will just bring it up." He is well aware, however, that the prospect will "probably . . . deny it regardless. But at least I asked. The rest is on him, you know." Adopting a similar strategy, Benjamin also asks, albeit in a more intimidating context. "There is always an underground interview and most of the time there is always a direct question about sexual orientation. I will just come out and ask. It's hard to lie in situations like that . . . brother yelling at your face."

Many of the brothers we talked with, however, opted for a less direct and personal approach to information gathering. One of the more common sources of background information is letters of recommendation. Leroy sees these endorsements as crucial in weeding out unwanted elements. "We know, if you can't get a good letter from brothers, something is wrong. And brothers won't write one if they know something's wrong [referring to being gay]. So it is not necessarily a direct method of trying to intimidate them not to be in, you see. [Etas] just look out for each other and the fraternity. They won't write one for a gay homosexual."

Some, like Brian, also "monitor" the actions of their prospective brothers. "Just watch and listen, you can tell. Keep your eyes and ears open. It's a vibe, a certain vibe I catch." Or they might actually question students on campus. "I ask people," said Brian. "Women know what's what, so if you ask women about him and they say he is straight, he's straight. If they have a question mark, then uh oh, it's trouble." Similarly, Robert's and Alex's chapters "do background investigations." "Yea, we investigate. We dig to make sure we are getting a Beta man. A Beta man has to be a certain type. And yea, part of what we looking for is whether they right [heterosexual]."

Making it successfully through the cross-examinations, obtaining the right letters of recommendation, and having a clean investigation are not always enough, however. If there are still suspicions, regardless of a lack of actual proof, a prospect might not get in. Ron told of one case in which conjecture and gossip were enough for exclusion: "Like I said, this one guy that we thought, but we had no proof. We investigated it to see whether or not we could prove he was a homosexual and we couldn't, but we voted him down. More than one guy too, that we knew were homosexuals, that tried to join the frat."

What often happens, however, is that a questionable prospect makes it through the first aboveground stage of acceptance—letter, grade point average, dues—only to receive greater scrutiny during the later underground pledge process. "I've seen it a few times," stated Robert. "I didn't like it, but what was I gonna do? The brothers just beat these guys down until they quit. If they want you to quit, you will. They all did. Gone." Benjamin recalled when they "beat down" one of his own line brothers. "It was bad, every day, at him and at him, bam, bam, bam." After a few weeks of this abuse, Ben came to the aid of his brother. "Wow. I just tried to say he was cool. And they were like, 'You his bitch?' And all of a sudden I was like [long pause] whatever." By the end of the process, "The kid dropped, just left. I don't blame him though. He got it hard."

On rare occasions, some make it through the abuse. Mark still carries emo-

tional scars from the hazing he received for being too feminine. When Mark first arrived on campus, it was his "dream to be a brother." Despite being gay, he wanted to experience the authentic college life, especially being a member of a fraternity. The way he saw it, "it shouldn't have mattered" that he was gay. "I kept my business, my business." In an effort to be more welcomed, in fact, he "even tried to keep a female always about—just to keep some visibility. You know, do something that they can see . . . to keep them off my back." It quickly became evident to Mark, however, that he was not overtly masculine enough for his older brothers. He began to be subjected to increasing verbal and physical abuse on his line. He recalled: "I got badgered on a daily basis. It came to my face every day. I didn't let them see my anger and my frustration. When I got back to my apartment and it was just me, you know, that's when I let my emotions kind of get the best of me and I am kind of ashamed to say that I let them get to me like that. When you are badgered and it is brought to you on a daily basis, you know, it got to get to you. But I never let them see that. I never let them see my hurt." Mark finally made it through and became a brother, but he is still bitter about how he was treated. At the end of the interview, we asked him whether it was worth it. "No," he responded without hesitation. "I feel ashamed that I stooped to their level, just to keep them off my back. No, I don't feel it was worth it. It made me [long pause] feel even worse about myself."

The preceding cases focus primarily on the actions and thoughts of undergraduate chapters. Would alumni and graduate chapters be less homophobic and more accepting? Most in our study agreed that they would be. James, for example, believes that a gay man has a "fifty-fifty" chance, "as opposed to twenty year ago, [when] it would have been ten-ninety." "Because of time," he continued, "because of the society that we live in, the playing field is almost level as far as accepting gay people into [alumni] sororities and fraternities."

For Michael, this greater acceptance is due to the maturity of its members. "Many of the men in our alumni realms," he claimed, "are older, more professional. We get older and we mellow. We have families, jobs. That stuff [homosexuality] is less important." In a similar vein, Martin attributed greater acceptance to the different criteria used. "Alumni chapters generally have different standards for picking members. Sexual orientation is not one of the more important criteria. It's about being productive. Our alumni chapters are looking for a bro who is willing to work, who is willing to be financial, who is willing to be responsible to the black community."

Not all the subjects in our study, however, agreed that alumni or graduate chapters would *necessarily* be more tolerant of homosexuals. "I think it really is

about where the location is," asserted Muhammad. If we lived in "a more liberal area such as Florida or New York or Chicago, in a big metropolitan city, we'd see more of it and it is acceptable because it is out there." Others speculated that the degree of acceptance would also be correlated with the ages of the alumni members. "There are some chapters out there," claimed Leroy, "that have a bunch of old, old men, old farmer types. They are from a different era . . . homosexuality is taboo." Young professional men are "more liberal minded when it comes to sexual orientation."[20]

This greater tolerance in alumni or graduate chapters, however, was not always seen as a positive social advancement. Some brothers disapproved of the lowering of fraternal standards. Stephen, an online respondent from the Washington, D.C., area, detailed the "declining" state of his chapter: "Yes, I shun them, try to stay away from them and limit my contact with them. Most of the other brothers are also gay (or closeted, or sympathizers), so they all treat each other like the little gay dudes that they are. The straight brothers have stopped being active because of all the gay dudes. We've all basically left our local chapters and are inactive because we're sick of all the gay dudes."

Based on the information we collected, it is clear that homosexual students at the undergraduate level are systematically excluded from the black fraternal experience. It is less clear, however, to what degree and under which situations gay alumni or graduate members are discriminated against. In the final section, we investigate how the exclusion of gay prospects is justified and why so many brothers view homosexuality as anathema to the mission and vision of BGLOs.

Justification for Homophobia

One of our goals in undertaking this project was to understand how fraternity brothers view homosexuality and how that perspective is informed by their ideas of masculinity. For the men involved in this study, however, no source was more important in informing their opinions about homosexuality than the Bible. "A *real* man," asserted Mark, "is a God-fearing and Bible-believing Christian." In fact, all twenty-eight (of thirty-four) brothers in this study who believe that homosexuality is "wrong" used religion to justify their belief.

"God makes it clear," Robert elaborated, "the Bible is clear-cut. Clear-cut as stealing and as murder. . . . It is wrong and it's not supposed to take place." "Yes, I think it is wrong," James asserted. "I do not think it is what God intended for

men. I think it is sinful." For Jacob, one of our online respondents, the sin is not simply being gay—an affliction he believes a person is "born" with or has forced on him by "molestation"—but "acting" on those impulses. "These guys have the choice of *living* the gay lifestyle, and that's where I have a problem. I hate to see men carrying on like women or with a bunch of feminine characteristics—*especially* if they are sporting my fraternity letters. . . . I do not think it is what God intended for men."

The historical Christian foundation of BGLOs is often used as a salient rationale for the exclusion of gay members. A Sigma brother defined this interconnected relationship: "Most fraternal African-American organizations have a Christian value. . . . Their members at some point or another affirm that these are Christian organizations. Their rituals have Christian rituals embedded in them. So we're talking now about a Christian value system . . . that members were attracted to."

Speaking to his specific organization's historical roots, an Omega brother attributes his chapter's stance on gay men to "one of the four founders, . . . who was a bishop and so the Bible like intermingles in everything that we do and what we think." Similarly, a Kappa brother told us, "The Bible is used as our key, from the beginning. It [homosexuality] is against the Bible, a sin. So we trust that as brothers."

Many that we spoke with, however, did not view "sin" in such monolithic terms. For Raymond, there is a difference between long-term and short-term sin. "Short-term sins," he detailed, "are the sins that will pass over such as lying, cheating . . . things that can be easily taken care of." Long-terms sins, like homosexuality, "affect people for a long time, and people will never forget about that." Others relied on a ranking system to give order to their moral code. For Wallace, homosexuality is "one of the top ones [he pauses to think]. It is bad to say that. 'Murder' is the top one, but then 'homosexuality' is probably right underneath that." Similarly, Jefferson uses a "hierarchy of sin" based on the Bible to determine the degrees of immorality. "Homosexuality," he told us, "is pretty high" on the list. "A lot of other sins are not as bad, like you won't go to hell for drinking."

Not all the brothers we interviewed, however, were comfortable using the Bible to prioritize sin or justify exclusion. In one of the more thoughtful responses, Benjamin explained, "Slave owners justified slavery by citing biblical scripture—does that make it right? During the Jim Crow era, whites used the Bible to keep black and white people separate. So when people say they know what God wants, watch out [laughing]." Others were skeptical of using literal

interpretations of the Word because of human politics and intervention. "King James omitted a couple of books of the Bible," Michael wrote. "I think we put too much trust in a document that has been written/translated by man." Using a similar line of reasoning, Joshua detailed the historical politics that fuels his misgivings about literalism: "Remember that the Bible conveniently leaves out Gospels that the Church deemed inconsistent with the tenets it wished to enforce. Thus, the Gospel of Mary that gives women greater prominence is not there, nor is the Gospel of Thomas by Didymos Judas Thomas with other recorded sayings from Jesus."

But religion was not the only source used by these brothers to justify their homophobia. The "laws of nature" also informed their attitudes about sexual orientation. "You are a man," explained Mark, "you are to reproduce with a woman. . . . My defining argument [against homosexuality] is production and the conduct of it. You know, we need to produce other human beings. It is pure and simple; it goes against the laws of nature." John concurred, noting, "It is a natural thing. If everybody was gay the world would end because we couldn't create, you know, so it is a natural order of life that I see." "Look at all animals," asserted Mark, "you don't see gay animals because it is unnatural. It is like poison in human society—something from outside of the normal."

Brothers also relied on social norms and cultural codes of acceptable behavior to inform their belief system. Regardless of what our pretty new "Will and Grace society" tells us, explained Wallace, "our social norms still tell us that it is wrong. We, especially black people, think it is wrong. Look around you. People are against it. That should be enough." For Greg, obeying social rules is part of being a good fraternity brother. "Our objective is to gain the public interest and to do things in the public interest, so if we are doing things like homosexuality that are against the social norms then we are a contradiction. Think about it, right? If we are good citizens, then we can't be gay." Similarly, Mark said, "The social norms is a man and a woman being together. . . . The majority of people, the way the world is, the way that society says, is homosexuality is wrong."

Not all the justifications raised by these men dealt with the abstract world of religion, nature, and social norms. Many of their concerns focused on the day-to-day pragmatics of homosexual integration. As previously discussed, for example, brothers expressed concern over the effect gay men would have on underground pledging. "We pretty close on line," explained Leroy. "We spend a lot of time with our shirts off, pretty close to each other. Paddling. It would just be weird to have a gay dude there. I would feel weird."

This physical intimacy could also engender unwanted sexual advances—

"being hit on." Explained Wallace, "I don't want a gay dude trying to holler at me. I'm not interested in that, that's being disrespectful." According to Robert, "There would always be a small amount of doubt put in your mind by this person." He would always be wondering, "Is this person close to me because we are pledging together or does he want to be close to me intimately? That small amount of doubt could cause a problem, a larger problem." "You always have that fear and kind of question," concluded Fred. "Is he trying to hit on me? . . . What are his true intentions? [Does he have] some other ulterior motive?"

Brothers were also concerned about the impact gay men would have on the organizational climate and culture of their fraternities. An online respondent viewed integration as being most "dangerous because they would cause division and destabilize the very unity of the organization." Michael feared that a gay presence could create "division within the fraternity" and "alienate" members, facilitating a "negative environment."

The threat to fraternal bonding and friendships was also raised. "As a group of guys," explained Mark, "we are all men of like-minded interests, because it gets down to interests. We like similar things, like we like to drink, we are going to like sports, we're going to like women." What, he wondered, would unite straight and gay brothers? This dissimilarity, from Martin's perspective, also threatens the brothers' ability to bond. "It's a different culture, so when you have different beliefs and different cultures you don't have a bond." And from the perspective of the brothers in this study, "it is all about the bond of brotherhood."

Finally, many in our study feared that public ridicule and ostracism would accompany homosexual integration. For some of our respondents, the concern was how they as individuals would be perceived. "I don't want people to think I am gay," worried Greg, to think that "because I have a homosexual guy in my chapter or multiple homosexual men, . . . I might be gay too." William was also anxious about his reputation. "I would be like, 'Hey, meet my frat brothers,' and he is openly gay, and, at least in theory, we would have this strong relational tie with each other. People would begin to think that I'm gay . . . I can't go for that, now."

Brothers were equally concerned about what a gay presence would do to their organization's public image. "You don't want to be known as the gay chapter on campus," warned Greg. "There is one kind of [fraternity] like that here [his university] and it's bad. They are a joke." Some, like John and Raymond, feared that the chapter would be seen as "weak" by the other fraternities, citing this as "a major fear that drives . . . discrimination." Explained Muhammad, "If you take one in, will everyone think everybody's gay too? You know, like why did

they take that guy anyway?" An online respondent similarly worried about such misconceptions. "Fraternities gather men who share common interests; if you get one or two gay guys, people will assume that [the] whole fraternity is gay."

It was not just "perception," in and of itself, that concerned these men, however. How you are seen is "tied in with everything. It is your life blood." Admitting homosexuals "would have serious consequences for how we operate on our campus," said Alex. "We will be scrutinized," expanded Ben. "Folks will not come to our functions, our parties, community service projects." "We will be the laughingstocks of the campus with this gay dude in our chapter," claimed Leroy, and "our numbers would decline . . . we would probably be seen as the *wack* fraternity. . . . Other people won't join." For Robert, "the process goes like this, now listen: So you take one gay guy, right? And next, less guys on campus want to join. Now, with fewer brothers, you have less money, less talk about you, less and smaller parties and so forth. The women stop coming by. When that happens, less guys want to join, cause it's about the women."

●

Conclusion

For the men in this study, homophobia is not an unexamined attitude, nor is it simple blind obedience to tradition. Their belief system about homosexuality has been discussed, debated, and refined. They have acquired support and evidence, albeit some a bit suspect, from pop culture, their parents, ministers, classes (e.g., social norms, natural order), and one another. What is most interesting is how similar the statements, metaphors, examples, and justifications are. Many of these men, in fact, used identical phrases and expressions when detailing their attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality. It is obvious that these rationales for homophobia are collectively shared and crafted within these very isolated and insulated fraternal groups.

It is also apparent that the organizations represented in this study have constructed a set of normative rules and procedures that are informally taught to new initiates and collectively embraced by existing members. These lessons not only supply most brothers with a rationale for their homophobia; they also create expectations for proper masculine behavior and strategies for homosexual exclusion (e.g., investigation, interrogation, intimidation on line). It is not an overstatement, therefore, to conclude that (1) antihomosexual bias is deeply ingrained in the rules, laws, and collective psyche of these organizations and that (2) true integration, at least in the foreseeable future, is extremely unlikely

without some ideological augmentations to fundamental Christianity and structural changes to contemporary (hip-hop inspired) notions of masculinity in the black culture.

Although this study examined the homophobic attitudes of fraternity brothers, we would be remiss not to address the concerns of the rejected and discriminated against homosexuals from these organizations. To begin with, the intense degree of homophobia exhibited in fraternal organizations could result in higher degrees of "stigmatization," which in turn "causes more 'closeted' behaviors" and stress for these gay men.[21] This stigmatization, according to Horace Griffin, "also creates an inescapable feeling of unworthiness and low self-esteem" that, if not monitored, could create a climate of "denial that can develop into rage and hostility by those who experience psychic pain."[22] Finally, "Understanding with the intent of abolishing homophobia is not only a psychological issue but arguably, a public health one as well. With the increasing prevalence and incidence of HIV/AIDS in African-American communities," this stigmatization, and the closeted behavior that accompanies it, creates a climate of silence and ignorance that "prevents the control of HIV/AIDS."[23]

When word got out that this volume would include a chapter dealing with black fraternities and homosexuality, more than one source took umbrage. This book's editor received requests to exclude this chapter, and we were strongly encouraged to discontinue the project and questioned as to its purpose and value. Alex, one of our online respondents, sent us this message: "What is the purpose of dredging up this topic? As homophobic as Greeks are, don't you foresee a backlash from them. . . . Greeks know how they feel and live with it quite well. There is a deeply religious and conservative air ever present in black life in general and Greek life in particular. I cannot conceive of a change in attitude amongst us. However, right now, we don't 'Witch Hunt' and I think most of us would rather keep it that way."

As academicians and fraternity brothers, our goal is not to "witch hunt" or to create a "backlash" in BGLOs but to cast an analytical lens on a culturally taboo issue. We should be worried not about the light that thoughtful discussion engenders but about the intellectual darkness that accompanies silence and censorship. It is our hope, therefore, that this work will generate conversations within the black Greek community about contemporary notions of masculinity; the intellectual, social, financial, and spiritual costs of excluding homosexuals; and issues of justice and discrimination. As Griffin reminds us, "African American gays, like their heterosexual counterparts, simply seek the freedom

to establish and maintain ... relationships, without the burden of heterosexual harassment, ridicule, and restrictions."[24]

Notes

1. For purposes of this study, we use the word *homophobia* to mean an "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals." It can also mean "hatred of and disparagement of homosexual people, their lifestyle, their sexual behavior, or culture." *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (2006).

2. Walter W. Hudson and Wendell A. Ricketts, "A Strategy for the Measurement of Homophobia," *Journal of Homosexuality* 5, no. 4 (1980): 357–73; William Schneider and I. A. Lewis, "The Straight Story on Homosexuality and Gay Rights," *Public Opinion* 7 (February–March 1984): 16–20; Gregory B. Lewis, "Black-White Differences in Attitudes towards Homosexuality and Gay Rights," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67 (2003): 59–78; Lisa J. Schulte, "Similarities and Differences in Homophobia among African Americans versus Caucasians," *Race, Gender, and Class* 9, no. 4 (2002): 71–93.

3. Lewis, "Black-White Differences in Attitudes," 59–78; Christopher G. Ellison and March A. Musick, "Southern Intolerance: A Fundamentalist Effect?" *Social Forces* 72 (1993): 379–98; Gregory M. Herek, "Heterosexuals' Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay Men: Correlates and Gender Differences," *Journal of Sex Research* 25, no. 4 (1988): 457–77; Richard Seltzer, "AIDS, Homosexuality, Public Opinion, and Changing Correlates over Time," *Journal of Homosexuality* 26, no. 1 (1993): 85–97.

4. Robert Joseph Taylor, "Structural Determinants of Religious Participation among Black Americans," *Review of Religious Research* 30, no. 2 (1988): 114–25; Robert Joseph Taylor and Linda M. Chatters, "Black and White Differences in Religious Participation: A Multisample Comparison," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 3, no. 4 (1996): 403–10.

5. Ellison and Musick, "Southern Intolerance," 379–98; James L. Gibson and Kent L. Tedin, "The Etiology of Intolerance of Homosexual Politics," *Social Science Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (1988): 587–604; G. M. Herek and J. P. Capitanio, "Black Heterosexuals' Attitudes towards Lesbian and Gay Men in the United States," *Journal of Sex Research* 32 (1995): 95–105.

6. Lewis, "Black-White Differences in Attitudes," 59–78; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001,* http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/.

7. Some of the more high-profile members include the following: Dennis Archer, former mayor of Detroit (Alpha); Barry E. Beckham, founder, Beckham House Publishers (Sigma); Guion Bluford, first black astronaut in space (Omega); George Washington Carver, world-famous scientist (Sigma); Johnnie L Cochran, attorney (Kappa); William H. Cosby, comedian, actor, educator, philanthropist (Omega); Charles Drew, doctor

(Omega); W. E. B. DuBois, author, historian, civil rights activist (Alpha); Dr. Bernard Harris, astronaut, first black to walk in space (Kappa); Robert Johnson, founder and CEO, Black Entertainment Network (Kappa); Michael Jordan, former Chicago Bulls basketball player (Omega); Kwame Kilpatrick, mayor of Detroit (Alpha); Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights activist (Alpha); Thurgood Marshall, civil rights activist, Supreme Court justice (Alpha); Adam Clayton Powell Jr., civil rights activist (Alpha); Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (Alpha). This list was obtained from http://www.learningtogive.org/papers/index.asp?bpid=171.

8. Iota Phi Theta Fraternity was not included in this study because it did not have chapters at all the universities under investigation.

9. In several places in this chapter, organizational pseudonyms were *not* used, so as to protect the coding system. In these cases, well-known organizational stereotypes were being discussed that would be easily recognizable to any informed member of a BGLO and could be used to decipher the codes.

10. The questionnaire was posted from August 2005 through March 2006 on Yahoo .com as a user group entitled "Homosexuals in Black Fraternities." The questionnaire consisted of six questions dealing with homosexuality in black fraternities: (1) Do you think openly gay men should be allowed to join your fraternity? Why or why not? (2) Do you think down-low (closet bisexual) men should be allowed to join your fraternity? Why or why not? (3) Do you think covertly gay (closet homosexual) men should be allowed to join your fraternity? Why or why not? (4) Do you think being gay is wrong (morally, socially, ethically, religiously)? Please elaborate. (5) What are the national stereotypes of each NPHC fraternity? Do these notions influence membership? (6) Do you know of any openly gay members? How are they treated by other brothers?

11. The group received 166 responses. Many of these, however, came in the form of short replies, spam mail, and erroneous messages.

12. Julia T. Woods, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture,* 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1999).

13. Maxine Baca-Zinn, "Chicago Men and Masculinity," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 10 (1984): 29–44; Clyde W. Franklin, *Men and Society* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1988); David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

14. Wizdom Powell Hammond and Jacqueline S. Mattis, "Being a Man about It: Manhood Meaning among African American Men," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 6, no. 2 (2005): 114–26.

15. Any form of hazing is officially prohibited by all nationally recognized black fraternities, including the four that we investigated. Many local chapters, however, still pledge "underground." For more information, see Ricky Jones, *Black Haze: Violence and Manhood in Black Greek-Letter Fraternities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

16. Many brothers have divided themselves into two groups: "Paper" brothers

are men who received their letters of recommendation, maintained their grade point averages, paid their dues, and completed their community service but were not illegally pledged or hazed underground. "Real" brothers are the men who went "on line" with their pledge brothers and completed the underground hazing segment of initiation. In the eyes of most real brothers, paper brothers lack legitimacy.

17. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); bell hooks, *We Real Cool; Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

18. John H. McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

19. Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005); J. L. King and Karen Hunter, *On the Down Low* (New York: Harlem Books, 2005); Centers for Disease Control, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 2004,* vol. 16 (Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, 2005), 1–46.

20. Lewis concurs, arguing that "older African Americans tend to be less politically and socially tolerant than younger Americans, probably due more to the eras in which they were socialized than to the aging process." Lewis, "Black-White Differences in Attitudes," 66.

21. Anthony J. Lemelle and Juan Battle, "Black Masculinity Matters in Attitudes toward Gay Males," *Journal of Homosexuality* 47, no. 1 (2004): 40.

22. Horace Griffin, "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches," in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities,* ed. D. Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2001), 120.

23. Lemelle and Battle, "Black Masculinity Matters," 41.

24. Griffin, "Their Own Received Them Not," 120.

16

"I Did It for the Brotherhood"
Nonblack Members in Black Greek-Letter Organizations

Matthew W. Hughey

In May 1904, Philadelphia bore witness to the birth of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, the first black Greek-letter organization (BGLO). Since their genesis a century ago, BGLOs have based their ideals on a synthesis of different organizational models and traditions. BGLOs incorporate African customs, principles, and social models of exclusive membership, along with attributes that mirror white-dominated fraternities and sororities.[1] This synthesis has led to BGLOs' iconic stature within the black community, marking themselves as institutions integral to W. E. B. DuBois's infamous "Talented Tenth"—a moniker for the cadre of elite, upper-class, college-educated African Americans.

In today's era of educational reform, just past the half-century mark of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), scholars, practitioners, and students have begun to question a U.S. system of higher education that is still largely segregated by race, despite federal efforts to promote desegregation. BGLOs are increasingly being sought out not only by members of a diverse and heterogeneous black population but also by people across the color line, with many whites, Latinos, and Asians seeking membership as well. Although the law prohibits de jure membership exclusion based on race in U.S. college fraternities and sororities, racial separation prevails de facto through custom, tradition, and preference in a Greek system comprising racially homogeneous groups. Analysis of the phenomenon of nonblack BGLO members has significant import and points toward a necessary examination of the role Greek organizations play in the foundation, development, and deployment of campus racial politics.

Why does nonblack BGLO membership matter? Why is this topic worthy of scholarly consideration? To answer these questions, we must first consider the significance of nonblack membership as contextualized by the increasing, and now institutionalized, rhetoric of multiculturalism in contemporary society. In a post–civil rights era in which many proclaim that racism has "ended," that the significance of race is "declining," and that whites are now subject to