

OSTRACIZED INSIDERS:  
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GAY MEN IN HISTORICALLY  
BLACK GREEK LETTER FRATERNITIES

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

Black Greek letter fraternities were created for the social and academic support of Black male undergraduates. Numerous studies have proposed the many benefits associated with membership in these fraternal organizations; however, these benefits are undermined regarding Black Greek letter fraternities' treatment of Black gay students, even those who are members of said fraternities. Through an epistemological lens of both critical race theory and queer theory, this case study seeks to explore the experiences of Black Greek gay men (BGGM) in their fraternities. Specifically, the inquiry seeks to explore BGGM's experiences in their fraternity and how they make meaning of their sexual and racial identities based on their interactions within the fraternal context. The purpose of this case study is to progress these organizations to a culture of empathy and acceptance for non-heterosexual students.

Through snowball sampling five Black Greek gay men were recruited and case study methodology encompassed semi-structured interviews in order to create critical discourse.

Findings indicated that BGGM encounter heterosexism and homophobia within their fraternity. However, there is more of an emphasis on masculinity than sexuality and closeted, masculine gay men are less ostracized than their less masculine and/or more out counterparts. The results also indicated that BGGM are more likely to be accepted if they fulfill some need of the chapter and that there is an underground gay culture that

provides a solace for BGGM. Despite the anti-gay culture of the fraternity, the participants developed more pride regarding their racial identity.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my participants. I am in awe of your intelligence, accomplishments, bravery, and vulnerability. Thank you for trusting me to tell your stories.

### Smile

Living in the shadow  
Can you imagine what kind of life it is to live?  
In the shadows people see you as happy and free  
Because that's what you want them to see  
Living two lives, happy, but not free  
You live in the shadows for fear of someone hurting your family or the person you love  
The world is changing and they say it's time to be free  
But you live with the fear of just being me  
Living in the shadow feels like the safe place to be  
No harm for them, no harm for me  
But life is short, and it's time to be free  
Love who you love, because life isn't guaranteed

Smile

-Gloria Carter

(Carter, Wonder, & Wilson, 2017)

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All work conducted for the dissertation was completed by J'Qualin M. Williams independently.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Though efforts have been made to improve the educational outcomes for Black male students, it remains that Black males have the lowest college completion rates of males and females of all racial groups in the United States (Strayhorn, 2010). In order to minimize achievement gaps between Black male undergraduates and their peers, many researchers emphasize the pressing need to address the challenges Black men face on college campuses while offering suggestions to improve educational outcomes for this student group (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010; Bonner, 2010; Cuyjet, 2006; March, 1999). Specifically, researchers suggest participating in faculty/staff interactions (Tinto, 1993), participating in extracurricular activities (Tinto, 1993), and having a salient Black identity (Parker & Flowers, 2003; Jackson, 2012) serve as tools for increased persistence for Black students in higher education. Fortunately, student organizations like Black Greek letter Fraternities (BGLFs) have been suggested to provide its members with the aforementioned tools (McClure, 2006; Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998).

For over a century, Black Greek letter fraternities have served as aegis of protection and social and academic support for Black male undergraduates. Current research suggests that BGLFs play a critical role with improving Black male students adjustment to campus. For example, McClure (2006) found that participation in BGLFs created opportunities for these students to connect to their Black history and former Black leaders, combat alienation on campuses, and develop a stronger social network on

campus and beyond. As such, BGLFs are crucial to the academic success of its members and, consequently, alleviating disparaging achievement gap figures for Black male students.

### **Background of the Problem**

While BGLFs have the power to improve persistence for Black male undergraduates (Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998; McClure, 2006), these student organizations often preclude Black gay males from becoming members, which denies these students access to the many benefits BGLFs offer, and marginalize gay men who are members of these organizations (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Hughey & Parks, 2011). Often these organizations preclude Black gay male undergraduates (BGMUs) from membership because of implicit and explicit discrimination based on their sexual orientation. A recent example of BGLFs' anti-homosexual bias received national attention; although, BGLFs' prejudices preclude far more sexual minorities than to which most are privy.

During the fall semester of 2013, Morgan State senior, Brian Stewart, received a letter of rejection from the school's chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. He later obtained a set of messages between the fraternity members of that chapter, which contained derogatory language about Stewart's denial. Additionally, one astonishing message by one of the chapter members read: "give [Brian Stewart] the perception of a fair and equal opportunity", implying that they had already made up their minds about Stewart before the appropriate time because of his sexuality, as Stewart suggests (WBFF Fox Baltimore, 2013).

After it was made public, Stewart's story caused an immediate frenzy on social networking and news sites. Stewart's supporters, Greek and non-Greek, were annoyed at his mistreatment and the fact that he was a seemingly accomplished student, one who had previously interned with First Lady Michelle Obama. His only downfall in joining appeared to be his sexual orientation.

Though Stewart's story is not an anomaly, it brought the issue of anti-homosexual bias in BGLFs to the forefront (again). Additionally, his story speaks to the general perception Black Greek letter organizations' (BGLOs) members hold about and their mistreatment of LGB people. This unjust treatment of LGB people is not merely a suspicion of the disenfranchised; fraternity members, too, acknowledge that the anti-homosexual practices are a part of their organizational principles. In an interview, two fraternity members remarked:

“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 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.” (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008, p. 299)

These powerful statements by BGLF members not only suggest the plight of LGB people wishing to gain admittance in a BGLO, they also paint a picture of the type of environment a gay man faces should he happen to defy odds and join the fraternity.

For example, Nathanael Gay, member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., received a lot of anti-homosexual comments regarding his marriage to Robert Brown. An overwhelming amount of comments from members of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., expressed disdain for Gay when the video of his marriage to Brown went viral in October 2012. Their wedding, which was decorated in crimson and crème, the fraternity's colors, was dubbed "The Gay Kappa Wedding" because, in addition to the colors, Gay was featured in the video throwing up the fraternity's hand sign with other men. A national conversation ensued about "The Gay *Kappa* Wedding" which did nothing to calm the wrath of many Kappas, who were upset and seemingly embarrassed about the fraternity being associated with homosexuality.

As news coverage continued over time, it was revealed that only one partner was a member of the fraternity, however, people overwhelmingly still regarded the event with the same title. Still today, a quick search of "The Gay Kappa Wedding" will direct surfers to numerous news stories about the event, laden with derogatory, anti-homosexual comments from people, many of whom claim to be members of Kappa Alpha Psi and other BGLOs.

Sustaining current anti-homosexual practices of BGLFs limits opportunities for success for Black male undergraduates, for whom these organizations were created, who happen to identify or be perceived as gay. The attempted exclusion of such a population highlights contradictions within the founding purposes of BGLFs, which includes being a safe, supportive space for Black male undergraduates, with no official prerequisites regarding sexual orientation. This should be of great concern for fraternity members

who have pledged to support their respective fraternities and the community for which their organizations were created.

All BGLF constituents, including researchers, student affairs practitioners and administrators, should take heed to the importance of including Black gay undergraduates and how it will benefit the students, postsecondary institutions, and the community as a whole. Researchers contend that constituents need to actively combat homophobic practices to improve the development of LGB undergraduates (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996). Furthermore, the growing research on this topic highlights the need to better understand the plight of Black gay male students. As such, practices should be developed to improve the experiences of Black gay male students who want to benefit from participation in BGLFs.

Though research provides a clear picture of the discriminatory practices of BGLFs, which attempt to preclude gay members from joining these organizations, less is known about Black gay males (BGM) who are able to infiltrate BGLFs despite their anti-homosexual bias. Some research on this topic suggests even after BGM defy odds and become members of these prestigious organizations, they are still confronted with anti-homosexual bias (Hughey & Parks, 2011; DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Kimbrough W. M., 2003; Case, 1998). Specifically, these Black Greek gay men (BGGM) face the dilemma of navigating an environment that celebrates their blackness and improves their academic success, whilst simultaneously marginalizing them because of their sexual orientation.

Peer pressure and the risk of being ostracized should people realize their non-heterosexual identity forces Black Greek gay men (BGGM) to conceal their identity and, in some cases, live a double-life (Harris, 1994). Such pressure to remain in the closet coupled with the stress of navigating an environment that does not fully accept them puts BGGM's mental, emotional, and academic health in jeopardy. However, the irony of this context is that BGGM choose to join and/or remain in these Greek spaces after becoming fully aware of their homophobic nature.

No matter how ironic their persistence in these spaces, the fact remains that BGGM are present in BGLFs. Furthermore, the organizations have pledged to be a supportive space for the Black community and its members. Subsequently, as these organizations have non-heterosexual men as members, regardless of underlying principles geared toward preventing such, they must also support their gay members, as they claim to do, and not marginalize BGGM due to their sexual orientation. In order to progress these organizations to a culture of empathy and acceptance, it is important to attempt to fully understand the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a problem in BGLFs regarding the anti-homosexual bias in these organizations and their treatment of sexual minorities. Despite the presence of BGGM in BGLFs, members of these organizations hold firm to discriminatory principles, which fosters a disaffirming environment for BGGM. This problem negatively impacts BGGM because they are constantly faced with a complex organizational environment that celebrates their blackness but also condemns their sexuality.

Previous research has highlighted the benefits of BGLFs and the anti-homosexual practices of these organizations; however, there is a significant gap in the knowledge about the effects these practices have regarding BGGM. Furthermore, empirical research on the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs and how it affects their perceptions of their racial and sexual identity is desolate. A case study that investigates such experiences and their effects could highlight the effects anti-homosexuality in BGLFs has for gay members of these organizations and, subsequently, progress these organizations toward a more affirming culture.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Equity, inclusion of *all* Black male undergraduates, and the advancement of BGLFs are important issues, particularly in the context of higher education. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs with hopes that findings will progress BGLFs to a culture of empathy and acceptance by exploring the significance anti-homosexuality plays in BGGM's experiences within BGLFs. Additionally, this study will increase awareness about LGB Black Greek students on college campuses and the influence and prominence of anti-homosexual bias in BGLOs. Furthermore, the findings of this study will be useful for postsecondary and fraternal stakeholders, as the findings may be applicable to other collegiate and/or fraternal spaces where LGB people of color and other sexual minorities are marginalized.

### **Significance of Study**

The advantages of BGLFs are clear (Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough &

The advantages of BGLFs are clear (Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998; McClure, 2006); however, these organizations still have room for improvement regarding their general treatment and perceptions of BGM. Though research on Black gay male undergraduates has been conducted (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011, Carter, 2013; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Patton, 2011), few scholars have used BGLFs as the context for exploring this topic. Additionally, many scholars have explored issues of heterosexism, homophobia, and/or anti-homosexual bias within the Greek context; however, an overwhelming majority of the studies are centered on white fraternities (e.g., Case, 1998). Finally, when scholars study anti-homosexual bias in the BGLF context, many scholars use heterosexual members to validate the existence of these issues (e.g., DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Hughey & Parks, 2011). This study, however, will add to the literature on BGMUs; BGLFs; heterosexism, homophobia, and anti-homosexual bias in these organizations; and the intersections of the three by giving voice to BGGM. Specifically, this study uses the narratives of BGGM participants solely without validating their experiences with heterosexual members' input or contextualizing the culture of BGLFs/BGGM as juxtapose to or in congruency with white fraternities/white Greek gay men.

### **Objectives, Outcomes, and Research Questions**

While there has been some research done on BGLFs, BGMUs, and their interactions, there are shortcomings in said research, as outlined above. To add to the literature on this subject matter, I will operate with the following objectives:

- To extend previous research on the relationship between anti-homosexuality and BGLFs
- To give voice to BGGM about their experiences without undermining them with others' experiences
- To explore BGGM's experiences in BGLFs and the effects navigation of these anti-homosexual spaces may have on BGGM
- To explore how anti-homosexuality affects BGGM's self-identity, particularly in the context of BGLFs.

As this study seeks to understand the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs?
2. How do BGGM understand their sexual and racial identity within their respective BGLF?

I believe these questions will elicit rich data about the experiences of BGGM in the fraternity context.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Black Greek Letter Fraternities-** For the purposes of this study, the use of the term Black Greek letter fraternities (BGLFs) refers to the five fraternities that are members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Namely, these organizations are Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.

**Black Greek Letter Organizations-** In the context of this study, Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs) refers to the nine historically Black Greek letter fraternities and sororities that make up the National Pan-Hellenic Council.

**Crossed-** A term generally used to indicate when a new member became fully initiated in a fraternity/sorority (e.g., “He crossed Spring 2009.”).

**Gay-** As used for the purposes of this study, the term gay is used to describe men who have sex with men regardless of frequency or openness about said encounter(s). It is important to note that this includes bisexual men, pansexual men, down-low men (frequently referred to as “DL men”), etc. “Gay” was chosen to describe these men because it is the most common word used in literature applied to this study. Though a recent Gallup poll suggests that more people of color (than white people) identify as LGB or transgender (Gates & Newport, 2012), most of the literature on BGM overwhelmingly suggest that BGM actually do not. This is an important topic, which is addressed in the literature review.

**Greek-** For this study, Greek is used to describe an individual who holds membership in a college-based fraternity or sorority containing a Greek symbol.

**LBs/Line Brothers-** Members who pledged a fraternity chapter together, at the same time.

**LGB-** LGB is an acronym that groups lesbian, gay and bisexual people together. Although all three identities share heterosexism as a common root of oppression, there are specific needs and concerns related to each individual identity. Furthermore, these

needs become even more specialized for LGB people of color (e.g., BGMUs) because of other external factors (e.g., racism on college campuses).

**On line-** “On line” describes an initiate’s status while pledging (e.g., “He was on line for over eight weeks.”)

**Paper-** A “paper” member refers to those chapter members who became members without completing a strenuous, underground pledge process, which includes unsanctioned hazing. The term alludes that the member simply filled out *paperwork* to become a member, without going through a significant process to earn membership.

**Pledging-** Participating in coordinated initiation experiences involving sanctioned, historic fraternity/sorority rituals, but frequently includes longer periods of unsanctioned hazing, too.

**Prophyte-** A prophyte is a member of a sorority or fraternity who has initiated members.

**PWI-** PWI (or predominantly white institution) is a “the term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment” (Brown II & Dancy II, 2010, p. 524).

**HBCUs-** HBCUs (or Historically Black colleges or universities) are postsecondary institutions established during the Jim Crow period which represented the only viable options for most Blacks to be college educated during that time; however, they still play a critical role in ensuring access for people of color today (Samuels, 2010).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Black Gay Male Undergraduates (BGMUs)**

Current research on Black gay male undergraduates (BGMUs) has been conducted in the context of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (e.g., Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011) and historically Black college and universities (HBCUs) (e.g., Carter, 2013; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Patton, 2011). The studies highlight the plight of BGMUs as they matriculate. The following two sections cover key findings that inform our understanding of this student population.

#### ***Black Gay Men on PWI Campuses***

Research has stressed the many challenges and issues that Black males face specifically on PWI campuses (McDonald & Vrana, 2007; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). For BGMUs at PWIs, it is hypothesized that the intersection of their race/ethnicity and sexual orientation begets additional barriers (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011), as they are confronted with both, racism and homophobia. The following studies about BGMUs at PWIs provide a clearer understanding of the complexities of matriculating as a sexual and racial minority and their experiences on those campuses.

Goode-Cross & Tager (2011) conducted a qualitative study of eight Black juniors and seniors at a large, Midwestern PWI to learn more about how Black gay and bisexual men persist on those campuses. The participants reported being frequently reminded of

their minority race status on campus and feeling more at home around their Black peers; although, their Black peers were more averse to homosexuality. To maintain and gain affiliation and acceptance from other Black students, the participants chose to minimize their sexual orientation by only being “selectively out” (i.e., they carefully chose exclusive individuals to inform about their sexual identity). The students were more willing to deal with potential sexual oppression in the Black community than to deal with racism in the larger school community. The authors credited their persistence with “engaging the African-American community and... the larger heterosexually dominated institution, a process that they perceived would be more difficult if they were open about their sexual orientation” (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011, p. 1247).

Strayhorn and Mullins (2012) also conducted a study about the experiences of BGMU at a PWI; however, their study focused on this student group in the context of residence halls. While the focus of this study was different, it yielded similar results to the study above. The participants experienced subtle and overt forms of racism while living on campus and indicated that the residence halls’ structures and policies seem to reify heterosexism and homophobia. Regarding interactions with their Black peers specifically, the participants reported frequent encounters with homophobia and gay oppression. The findings about how these GBMUs persisted are slightly different from the study above, most likely due to the different focus. Three things helped the students persist: Black straight female peers, gay or ally resident assistants and affirming housing professionals, and their personal resilience.

Goode-Cross and Tager's (2011) study was an extension of previous research, which suggested that race, gender, and religious beliefs are most important for BGMUs at PWIs, and sexual orientation and social class were less salient aspects of their identities (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). This finding corroborated Brown's (2005) outcomes, which suggested that Black gay men create a personal hierarchy for their individual identities. Though BGMUs in Goode-Cross and Good's (2009) study indicated that their sexual orientation was less important to their identity, there may be some explanation for that. Narratives of what it means to be gay and bisexual are often westernized, Eurocentric notions, so it is difficult for BGM to have a salient non-heterosexual identity (Poynter & Washington, 2005). Consequently, Black men who have sex with men often distance themselves from "gay" and/or "bisexual" labels (Poynter & Washington, 2005). This was evidenced by Brown's (2005) case study in which only 37 percent of his 110 Black participants identified as gay, although, all participants indicated that they have sex with men. From this, a valid supposition is that it is easier for BGMUs to identify and relate to the Black college community because their definitions of what it means to be Black is concrete, while their definitions of what it means to be Black and gay or bisexual, may often conflict with dominant views.

The studies above both indicate that issues of homophobia are more prevalent in BGMUs' own racial community on PWI campuses. The homophobia experienced in the Black community on college campuses stems from notions of Black masculinity (Hughey & Parks, 2011). However, Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) argue that few attempts have been made to combine areas of Black masculinity and the collegiate

experiences of BGMUs “to examine BGMUs’ construction of manhood and their beliefs about Black masculinity or masculinities” (p. 84). To help fill this gap in the literature, they conducted a qualitative study at six PWIs.

Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) found that BGMUs accept, adhere to, and perform traditionally masculine norms, and many of them do so to conceal their sexual identity or to prove themselves as “real men” to their heterosexual counterparts. However, not all participants succumbed to the pressure of performing traditional norms of masculinity. Some participants intentionally challenged hegemonic notions of Black masculinity through their behaviors and self-beliefs. The authors provided examples of this behavior, which included being involved in traditionally feminine activities like theatre, cheerleading, baton twirling, and music. It is important to note that the participants of this study self-identified as gay and were selected by presidents of the student organizations to participate. Arguably, “less out” students may not be so willing to challenge hegemonic notions of Black masculinity so publicly.

### ***Black Gay Men on HBCU Campuses***

The above studies focus on BGMUs at PWIs. A universal theme of those studies is that BGMUs experience racism on PWI campuses and more gay oppression from their Black peers especially. By switching the context to an HBCU, one might assume that marginalization for BGMUs is minimized because racism is less of a factor on those campuses. However, Harper’s (2012) study suggested that openly Black gay men risked being ostracized by Black students, voted against in campus elections, and having discredited leadership; notably, these fears were most pronounced at HBCUs.

On the other hand, the six BGMUs in Patton's (2011) study expressed generally positive experiences at their HBCU. Although, her participants were only "selectively out", which, debatably, may have caused them to view their HBCU campus as more collegial than their more "out" peers may have. Nevertheless, her participants felt it was better to be "low-key" (pp. 88-89) about their sexuality because of the consequences of being LGB. Specifically, being completely out would risk their participation in organizations and leadership, on which the participants placed major emphasis.

Even though the participants expressed the risks and consequences of being gay, they viewed their HBCU campus as universally tolerant (not necessarily accepting). Some of Patton's participants even suggested that there are straight allies who actively combated gay bashing on campus and the topic of homosexuality is somewhat addressed in the classroom. Though they expressed these as positive attributes, these students still were not comfortable being (completely) out.

Unlike many HBCUs, the HBCU in Patton's study had a LGB organization of which all of the participants were not members. There is obvious danger of being outed by affiliating with such an organization on campus, so it is understandable why these "selectively out" participants would not risk it. Fortunately, BGMUs can find what Carter (2013) describes as a "sanctuary from the pressures they felt from society as a whole" (p. 37) in other (non-gay) activities and organizations.

Carter's qualitative study focused on the experiences of Black gay males who were band members at an HBCU. A principle theme in Carter's study was that BGMUs are constantly concerned with being rejected because of their sexual

orientation. However, the smaller group of friends who knew of their sexuality gave the participants a sense of belonging. Similar to participants in Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly's (2013) study, half of the participants placed emphasis on passing (i.e., being perceived as heterosexual), while others intentionally challenged hegemonic notions. Namely, the other half of the participants were out during their time at their respective HBCU. For one participant specifically, the fear of rejection was realized when he came out before his senior year. This participant noted a decline in popularity and struggled with the rejection of college friends.

Though the studies above target different campus contexts for the experiences of BGMUs, there are consistent themes in both bodies of literature. While researchers suggest that specific groups of people, like BGMUs, are not monolithic, student performance/behavior is generalizable (Strange & King, 2011). Therefore, in spite of intergroup variance, consistency within different bodies of literature about BGMUs can provide postsecondary constituents a foundation for understanding this student group at large.

While constituents at all types of institutions should recognize and advocate for this student group, constituents at PWIs, in particular, may have added pressure to make the college experience equitable for BGMUs. Research indicates that Black gay males deliberately choose PWIs because they are thought to be a "safe place" to "come out", where they can avoid homophobia from the Black community (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008, p. 99). Unfortunately, these students will encounter said homophobia, shattering their idealistic expectations about PWIs. In addition to their unrealized

expectations, these students will frequently encounter racism, making matriculating at a PWI exceptionally complicated.

### **Heterosexism in BGLFs**

By and large, heteronormativity is the attitudes, practices, and/or beliefs that normalize heterosexuality and traditional gender roles. Within heteronormativity, men perform masculinity; women perform femininity; men are attracted to women; and women are attracted to men. Furthermore, heteronormativity can birth heterosexism, which is a system of covert to overt actions that marginalize and/or oppress people who deviate from heteronormative ideals. This not only includes same-gender-attraction, but deviations from male-masculinity or female-femininity performances as well. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes heterosexism as the belief in the inherent superiority of one form of sexual expression over another and thereby the right to dominate. James DeVita (2010) corroborates this definition proposing that heterosexism is an oppressive system rooted in the belief that heterosexuality is inherently normal and superior to any other sexuality. Heterosexism in this study refers to BGLF members' mistreatment, prohibition, and domination of non-heterosexual men.

The notion of "masculinity" for Black men is a bit more convoluted. Black masculinity is often discussed using one side of a dichotomy of Black men being emasculated, perpetual victims or hypermasculine, hypersexual predators (Hughey & Parks, 2011). The latter is arguably the chosen image BGLFs reinforce, in some regard, in their chapter and/or national images (see Hughey & Parks, 2011, pp. 38-41). The ideas of what Black masculinity is beget the marginalization of BGM in BGLFs.

In their study, DeSantis and Coleman (2008) found that “‘antihomosexual bias’ is deeply ingrained in the rules, laws, and collective psyche of these organizations” (p. 308). One interviewee went so far as to say that homosexuals are “forbidden” to be in his fraternity (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008). While this member’s comment is clear, the “antihomosexual bias” is not always explicit, as no BGLF outright denies membership based on a potential member’s sexual orientation.

As suggested by the definition of heterosexism above, performance plays a significant role in this phenomenon. Many people rely on gender-normative performance to determine one’s sexual orientation, so one’s masculinity or femininity determines if he or she will be perceived as heterosexual or not. In BGLFs the idea of masculinity is intensified, resulting in a hypermasculine atmosphere. “Due to hypermasculine environments in which fraternities... exist and the strong influence to ‘be a brother’” (Hughey, 2008, p. 450), many men try to adopt more masculine and misogynistic behaviors that not only silence their true identity, but exploit women as well. For example, Boyd-Franklin and Franklin contend that this performance of masculinity determines a man’s acceptance into the fraternity:

One of the “codes of the brotherhood” hinges on bragging about sexual conquests [with women], real or imagined. “Getting some” and then bragging about it to other brothers is a merit badge of masculinity that permits entry into black “manhood”. (as cited in Hughey, 2008, p. 450)

Albeit an unspoken requirement, a prerequisite of sexual intercourse with women precludes membership for gay aspirants or forces them to mask their sexual

identity. Regardless of those two options, this and similar requirements create a hostile environment for both, out and closeted Black gay men alike (Hughey & Parks, 2011).

What stands out about Boyd-Franklin and Franklin's concept is that this [hetero]sexual behavior exhibits "manhood" within BGLFs. This problematic definition of manhood aligns with DeSantis and Coleman's (2008) notion that "antihomosexual bias is deeply ingrained" in BGLFs. For example, "manhood" is one of the four cardinal principles of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and one of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity's aims is "manly" deeds. Additionally, brotherhood and manhood is laced in the mission, principles, and/or purpose of all BGLFs. Consequently, BGLF members rely on their collective definitions of Black manhood, no matter how narrow or despotic, to determine an aspirant's fit with the respective organization. Unfortunately, these collective definitions of Black manhood, exclude homosexuality, which in turn marginalizes their gay members or excludes gay Black men from membership altogether. The marginalization and prohibition of gay men within and from BGLFs is ironic, as it oppresses a portion of the demographic (i.e. Black men) for which these organizations were founded.

### **Key Issues and Challenges**

The literature above provides insight to the many challenges and issues BGM face on college campuses. BGM face unique challenges that make matriculating especially difficult for them. Many of the issues and challenges BGM face could be alleviated by gaining social support from their peers, such as that which members of BGLFs provide to their members. Perhaps the benefits associated with membership in

BGLFs are even more advantageous for BGM than their heterosexual counterparts, as BGM are more susceptible to alienation on college campuses due to their sexual orientation. Though BGLFs harness the ability to produce postsecondary and professional success for their members, they overwhelmingly preclude BGM from membership; however, some Black gay men are able to infiltrate the organization, especially those who keep their sexuality hidden. Of course, just because they defy the odds and become members, does not mean they do not face issues and challenges in these organizations. Below, are two of the key issues and challenges BGM face in BGLFs, which were derived from research literature.

### ***Stifled Sexual Identity Development***

As Evans and D'Augelli note, many students begin exploring their sexual identity during their undergraduate years, but BGM often choose to leave their sexual orientation identity on the back burner in order to maintain positive affiliation with the Black community (Patton L., 2011; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). The same is true for BGM who want to pursue membership in a BGLF. Furthermore, BGM must keep their sexual orientation concealed while in college to avoid being ostracized.

Because BGM place their sexual identity on the back burner (i.e., not confront or deal with their personal sexual orientation) they may not be able to reach a salient sexual identity. While this may seem independent of academic pursuits, it is not. Research indicates that BGM have a difficult time regarding their self-acceptance as gay men in the predominantly heterosexual Black community (Loiacano, 1989). Lack of self-acceptance or a positive self-identity may have adverse effects on BGM

undergraduates' sense of belonging and, thus, academic performance. By putting their gay identity on the backburner, BGM prolong the self-acceptance phase, which is an important factor that allows gay men to find a sense of empowerment (Stevens, 2004), which would aid them in their academic pursuits.

### ***Internalized Homophobia***

While BGGM deserve the opportunity to participate in BGLFs, membership in these organizations arguably condones the heterosexist and homophobic narratives BGLFS project. For BGGM these negative attitudes can become “internalized”, as they are subjected to the same prejudices as other BGM even though they are members of the in-group. Pachankis and Goldfried (2004) describe this internalization process in the following:

This societal heterocentrism is manifested at an individual level when a person internalizes the hostility and disdain that society exhibits toward LGB individuals and their behaviors. ... Thus, upon recognizing a possible LGB identity within themselves, LGB individuals may naturally feel ashamed and compelled to hide it. ... This manifestation of shame is referred to as “internalized homophobia.” (p. 228)

Unfortunately, internalized homophobia can breed many other problems for BGGM such as anxiety and depression, substance and alcohol abuse, and the devaluation of LGB activities (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004), all of which possess the ability to affect their postsecondary and professional success.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Why a qualitative approach?**

I am interested in understanding the experiences of Black Greek Gay Men (BGGM) in historically Black Greek letter fraternities (BGLFs). These experiences are constructed by the nuanced intersections of my participants' backgrounds, identities, life events, and many other influences that are important to recognize while attempting to understand the participants' experiences. As such, my assumption is that the best way to elicit rich, meaningful data about my topic is through personal interactions with the participants. My focus for this study does not lend itself to quantitative questions and responses that attempt to explain or predict, instead my focus calls for qualitative methodology that is geared toward understanding (Smith, 1983). The qualitative approach allows the researcher to focus on "how other people live, experience, and interpret their lives", while also acknowledging the "nature and the quality of the relationships between researchers and research participants" (Tom & Herbert, 2002).

Paradigms are suppositions and beliefs that represent the researcher's worldview and provide lenses through which the researcher will use to frame his or her observations. More specifically, Guba (1990) suggests a paradigm represents a patterned set of assumptions concerning reality (ontology), knowledge of that reality (epistemology), and the particular way for knowing about that reality (methodology). Respectively, the following are characteristics of the constructivist, which is the paradigm that will guide this qualitative study:

- *Relativistic ontology*- assumes that reality as we know it is constructed intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially.

- *Subjectivist and transactional epistemology*- assumes that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know (i.e., the investigator and the object of investigation are linked such that who we are and how we understand the world is a central part of how we understand ourselves, others and the world).

- *Hermeneutical and dialectical methodology*- assumes the variable and personal nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006)

Below I briefly detail these three areas as they relate to my study.

My ontological stance for this study is that the realities of BGGM are unique and socially constructed by their multiple identities and their interactions, specifically with peers and fellow fraternity members, in addition to the general polity. I expect that the combination of the participants' identities, and life events contribute to their perceptions, experiences and, consequently, their realities and how they make meaning of their sexual and racial identities. Finally, I believe their narratives provide a much broader and more in-depth picture of the perceptions of homosexuality in these organizations and the effects they have on BGGM.

According to the subjectivist epistemology, the researcher is unavoidably linked to that which he or she is researching. As such, I recognize that meaning is imposed via

my lens without the participants' contributions or intentions necessarily. Furthermore, my membership in a BGLF, my admiration and honor of the legacy of these organizations, and my critical lens of malpractices of organizational members all affect what I will learn from the participants.

Finally, in regards to hermeneutical and dialectical methodology, my assumption is that the best way to extract the most significant data about BGGM experiences is through personal engagement. Engaging with the participants allows me to probe, uncover, and help the participants process their experiences, which would be more difficult without interaction.

This study calls for a theoretical framework that assists in the deconstruction and understanding of BGGM's experiences, while also providing an affirmative lens to view their stories. Critical race theory has benefits regarding the racial construction of BBGM's experiences and queer theory has benefits considering their experiences as gay men in these fraternities. An overview of each critical lens is provided below.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Queer Theory***

Queer theory understands sexual orientation is constructed within cultural formations and social practices. As such, BGGM's experiences are reconciled both internally and externally by the individual himself and his context. Ralph R. Smith offers the following tenets of queer theory:

1. All categories are falsifications, especially if they are binary and descriptive of sexuality

2. All assertions about reality are socially constructed
3. All human behavior can be read as textual signification
4. Texts form discourses that are exercises in power/knowledge and which, properly analyzed, reveal relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation
5. Deconstruction of all categories of normality and deviance can best be accomplished by queer readings of performative texts ranging from literature (fictional, professional, popular) to other cultural expressions (geographic distribution, body piercing, sit-coms, sadomasochistic paraphernalia).

Together these the tenets work to deconstruct “the deformative and misappropriate power that [heteronormativity] enjoys” (Butler, 1993, p. 21).

Queer theory informs this study because it provides a lens that challenges heteronormativity and the privileges that come along with that system of oppression, while providing a space for the reality of queer people. Specifically, queer theory recognizes the heterosexual dominance in BGLFs, allows for the deconstructions of said dominance, and open a window for the narratives of BGGM. A major critique, however, is that queer theory has limited applicability because it maintains an ahistorical fixity (Meghani, 2010), not acknowledging the unique history of people of color, specifically, in this case, BGGM. This calls for the additional theoretical outlook that allows for the unique racial history of BGGM to be taken into account as well.

### ***Critical Race Theory (CRT)***

CRT challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and

represented in American society as a whole (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). The CRT framework is used to analyze, deconstruct, and transform social domination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Finally, CRT exposes the constrictive role that racial ideology plays in the composition of American institutions (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). As outlined by Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado and Crenshaw (1993, p. 6), critical race theory operates by the following six tenets:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges historicism and insists on contextual/historical analysis.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.

The task of CRT is to devise ways to wage ideological and political struggle while minimizing the costs of engaging in an inherently legitimating discourse (Crenshaw, 1988). Crenshaw (1988) suggests that this can be maintained by focusing on the needs of the Black community.

CRT informs this study because it assists in understanding the importance of BGLFs and potentially paints a picture of the organizational benefits, while providing some explanation of BGGM's persistence in these organizations. For example, CRT asserts that racism is longstanding and never-ending; however, BGLFs can provide an outlet for students that will allow them to persist in college campuses despite racism on campuses and/or in society. Additionally, CRT challenges the "post-racial" discourse and colorblind ideology that make it difficult for people of color to claim racism and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1988), which highlights the need for BGLFs today. Regarding ahistoricism, BGLFs serve as a medium for passing Black history, which is often excluded from institutional memory, so these organizations protect a crucial Black historical narrative. Finally, CRT is useful in understanding the racial experiences of BGGM in BGLFs; however, with the exception of the last tenet, it is less useful in understanding their experiences based on BGGM's sexuality.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study include five Black men who were members of the same BGLF during their respective times as undergraduates. Notably, while these men are members of the same fraternal organization, they crossed (i.e., gained membership) in different chapters. This is important to note, as fraternity chapters, though they are undoubtedly products of the organization at large, maintain individuality regarding chapter culture, chapter traditions, and chapter practices. As such, the same person could have a completely different fraternal experience if he crossed in a different chapter. Additionally, the participants crossed in different regions of the country as

well. Specifically, the participants crossed in either the Southwestern or Eastern regions of the fraternity. This potentially adds another complexity to the study because the participants' Greek experiences may be impacted by their respective regional cultures, too.

In addition to being in a BGLF as an undergraduate, the participant must be Black and identify as gay or acknowledge his nonheterosexuality. The wording is particular because one of my participants rejects sexual identity labels (i.e., gay) and views them as problematic and oppressive. This did not present a problem for the study and the participant is aware that I am using the word gay loosely to describe my participants' sexual identity (see p. 10).

The number of participants was intentionally small to facilitate deep, thorough analysis of the individual stories and events that shaped the participants' experiences. Expanding the study to include more participants would have prohibited the desired depth and intensity of the data. Additionally, I was able to achieve saturation within the five interviews.

I specifically chose former undergraduate members because it is my supposition that they will be able to conceptualize their Greek experiences differently, and possibly more in-depth, because they have had time to process their undergraduate experiences. Though using participants who are currently undergraduates would possibly contextualize the most immediate climate of BGLFs culture today, they were not included in this study. While undergraduates are currently going through the experience

and would possibly be able to speak about their experiences more readily and vividly, they have not had time to process and reflect, as their experiences are incomplete.

Furthermore, I did not choose members who crossed as graduate students. There is an undeniable difference between the graduate and undergraduate pledging process, which is a notion supported by research and echoed by members of BGLFs. For example, graduate chapters are purported to be less selective and have a less rigorous pledging process. As such, I would expect men who crossed in a graduate chapter to have different experiences from those who crossed in undergraduate chapters.

**Table 1. Participant Information**

Participant	Classification when Crossed	Semester/Year Crossed	Institution Type	Undergraduate Region
Farrakhan	Junior	Fall/2009	PWI	Southwestern
DeRay	Junior	Fall/2003	PWI	Eastern
Martin	Sophomore	Fall/1997	PWI	Southwestern
Harvey	Senior	Spring/2013	HBCU	Southwestern
Perry	Senior	Spring/2011	HBCU	Southwestern

Below I briefly introduce my participants. It is important to note, when I talk about my perceptions of them, especially their gender performance or perceived sexualities, I am doing so to establish how they navigate society and how they may be perceived by others. While some of my perceptions reify problematic ideas, they are important to highlight because their gender performance plays a role in how they navigate aspects of their lives and may speak to their experiences in and out of the fraternal context. I am aware that some of my perceptions may appear heterosexist,

oppressive, and/or naive, but they are grounded in how society typically views or labels sexuality, *not* how an informed person views sexuality and gender performance.

### ***Farrakhan***

I would describe Farrakhan as masculine man. His voice is deeper than the late Barry White's; his mannerisms are manly; his words are direct; and his build is lean and muscular. He is what one might describe as a "man's man". According to problematic ideas, most people would assume that Farrakhan is a straight man through and through, with no room for exception.

Farrakhan and I were well-acquainted before the interview. In fact, I would consider him a good friend. He was my first interviewee, so I very nervous to interview him and I was intimidated by his intellect, as I consider him one of my smartest friends. We met at his apartment in South Central Texas on a hot summer day. Farrakhan answered the door barefoot in basketball shorts and a tank top. The apartment was slightly untidy and smelled faintly of marijuana. He asked if he could smoke during the interview and I obliged, as it was his home. All of these details speak to the pre-established rapport I built with him.

Farrakhan offered me a seat and he set across the room. I thought the distance between us was far, but recognized our socialization regarding masculinity that might have prompted us to sit several feet away from one another, even while knowing I needed to audio record the interview. After he signed the consent form, we began the interview. Farrakhan challenged me from the beginning of the interview, which I

expected, as I knew he was a critical thinker who always challenged me to think abstractly during our friendship.

**Williams:** ...how do you define your sexuality... in terms of gay, bi, pansexual, [etc.]?

**Farrakhan:** Am I limited to those terms?

**Williams:** No.

**Farrakhan:** I just, I don't bound myself by those terms. That's not saying that I don't... engage in homosexual activity or anything like that, but I just like what I like and that's what I'm attracted to and I don't believe in putting myself in any of those boxes. You know? Even if I'm heterosexual, I like what I like, you know? I might one day like men, and if I'm gay, you just never know.

**Williams:** Are there any other reasons you don't identify with any of those labels?

**Farrakhan:** I just feel it puts a limitation on it. With the growing...sexual identities, you know, is "bisexual" relevant if you like men, women, and transmen and transwomen? What is that? Do you have to classify them separately or would that still be bisexual?

Granted, my question about his sexuality was presumptive and, notably, he never gave me a clear response that day; however, in a subsequent conversation, he said he "could've have just said pansexual", but I perceived he was still unhappy with putting a label on his sexuality.

Farrakhan is from Dallas, Texas, where he grew up in a pretty big family, the third oldest of four brothers. He lived with both parents in the household, where they never went without basic needs, even though they were a working class family. All but one of his brothers went to college, including an older brother who attended the same university as Farrakhan.

Farrakhan attended a large, public university in Central Texas, which was comprised of less than 3 percent black students. He was unhappy with the abundant racism on campus and in the surrounding areas, but was able to persevere because of the relationships he built. Many of those relationships were with his fraternity brothers.

### *Harvey*

Harvey is a stout, somewhat effeminate man. He is delicate; he uses his hands a lot when he speaks; his voice is light, but rich, and he stresses syllables in uncommon places. He dresses in trendy, urban men's' clothing and walks with a slight bounce. While he is not flamboyant, some people may perceive him to be gay after a conversation or watching him move around, but not upon first glance. Harvey, however, believes he presents a completely masculine performance. Harvey attended a small, historically black college in East Texas, where he pledged his fraternity during his senior year.

I interviewed Harvey several months after interviewing Farrakhan. Harvey and I met through mutual friends at a social event. My friends had already disclosed his sexuality and fraternal membership to me, so I was hoping to build rapport with him and invite him to participate in the study. After we became more acquainted, I asked him to participate. He seemed reluctant at first, but I assured him there were procedures in place to maintain his anonymity.

Harvey and I met at his apartment in Houston, Texas, for the interview. It was a familiar environment for me, too, as I had been there a few times. We conducted the

interview at his kitchen table, where I also presented him the consent form and reassured him that he could safely share his experiences with me.

Harvey was 23 years when the interview transpired. He was a young professional who enjoyed partying and going out, not unlike many people his age. While he frequented Houston's gay scene, he did not consider himself "out":

To this day, I'm still not fully comfortable with saying, out in public, that I'm a gay black male. It's not something that I would say I'm comfortable with, just due to society. My family members, my mom, my brother, they don't know about me being a gay black male and I try not to identify myself like that all the time, cause I don't want to be stereotyped.

Later, it appeared that religious beliefs, too, had much to do with why he is not "out" to aforementioned people.

### ***DeRay***

While discussing my dissertation with a colleague, she mentioned one of her bosses, DeRay, fit the criteria for my study. DeRay is a big, muscular guy. He is neither masculine nor feminine enough for either label. He is professional, eloquent, and assertive. He is usually dressed in business attire or casual clothes one might find at Urban Outfitters. He is built like Terry Crews; he speaks like Don Lemon; and his hair is long and tidy, like AJ's from old *106 and Park* episodes. He may or may not appear gay to people because his effeminate characteristics can just be viewed as "professional".

I was anxious to contact DeRay about my study; he and I were not acquainted and we worked for the same company, where my status was much lower than his. Nevertheless, I sent him an email briefly detailing my study and asked him to participate. He agreed and we set a time and place to meet.

DeRay and I conducted his interview one evening at a cafe in a ritzy area of Houston, his choosing. We had both come from work; I was dressed casually and DeRay was more dressed up, which is probably indicative of our roles in the company. I was anxious about this interview because of our statuses, among other things. Only to add to my anxiousness, I was late to the interview because of a miscommunication about location. DeRay was kind about my tardiness and apologetic about the miscommunication.

DeRay was raised in a predominantly black, low to middle class neighborhood in the Midwest. He is the youngest of three with two older sisters. Both of his parents are educators at the local junior college. Due to a desegregation lawsuit in his city, he attended a wealthy high school that was pretty diverse. According to DeRay, the school consisted of 25 percent of each black people, Asian people, Latinos, and white people. He recalls being the only black male in his honors classes, but credits living in a black neighborhood and running track with having touch points with other black peers who were not privy to the same academic spaces.

DeRay attended an Ivy League school in the Northeast. He described the school as having a liberal environment where everyone was free to think whatever they want. He was incredibly active at his undergraduate institution. He ran track and volunteered so much that he was recognized for it on campus.

### ***Martin***

Martin has a sharp tongue and some might describe his words as feisty. His voice is smooth and he has a mild southern accent. He is somewhat effeminate. He walks

lightly, speaks expressively, and dresses conservatively. Like DeRay, he may or may not appear gay because his effeminate characteristics can just be viewed as “professional”. Although, some may assume he is gay because he directs the church choir.

Martin, with whom I was acquainted before the study, and I conducted his interview via Skype. Though this was not the preferred method, it was the only viable option at the time. Like Harvey, Martin was preoccupied with maintaining his anonymity before agreeing to participate in the study.

Martin was raised as an only child by a single mother. He is a first generation college student who attended a small, predominantly white university in the southwestern region of Arkansas. Like DeRay, Martin was very involved in college; he was heavily involved in three organizations, one of which he was president, and even worked on campus for the President of the university.

### ***Perry***

Perry is a muscular guy whom all of my friends, of different genders and sexualities, find quite attractive. He appears masculine; however, his voice is gentle and silvery. He laughs a lot and has a bright smile, which many people get to see often because he frequently posts selfies on his social media accounts, which have a large followership. Most people would assume Perry is a straight man because of his physique, but a gay man by the way he speaks.

I met Perry through Harvey, his longtime friend. Perry immediately agreed to be in my study after I asked him to participate. Due to his busy schedule, I was only able to

interview him via phone. In fact, he keeps such a busy schedule, he was driving while I was conducting the interview.

Perry was raised in Los Angeles in a working class family consisting of a sister and his two parents who had a difficult time when they learned about his sexuality:

It was a trying time. It was different for me because I wasn't living at home, so I didn't have to, you know, the burden of always being there with them to kind of let it sit on them and fester with them a lot. But it was hard. You know, my mom didn't take it as hard as my dad took it. But my dad took it pretty hard in the sense [of]... you know, this is my only son and he's gay. Wow, what did I do? You know, like what could I have done to prevent this or to stop this from happening. So it was kind of hard for them.

Though the initial phase was rough, his parents have grown somewhat more accepting today.

Perry attended a HBCU in Arkansas, where he transferred with sole purpose to become a member of his fraternity.

### **Data Collection**

Initially, all of the participants were expected to be recruited through snowball sampling. Lindlof & Taylor (2002) suggest that snowball sampling “may be the only way to reach an elusive population... or engage people about a sensitive subject” (p. 124). Specifically, snowball sampling “yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of the study and BGLF's purported anti-homosexuality, snowball sampling was the more discreet, less invasive method for acquiring participants. While snowball sampling seemed to be the most effect approach to garner participants, only two of my

participants actually came through snowball sampling. I acquired the remaining participants through personal interactions in other social, professional, or philanthropic endeavors.

The interviews for this case study were conducted in various locations depending on participant locality and availability. A case study was the most appropriate research strategy because it fits the “relevant situations” Yin presented about this particular approach (2003, p. 5). Specifically, a case study is appropriate for this study because my study does not require a control of behavioral events and the study of my focus is on contemporary events (Yin, 2003). Lincoln and Guba reiterate that the case study “provides the thick description needed to apprehend, appreciate, and understand the circumstances of the setting, most importantly, its physical, social, economic, and cultural elements” (2013, p. 80), which is most fitting for exploring the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs.

I communicated with the Farrakhan, Martin, Harvey and Perry by phone and/or in person to invite their participation. DeRay was asked to participate via email. Once they agreed to take part in the study, we set up a time and place to meet. It was important for me to let the participant choose the environment for the interview, as I wanted them to feel in control and most comfortable to facilitate ease with sharing their experiences. Before the interview, each participant was provided an Informed Consent form for their review and to sign. Notably, three participants had concerns about maintaining anonymity, which were addressed.

I conducted semi-structured depth interviews with each of the five participants. The goal was for interviews to last one hour minimally; however, because of restraints on Perry's availability, his interview only lasted 30 minutes. Though the additional time with Perry could have enhanced the understanding of BGLFs, I do not believe the reduction in interview time diminishes the overall findings.

All of the interviews were audio recorded with the written consent of each participant and transcriptions were produced for analysis. I hired a professional who was willing to sign a confidentiality agreement to transcribe the audio recordings to text. After the transcriptions were returned, I double-checked them for accuracy by listening to the corresponding audio recordings and noted corrections. After I checked the transcriptions for accuracy, I emailed each participant a copy of his transcriptions to review and provide any corrections, additions, or clarifications to what was communicated during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

I used grounded theory to understand and explain my participants' experiences within the context of their BGLF. During the grounded theory process, the researcher creates units of data and, via constant comparison, links them to identify major categories of discovery (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After themes emerged, I shared them with the participants to confirm if the themes represented their experiences.

### **Trustworthiness of Data**

A critical element of the study was for participants to review and confirm the findings. I conducted member checks by providing participants an opportunity to review

the transcripts and the findings to ensure that codes and selected quotes accurately capture their thoughts and reactions to the interview questions. Additionally, participants were allowed to review and confirm my findings based on their personal experiences.

### **Investigator Subjectivity**

Of course, the role of the researcher directly impacts qualitative methodology. Specifically, a qualitative researcher must acknowledge his or her subjectivity as a human instrument. Accordingly, there were parts of my identity I had to confront while conducting this study.

Since the sixth grade, I have paid attention to the rich legacy of Black Greek letter organizations and, in some ways, celebrated their causes through the directions of mentors. Though I initially celebrated BGLOs without criticism, things changed when, before I was a member of the national organization, three people were rejected from a local chapter on the suspicion that they might be gay. Knowing their character and their potential to impact Greek life, I became frustrated about their rejection. Since then, and though I still celebrate the positive aspects and outputs of BGLOs, I have taken a more critical approach regarding these organizations. Specifically, I have researched, presented, and/or given talks about sexism, elitism, heterosexism, classism, etc. within these organizations. It should be noted that this approach is not to demonize these organizations. Instead, it is to spread awareness about opportunities for improvement so that these organizations can be the best asset for the Black community as possible. I do,

however, recognize that this preexisting critical view of BGLOs may, in some way, affect how I analyze the data.

In an effort to gain rapport with one of my participants, DeRay, was informed about my Greek membership beforehand. The other participants knew about my Greek affiliation prior to agreeing to participate in the study. Participants were not directly informed about my critical nature regarding BGLFs; however, given the nature of the topic of this study and preceding casual conversations outside of the study, I believe they were able to infer that I am critical of some of BGLFs practices. I do not believe this had any negative (or positive, for that matter) effects on the interview process.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Overview**

In this chapter, I explore the experiences of Farrakhan, DeRay, Martin, Harvey, and Perry, five black gay men who are or were members of the same historically black Greek letter fraternity (BGLF). The nature of BGLFs plays on the intersections of religion, masculinity, sexuality, gender performance, education, and the ethos of the individual chapters. An additional layer of complexity is added when we consider the complexity of each participant's intersectionality. Though research has been conducted on anti-homosexuality in these organizations, there is a dearth of research concerning the experiences of black Greek gay men (BGGM) who became members of BGLFs. Consequently, BGGM's voices have been marginalized regarding their experiences in these much nuanced contexts.

This chapter will offer detailed information about the contexts in which these men experienced their undergraduate Greek membership, their encounters with anti-homosexuality, and the meaning they assign to their fraternal experiences as it relates to their sexual and racial identities both, within and outside of the organization. I also attempt to uncover the manner in which BGGM negotiate, internalize and resist marginalization.

Before I address the findings I would like to address what some may consider contradictory conclusions. For example, one might question how BGLFs can be both oppressive to gay men (i.e., anti-gay), but still affirm them and, in some spaces, provide

a solace for their sexual identities. In fact, this was something I struggled with while coding my data. One theme suggested something another theme did not. However, it is important to acknowledge the positionality of these men (including their sexuality, class, gender performance, upbringings, religious beliefs (or lack thereof), etc.) coupled with the incredible nuances of their chapter cultures and members, fraternity culture, navigating society and their organization, and their perceptions of their sexual identities. That being said, the following themes emerged, despite arguable incongruences.

### **BGLFs are Anti-gay**

This is not a newfound notion by far; however, the context for this study is different from preceding research focused on heterosexism in BGLFs. Specifically, much of the research has not address how black Greek Gay men (BGGM) feel about their experiences in these organizations. Instead, much of the research rely on the experiences of straight men or men with undisclosed sexual identities, without privileging the voices of BGGM.

One of the participants, DeRay, adamantly defended his chapter as not being anti-gay; however, you will see in his quotes below that it was indeed so. That is particularly interesting because some of his comments clearly highlight an anti-gay culture, but DeRay loves his chapter so much, he refused to acknowledge it initially; although, he could not smuggle it when talking about his experiences. That is particularly important regarding a finding I will discuss later, which acknowledges that my participants identify as black first and gay later. As such, DeRay, was determined to defend his black organization, instead of acknowledging their oppressive behaviors

toward gay and/or effeminate men. It seems DeRay excuses his chapter's anti-gayness because he was able to become a member and that, for him, is some sign of acceptance:

**DeRay:** ...I never made it personal. I didn't allow myself to feel like it was personally happening to me. . .I'm trying to like dig in my memory for like a negative experience related to [being gay] and I think it's telling, to me, that I don't have that within my chapter. Cause I remember getting beat, but I don't remember it being [anti-gay] like that.

**Williams:** Well, you did mention the comment, that they said they don't pledge faggots.

**DeRay:** Yeah, but again that didn't land personally for me. It did but it didn't. And then because they also put me on line. If I hadn't been on line at that point or like pre-pledging and then they put me on. So, I guess I would've thought differently had they not put me on and then they did.

Because DeRay was able to join the organization, despite his sexuality, he excuses their anti-gay behavior. I believe the benefits of being a member of the organization outweighed the costs for DeRay so he turned a blind eye to the homophobia, did not internalize it, and, in some ways, justified the abuse. It reminded me of some sort of fraternity Stockholm syndrome. However, at another point of the interview, DeRay explains that his sexuality was an issue for his prophytes:

So [my sexuality] was always asked [about]. It was asked before I got on line. I don't think it was asked as much when I was on line. I think they were kinda like, let it go. One of my prophytes told me when I was on [line] or shortly thereafter, that one of the reasons why they really wanted me 'cause I like rolled with a lot of pretty girls. They were like why don't you bring your girls over to like these parties. And I did. It wasn't like that big of a deal but I feel like it was one of those...I can imagine that like when they sat around and voted, like a bunch of stuff, there were a bunch of factors that probably were more important to like letting me in and gay was probably like one of the strikes against me. But then there were like all these other things, they had to have been like forget it.

While DeRay presents what some may consider a mild example of anti-gayness in BGLFs above, it is still clearly anti-gay if his sexuality was a strike against him. DeRay believes his sexuality was less of an issue because he was not out and suggests an openly gay man would not be allowed to join his chapter:

I wasn't openly gay. I think it would've been different if I was openly gay in undergrad. So, if I was openly gay in undergrad and went to informationals and stuff like that, I don't think I would've got put on line.

After some time in the interview, DeRay became less defensive about his chapter. I believe speaking about his experiences helped him analyze his encounters with his fraternity's heterosexism:

I guess [being gay] would've been a big deal. It would've been a big deal. It would've been. I shouldn't pretend like it wouldn't be. It would've been a big deal. There were lots of "gay ass" comments. And it's hard being black and gay in the black community, 'cause like if you don't have sex with girls, there is nothing you can do to be manly enough to counteract that.

I asked DeRay what he thought would happen if his chapter brothers found out he was gay while he was on line:

You could not have run me off of [my institution's] campus, but they probably would've dropped me. See, I don't know, cause...okay, so if they had found out before I was on line, they would've tried to drop me. But they would've tried to threaten me and then drop me. But that would've been stupid because I would've been like, "I'm gon' tell. What chu gon' do?" [Laughter] But I would not have wanted to be paper (see p. 11). And I guess at that point, getting your ass beat is no different than the ass whipping I'm already taking. But I'm sure they would've tried to drop me. Or at least there would've been conversations about it.

Farrakhan explained that while his chapter is arguably anti-gay, he believes the culture was starting to shift to a more accepting space for gay men around the time he became a member during Fall 2009. This shift to a more affirming fraternal space is

most likely due to the shift in society as a whole, as it, too, is slowly becoming for accepting for LGBT and gender nonconforming people. For example, there was an increase in the metrosexual man in the late 90s, where behaviors that were previously considered exclusively for women were now acceptable for men (e.g., satchels (or “man-bags”), the man bun and other hairstyles for men with long hair, more public attention to male grooming, feminine attire (e.g., skinny jeans and crop tops), etc.). Politically, we have seen a rise in support for and laws that affirm gay and bisexual people, like the passing of Same-Sex Marriage in 2015. Specifically for black men, they have been challenging problematic notions of black masculinity (e.g., the thug, the athlete, the rapper) even more in recent years. For example, if one does an internet search for the popular hashtags #carefreeblackboy or #blackboyjoy, which were popularized in the last couple years, he would be inundated with countless pictures of black men and boys smiling brightly, adorned with flowers, dancing, showing their softer side, and/or simply being themselves, even if it counteracts detrimental notions of black masculinity. All these examples may highlight why Farrakhan’s chapter culture was starting to shift to a more affirming culture with less attention given to sexuality:

**Williams:** ...Had [your gay chapter brothers] been completely out [before becoming members], do you think it would have been the same outcome?

**Farrakhan:** Like if they had been...no, it would have definitely been bite back with that... Within my chapter there’s little breaks in the chapter where, you know, at our reunion, I get together and I can see how we all...you can clearly see divisions where there are breaks in attitudes and views from just the time periods. And when I came in, I’m like right on that cusp, where the men before me had kind of this conservative view about homosexuality and all that and the men afterwards are more open about being more accepting about it. And so, I think after I had come in and prior to that if that man had been openly

homosexual they would have definitely been like, “Nah, we can’t take him.” or give him hell to where he doesn’t want to [pledge anymore]. And afterwards, the men that came after me and I want to say part of my line and after me, I don’t think that would’ve been a factor at all. It might’ve come up, but just from the things that I’ve seen from them. And even one of them...those older brothers had some type of event on the campus and there was a conversation about it because this brother [who hosted the event] is openly gay now. But when he was in the chapter...that was one of the ones I was telling you about...he’s openly gay now. And he came back to speak, to present, or to do something and I believe he’s HIV positive too, as well. And so some of the older members, senior members were concerned about how that might look on the chapter and should we go and support and all this other shit. And me and my LBs and the guys we had brought in, they’re all like, “What the hell are you talking about? That’s our frat brother, what does that have to do with anything? He’s doing something positive with his experiences and he’s our brother.” So it’s just, yeah, on a large scale, yes, they are [homophobic]. . . I think that’s just something that’s just going on within this chapter, but I won’t even pretend like [the fraternity isn’t homophobic]. Just talking to brothers from other chapters and just hearing the hateful shit when it comes to homosexuality and the homosexual community and everything that’s going on politically with that.

While Farrakhan spoke about homophobia in his chapter, he believes his fraternity should not be blamed solely for the oppressive climate for black gay men. Instead, he believes any all-male organization is homophobic. Said organizations, including BGLFs, encourage hypermasculinity, anti-gayness and heterosexual promiscuity, which makes it difficult for BGGM to navigate those spaces.

**Williams:** You brought up other all-male organizations that you’ve been in, like football. Would you equate the hypermasculinity and anti-homosexuality of black Greek letter fraternities to football or would you say it’s more intensified in the fraternity as opposed to a hockey team or something like that?

**Farrakhan:** I would say anything that black men are gonna be in, have some type of position or status or if we’re the heart of that, at the forefront of that, then hypermasculinity is gonna go along with that.

**Williams:** Hypermasculinity includes anti-homosexuality?

**Farrakhan:** Yeah, because homosexuality isn’t seen as masculine among black men, largely. I should say heterosexual black men. Even gay black men. There

are homosexual black men that I've heard say they feel less manly; they don't feel as manly as a heterosexual man. Not that it bothered me, I don't know, just I didn't get that but I think they were at a stage where they were not happy with themselves.

**Williams:** What does masculinity mean in the context of your fraternity? What does it mean to be a [fraternity] man?

**Farrakhan:** Proud. Be proud, bold. Very sexual when it comes to women. What's the word? Very, very, you know, promiscuous, I should say. You know, just being on the inside it was almost rewarded if you, you know, so and so he got his, he getting his, he getting his, you know and the bros that aren't they...especially if you like overtly saying, "I'm not trying to sleep around"...you know, it's like, "Ah bro, just get some head, just get some head." [Laughter]. . . When it comes to sexual activity. What it means to be masculine, it falls into all of that...all of that falls into masculinity.

Perry echoed Farrakhan's statements about masculinity in the fraternity and the lack thereof as an indicator for homosexuality:

**Williams:** Did you know that these organizations had a reputation of being hypermasculine and pretty much anti-gay, according to research?

**Perry:** According to research. [Chuckle]. Yeah. I mean, yeah, because you go around and you look at the members that's in it, they're portraying one thing. And it's sometimes not always what it seems like. But yeah you, of course, I think you have to be masculine to part of...like you're always on show, so like being Greek is almost like being a celebrity in college and like you know. So you have to try to withhold that or keep that up in a sense. So, yeah. . . When you think about like holding your particular fraternity high, being gay is not something they would consider masculine, so they're hypermasculine fraternities and then they have all these gay guys who have feminine ways and feminine gestures and feminine things, they're not perceiving this fraternity beyond it. Like this is gonna be considered a gay fraternity when it's not even that. Regardless to it being gay members involved, you know, they don't want to be perceived as that. That's not what they're wanting their fraternity to look like, though there are some who have more gay members in it than straight.

...

**Williams:** How often would you say that they exclude someone based on their perceived sexual orientation?

**Perry:** I mean, I wouldn't say a lot but at least half of the time. So you come in, for example, you come in and you acting extremely feminine or where there's just... I don't want to use the term "clocking you", but they're just like really knowing off top that you're gay, it's like how can he even go...if he's coming here and letting us see that he's gay like this, we for sure know he'll go outside these walls getting perceived that [way]. He'll show that same kind of behavior or mannerisms that we're not really looking for to uplift our fraternity or hold our fraternity at that esteem. So, yeah, I believe like at least half the time, depending on how they're coming in.

Every interview mentioned sexual conquests as part of the brotherhood and, ultimately, something that marginalizes gay members or prohibits others from attaining membership. In a homophobic society, it is understood that men have sex with women. Accordingly, a man having sex with women is an indicator of manhood and heterosexuality. In this fraternity's context, one that is notably hypermasculine and focused on "developing" men, it is not surprising that many of the conversations focused on heterosexual sexual prowess. If being a man means having sex with women and one is in a hypermasculine environment that is supposed to produce the best men, of course, there is going to be even more focus on having sex. From personal experiences, and the experiences of my participants, like Martin, these conversations were more frequent in the fraternity context, where the conversations were ever-present, than in non-fraternal contexts. Martin, who was never a victim of direct, homophobic comments in his chapter, spoke about his experiences within his chapter and their focus on sex. He also highlights that alone is indicative of the anti-gay nature of BGLFs, specifically noting that a gay man would disrupt the established culture:

**Williams:** So you mentioned there was a lack of anti-gay comments, however, an openly gay guy definitely wouldn't get into your chapter.

**Martin:** I don't think so.

**Williams:** So, was the rule just understood?

**Martin:** I think it was understood.

**Williams:** And from where did this understanding come...?

**Martin:** I don't know because it was just like in, when you went around the frat, it was always [Laughter], oh lord. It was back in the day like they was always talking about...can I talk vulgarly?

**Williams:** Yeah.

**Martin:** Okay. It was always talk about getting pussy and this girl here and this girl there and you know, getting the puss and all this kind of stuff.

**Williams:** [Laughter].

**Martin:** I mean that's how the conversations went. So it was just always like okay, this is what this is about. [Laughter].

...

**Martin:** I mean I didn't get involved in no conversations about pussy and going to get girls, stuff like that or whatever 'cause and well, they called me the good boy in the frat. Cause I was in the gospel choir and I, you know, was the president of that or whatever and I went to bible study and stuff like that. So they called me the good boy and so I think they respected that. I mean they talked about it around me but they never like made me be a part of the conversation.

**Williams:** So in some regard you were able to use your religious identity to navigate those hypermasculine contexts that were probably like juxtapose to your own sexual orientation?

**Martin:** I think I used it unintentionally. I don't think that's something I did on purpose. I just think because that's what they affiliated me with, that's how they, you know, treated me. They respected that in me. You know?

...

**Martin:** I just think it was the culture of the chapter. It was like we bros, you know, bros before hoes and all this kind of stuff. But then it was always talk

about girls, all about women and all that kind of stuff. And I think anybody who came in who was openly gay and bucked that system would have upset the culture of the chapter.

During the interviews, most participants tried to avoid responses that may indicate hazing occurred during their pledging process. This is due to the secretive nature of the pledging process and the illegality of hazing by both law and the fraternity. Accordingly, while the participants knew the interview was confidential, most of them refrained from pledging stories that outright highlighted hazing in an effort to protect their fraternity and, perhaps, themselves. However, Harvey provided some examples of homophobia in that realm, too:

**Harvey:** One time. One time. I know to become [a real member as opposed to paper] (see p. 11), you have to [do this specific fraternity ritual] and they make us strip down to our underwear and one of the frat brothers, he was like, “Uh ain’t nobody gay in here, but well, I take that back, but we ain’t looking at y’all.” Or “ain’t nobody gon’ be looking at y’all.” So, I don’t know who he was trying to refer to, so I know I kinda felt uncomfortable in that situation.

...

**Harvey:** Actually another instance, while pledging some of the old heads (long-term members of the fraternity) they were just...they tried to corner me, saying that they went on my Facebook and they saw me hanging out with all these girls and asking me was they my girlfriends, then why I didn’t have a girlfriend and this, this, and that. Just basically trying to corner me and make me tell ‘em that I was gay.

Of course, Harvey could not be honest with the “old heads” about his sexual orientation because that would be grounds for exclusion in his chapter, too:

**Williams:** How often does your chapter exclude someone from being a member based on their perceived sexuality?

**Harvey:** All the time.

**Williams:** All the time. Why?

**Harvey:** . . .I've seen guys come before me, that was gay and they didn't get picked. I'm assuming. I don't know what they reasons were but I'm assuming that could've been an issue, their sexuality.

**Williams:** Why wouldn't your chapter want somebody who's perceived to be gay?

**Harvey:** Because our chapter. . . is really known for like being tough, being like in charge, so I'm guessing they're assuming a gay male would not be able to demonstrate that look for the chapter.

**Williams:** What's the look?

**Harvey:** Very strong. Masculine. Being able to stand your own. Being able to go out to a party and someone come and try to charge you up and you know what you supposed tell them either "I don't take charges" or you gone accept your charge and go about your business.

Though all of the examples above highlight the homophobic nature of BGLFs, the fraternity chapters have been incredibly rewarding for the members, too. One does wonder, however, how much more beneficial these fraternity chapters could have been for the participants, had the chapters been more affirming. Also, some, like DeRay, may suggest that these organizations are not anti-gay if these men were allowed to pledge. However, and perhaps this is fallacious, but that would be like suggesting that sexism does not exist in a workplace because women are allowed to work there. As such, the presence of oppressed members does not ensure the space is safe or that oppressed groups are protected from violence in those spaces.

### **"You Can Be Gay, but Not *Too Gay*"**

This finding may appear to contradict the previous finding. How can BGLFs be

This finding may appear to contradict the previous finding. How can BGLFs be anti-gay if they actually accept gay members? The difficulty in such a question is that gender-performance is closely tied to how much of society views one's sexuality. One could see a lady with a short haircut, a stiff walk, wearing men's clothing, and assume she is a lesbian because he has been socially constructed to think that those are some characteristics of a lesbian. Of course, it is completely problematic; nevertheless, many people subscribe to those notions.

While the participants highlighted clearly anti-gay sentiments in their chapters, a lot of the conversations centered masculinity as a crucial measure for manhood. According to what I derived from the interviews, a gay, masculine man who is not out may not face any problems, regarding his sexuality or gender performance, when seeking membership. In addition to masculinity being a saving grace for gay men who want to join a BGLF, members suggested that you can be gay (i.e., feminine, even though those should not be considered synonymous), but, in what seems like some sort of obtuse cost benefit analysis, you must have enough benefit to the chapter for them to overlook your sexuality or lack of masculinity.

### ***Masculinity is the Ultimate Criterion***

I had a conversation with each participant about manhood, which a focus of their fraternity, and masculinity and their answers reveal that it may be less about sexual orientation and more about protecting the masculine image of the fraternity:

**Williams:** . . . So I'd like to know what does masculinity . . . mean in the context of your fraternity? What does it mean to be a man? . . .

**Martin:** . . . I think masculinity, there's stereotypes associated with it. There are social contexts in which the term masculinity, in which people interpret it. I think it means being a manly man. It means not being effeminate. It means...I think those are the actually, the two biggest things. Not being effeminate. Being quote-unquote a manly man. Not necessarily meaning that like you're into sports or anything but there is a...speak with bass in your voice. You don't walk with...you walk like a man, like you don't walk with a switch. Or you [hold] yourself like a man...I don't really know what adjectives to use to describe it but [Laughter] just, you know, being one of the boys, so to speak.

**Williams:** Do you think that that definition of masculinity is different in different fraternity contexts? Like say different for Alpha than it is for Omega than it is for Sigma than it is for Kappa?

**Martin:** I don't think it's necessarily different. I think that some fraternities are a little bit more rough around the edges so to speak. [Chuckle] I think, of course, Kappas are known for being pretty boys. Alphas have the stereotype of being intelligent, carry themselves really well. Sigmas country. And Omegas like rough, rough necks. So those are the stereotypes that are associated with those but I think within each organization it's about the same.

**Williams:** Okay.

**Martin:** Yeah.

**Williams:** So the way you define masculinity for your fraternity context dealt with not being effeminate, being a manly man, etc. So I could argue that one could be gay and still have all those attributes, be a manly man, not be effeminate, etc.

**Martin:** I agree.

**Williams:** Okay. So would an openly gay person who was hypermasculine be allowed to enter your fraternity?

**Martin:** [Sigh]. I would hope so. But I don't know.

**Williams:** Okay.

**Martin:** If he was out, I don't know. [I'll] give you [a] prime example. I went to one of our regional conventions maybe two years ago and the president of one of the graduate chapters asked a general president was he wrong for not wanting an openly gay man to be a part of the organization. And this person [the gay aspirant], his credentials were like phenomenal. His pedigree was just off the

charts and because he was openly gay, the president [of that chapter] didn't want him to be a part of the organization. And one of the things that the president said, what the general president said was the fact that you know, if this man can bring something to our fraternity, if this man can help our fraternity move forward why would you not want him to be a part of the organization? He also stated that there're probably brothers in the organization that are gay that you talk to everyday but you just don't know. So as far as the overall direction of leadership of the general body of the organization, I believe it's accepted but within the individual chapters I think it depends on the culture of that chapter.

Martin's quote above also highlights that one can be gay in the fraternity, but he should have enough beneficial qualities to make up for his misaligned sexuality, which is discussed in the section below.

For some members, it is not just about increasing masculinity; it is about removing behaviors they were accustomed to doing. Harvey spoke about his challenges to reduce what he called "female tendencies" while around his fraternity brothers, and it appears he is still working to limit said tendencies today:

**Williams:** So, you mentioned throwing away. . .female tendencies, what are some of those female tendencies?

**Harvey:** I know one that I have, I talk with my hands and I know that's really a female tendency. I gotta stop throwing my hands around a bit. That and putting some bass in my voice. I don't know if it's just me, but I've always talked really soft. And what else do I have? I might twist when I walk, I don't know.

**Williams:** Okay. So having a more masculine sounding voice, walk, and less hand gestures...

**Harvey:** Right.

**Williams:**...are more masculine behaviors?

**Harvey:** Right.

**Williams:** And you felt pressured to correct those things?

**Harvey:** Right.

**Williams:** So what's the difference? So, if you...what do you gain by doing those things?

**Harvey:** I gained nothing.

**Williams:** You gained nothing?

**Harvey:** Not one thing.

The end of that quote above caused me to have a lot of empathy for Harvey. To see someone work so hard to change something about themselves, but fail to see any benefit from that acceptance is sad, even though he was seemingly unbothered by it. I tried to understand why he would force himself to change with no readily identifiable benefits of doing so:

**Williams:** So why did you do it?

**Harvey:** To try to fit in basically.

**Williams:** Try and fit in?

**Harvey:** Mmm hmm.

**Williams:** Okay.

**Harvey:** To try and throw away those aspects of people saying, oh he's gay because he hang with a lot of females. And look at him, he's talking with his hands or he's twisting or he's moving his neck a certain way. So we know that he's gay because he does all of that.

**Williams:** You said people would say that, does that include your chapter members?

**Harvey:** Yeah. Definitely. They always said that but they never like outright said it, but I believe it was always a question. Because I know that they would make certain comments. Don't ask what them comments were because I can't really remember. . .

Like Harvey, Perry internalized the pressure to act more masculine. Although, it is difficult to decipher if the participants were covertly or overtly summoned to act more masculine or if it is something they took on because of other experiences or what they understood the fraternity to represent:

**Perry:** ...So, we're kind of accepted closetly but like outwardly we'd have to act a certain way, which is understood. It's almost like an unspoken rule or something.

**Williams:** Okay. Would you say that the hypermasculine and the anti-gay like surface is just a front?

**Perry:** I would believe so. Yeah.

**Williams:** So, why would you say that the organization puts on that front?

**Perry:** Just because they don't want to be perceived as bringing anything that anyone could consider shame to the organization. And this is not something that's accepted or wasn't accepted at this time. Mind you these fraternities been around a hundred plus years. So at the beginning, the foundation, this is not the norm that we can see today. So I feel like it's changing, but it's still not, you know, not considered the norm for these older brothers who are involved.

...

**Perry:** I didn't feel like I was shamed. I understood the part about displaying [manliness] or I understood the part about, you know, acting a certain kind of way when you're in the midst of, I don't want to say outsiders, but people that's not involved. You know, you don't just go out and you're just looking any kind of way. Like, you're not just bouncing around or just acting unmanly.

...

**Williams:** ...the literature always says that these Black Greek Letter Fraternities are anti-gay or homophobic, but according to what you're saying, they're not necessarily anti-gay, they're anti-feminine.

**Perry:** Right. I believe that to be the case. They're probably anti-feminine where it's not perceived. It's all about perception within, well within all fraternities to me. Cause if you're perceived one way then you're making that whole fraternity look like that same way. But if you're not perceived in that

light, then you can be just as gay as you wanna be behind closed doors. But when you're out. . . on the yard or out doing something, those things is where it counts, you know. So we're perceived versus what happens when the doors close. . .So behind closed doors, of course they would accept you and show you love but you still know that you have to act this particular way. So I believe these fraternities pretty much support being a man regardless of what your sexual preference is. It's like okay, you know what, being masculine is considered being a man. Not being feminine regardless to what you like to do, so you carry those traits, we're gonna accept you any way it goes. So, it's just a thin line. Sometimes it can get crossed but majority of the time, I feel it's that way.

### *Make Up for Your Gayness*

While gay members are able to join these organizations, there is some intracultural oppression that occurs regarding their sexuality. When they are perceived to be gay they must have enough to offer the chapter for chapter members to overlook the aspirant's perceived sexuality, which brought up childhood memories for me. I remember my mom telling me, "You have to be twice as good to get half of what [white people] have", in effort to get me to recognize that racism and white privilege exist and I have to overcome it to get what I want. I also recall growing up in black churches. I remember having a gay worship leader at one of my churches, a gay piano player at another, and a gay choir director at another church. This was interesting because I heard an uncountable amount of sermons in these same churches that demonized gay people and said they were hell-bound. I wondered why they would have that viewpoint, but have a gay choir director, a gay pianist, or gay songster. It baffled me. However, while these men were gay they had a certain skill the church could use for its own personal gain, so their sexuality was overlooked. The experiences of my participants reminded me of these childhood memories. Because my participants are gay, they had to work "twice" as hard

to gain membership to counteract their sexuality, and their sexuality was demonized, but overlooked because the chapter needed something from them.

For some of the participants, their abundant campus involvement was key. Black Greek Letter Organizations are in competition with each other on college campuses to have the best members possible because that, in turn, makes them stand out as the best organization on that campus. Accordingly, most of the participants were able to circumvent drama about their sexuality because they were involved on campus, well connected, and well-liked by peers, which would benefit the chapter when they joined:

**Martin:** I was very well integrated [into the University setting]. I was actually...at the time, I was a president of one organization and I was involved in two other organizations. I worked on campus for the President of the University, I was a President student worker, so I was connected to his cabinet. I knew a lot of the administrators and faculty just because of the role I had as a student worker for the President. And because of my involvement in different organizations, I was pretty connected and well known on campus.

**Williams:** Could you talk about those organizations? What type of organizations were they?

**Martin:** One organization was the Gospel Choir. I was the President and Director of the Gospel Choir. I was also what was called [an Ambassador], which was basically I worked in the Admissions Office for the admissions and recruitment team. I helped with recruitment to the University, gave campus tours and things like that. And the other organization was, oh lord, what was the other one? It's been so long, I can't remember. Oh, I was [on the Debate Team].

**Williams:** Okay.

**Martin:** So, I was a communications major as an undergrad and so I did a lot of work with the University television station and mass media.

Martin reveals that his line brother, who is also gay, was able to join because he was a stellar guy, despite his feminine mannerisms:

**Martin:** ...to be quite honest my line brother, he's pretty feminine. And but, the boy's freaking smart and he had his stuff together. He has a great reputation on campus and I think at the time, the chapter really needed people like me and really needed people like him.

Like Martin, DeRay was very involved at his institution and even received an honor for it. He was also a college athlete, too, which attributed to his popularity on campus.

Harvey was popular at his university as well and attributed that popularity as a factor to undercut his chapter's heterosexism:

**Harvey:** I feel as though, if I was not [Harvey], yes [I may not have gotten in]. Because a lot of gay males have tried to join in my chapter but, they were more on the flamboyant side, so me being me and knowing a lot of people and cool, I guess cool, quote unquote, got me in.

**Williams:** What does cool mean?

**Harvey:** Popular. Well known. Just a good stand up guy. Being able to hold my own.

**Williams:** Popular. Well known. So, if you have like certain positive attributes about yourself, they're willing to overlook the sexuality part?

**Harvey:** Right.

Sometimes, however, it is not necessarily what the aspirants have done or who they are that can benefit the chapter, sometimes the chapter just simply needs numbers. Chapters cannot exist without members and they will sometimes accept pledges whom they might otherwise reject in order for the chapter to thrive. For example, Perry's chapter needed members because they were trying to reinstate the chapter at his school. Knowing this, Perry transferred to that school, so he would be able to join his organization:

**Perry:** Yeah. I actually went to that school for that purpose, so that was the only way that I could kind of get in at the time. So I attended a semester there at

that school. On that line there was like 28 other brothers coming to bring the chapter back to that school.

**Williams:** Okay.

**Martin:** So that's how I was able to get on. . . They were just reopening the chapter there. Yeah.

DeRay's line brother did not attend the same school as him, but they were both aspirants for chapters that needed members:

**DeRay:** ...Because of like the context of like when we crossed and there were like no bros on the yard. I was the only guy on line at [my institution] and there was only one guy at [a local institution]. And I know this to be true, 'cause like they talked about it. They needed me. Just like they needed my line brother, too. But like I had good relationships with the University. Like I was in charge of organizations. So it would've been a bad look, for [them] not to have crossed me.

Not unlike the scenario with the black church and the choir director, the chapters used participants for what they could bring to the chapter. It is unfortunate their sexuality and/or gender-performance were counted as a strike against them or something that was overlooked because the chapter profited from their membership. One could argue that no chapter wants subpar members, so, of course, my participants had to be exceptional men. While that may be true, my participants had to even more exceptional to make up for their sexuality and that is unfair and a disservice to them.

### **Underground Gay Culture- A Solace for BGGM**

The participants dealt with implicit and explicit homophobia before, during, and after their pledging experiences. Clearly, however, gay men are sometimes able to infiltrate these organizations by the means above. While it is difficult to navigate an

oppressive environment, the participants were able to find comfort in the other gay members who defied odds and joined these anti-gay organizations.

All historically BGLFs have members who are non-heterosexual. It is not a secret. In fact, there is an underground gay community within these BGLFs where gay members fraternize amongst themselves. For example, at national conventions, gay members have secret socials, where they go out and party and meet other gay fraternity brothers. They do everything their straight fraternity brothers do, but, unlike those events, the gay events are not publically publicized. You have to be in the know to find out where the events are. Details about these events are passed through word of mouth, text messages, phone apps, or whatever means is considered safe and discreet.

I do not believe this is unlike what many marginalized group does when surrounded by a dominant group. Gay communities in any major city have an area of town or establishments they frequent that is a safe space for them. It is not surprising when gay or black or women coworkers hang out together because most people understand the importance of community and bonding with people who understand your plight. I have always felt a sense of comfort when there was another black person present in predominantly white spaces. It let me know I was not the only one encountering my experiences in that space and, most of time, I tried to build a relationship with other black people or non-black people of color to create my own solace.

Unfortunately, the underground gay fraternity culture, is not necessarily a solace from which all BGGM can benefit, as it requires you to be out, in some regard, even if it

is just to your fraternity brothers. Because not all BGGM are out, they must deal with the oppressive nature of BGLFs privately, without being able to express the anguish of navigating a homophobic environment. The presence of allies may alleviate some of the effects of being a closeted BGGM in the homophobic fraternal context, though. For example, Farrakhan used his privilege as a heterosexual-appearing man to stand up for gay men who were negatively discussed by his chapter brothers:

**Farrakhan:** When I hear it. Yeah, when I hear the homophobia, I do it in a tasteful way. Well, it might not be tasteful, but I just let em know like, I tell em straight up, you know, “Extreme homophobia is a telltale sign of homosexuality, dude. Are you battling with something? Why are you so obsessed with who this man is sleeping with? Are you trying to take the attention away from you? Are you projecting what you’re feeling on him? Or is he sleeping with somebody that you sleeping with and you mad about it? Like, what is your agenda? Why are you so obsessed? That has nothing to do with you and your life chances and you moving forward.”

While this is may be a subtle way for Farrakhan to challenge his chapter’s heterosexism, his advocacy is beneficial to both closeted and out BGGM and gay aspirants.

My participants were able to find comfort in their non-heterosexual brothers after they became members. In addition to the underground gay culture being a benefit to members, it can also be extended to an aspirant before he gets on line, as gay fraternity members will help them surpass the fraternity’s gay prescreening, so to speak:

**Williams:** But how does someone, you said this is a very homophobic culture, so how does someone who is perceived to be gay become a member?

**Farrakhan:** Well there’s...like I said a lot of those same men, well I won’t say those same men, but there’s some of those same men that are overtly homophobic and some of the ones that are homosexual that are not homophobic, you know, they recruit these [gay] guys.

...

**Perry:** ...And then the other gays get in, that allow other gays to get in, that allow other gays to get in, and it just builds on that. So it's just like oh, you're gay, you know, we're gay let's [get our other gay friend in]...oh, then our friend is in, [and] I want my [gay] friend to be a part of [my fraternity, too]. I want my friend, you know, so that birds of a feather kind of mentality kind of unravels in a different [way], you know...

This is a process for some BGGM to build an even greater gay community within the frat for themselves and aspirants. Helping others bypass some of the homophobic hurdles to becoming a member of this fraternity may seem pretty innocent from the above examples. However, Farrakhan suggests that sometimes gay fraternity brothers help other gay men join the organization for their own, personal benefit (e.g., sexual exploitation):

**Williams:** But from what you just said, it seems like you're saying, in your chapter, it's slowly becoming more progressive toward anti-homosexuality. You don't think that's the same in the fraternity at large?

**Farrakhan:** Within my fraternity? Or fraternities at large?

**Williams:** You can speak on both.

**Farrakhan:** It's the same across the board. I'm not gon' even discriminate. Yeah, that's happening because a lot of more homosexual members are joining the organization and administratively, I don't want to say that [Laughter]. On an administration level of the fraternity, you know, those men, and there's a lot of down low men in those positions, and I think they kind of use that to their advantage. They're accepting them, but I don't know whether it's...you know, I don't know if it's them being accepting...because a lot of those same men letting them in the frat are outwardly condemning homosexuality and gay marriage and all that stuff, but at the same time, they know that the men in the fraternity are gay or bisexual and they might be actively engaging in sexual activity with them, but at the same time condemning them, you know, gay people in the frat. . . Just being in the frat and [me] being, you know, largely perceived as heterosexual and, at the same time, engaging in homosexual activity, getting to see both sides. You see that the gay brothers really going at it and then the heterosexual brothers doing the same thang, just different realms. . . Everybody is tryna sleep with everybody. Everybody's tryna get connected with other frats or other brothers, you know. Everybody! Well, I won't say everybody. That's

wrong. Not everybody, but there's a, from what I felt, a strong presence [of gay men] within the frat. You go to conventions, it's like ohhhh, who, you...it's too much! But you know, you go to conventions, you just see people. . .I would like to walk five minutes without [a gay frat brother] making ten minutes of eye contact with me.

**Williams:** Yeah.

**Farrakhan:** [Laughter]

It would be a disservice to the participants and other BGGM to highlight the sexual aspect of underground gay culture and not discuss the more prevalent, platonic nature of said culture. For example, having another gay member in the chapter allowed participants to better cope with oppression and provided them with a cornerstone:

**Martin:** ...And to be quite honest with you, I have a line brother who's gay and we were roommates and so, we actually became each other's confidants and so I was able to talk to him about a lot of stuff that I was going through, a lot of things that I was feeling...

**Williams:** Yeah.

**Williams:** How did you know your line brother was a safe person to come out to or vice versa I guess?

**Martin:** [Laughter]. You know what, it just happened one day. It just happened one day. There was this guy that I liked and he was uber masculine and we were spending a lot of time together. We ended up dating for a little bit. But anyway, I think my line brother just kind of put two and two together, cause you know, you know, when you know, you know. You know there's kind of like, I don't know, he just put two and two together and he just asked me one day. And we had been drinking a little bit and so I didn't care at that point. So, I told him. And he told me, actually. Yeah, and then he told me about himself and we just talked and it was just, it was good from there. And we're still like probably, he's the closest, my closest line brother that I have, although he lives in [another country] now.

...

**Perry:** It's just the bond you build with somebody. So for example my LB, I didn't know that he was initially gay, you know through the process. But we

bonded, we talked, you know, it was certain things that I thought may have been gay but I never wanted to question him and be like, “Are you gay?” ‘Cause I don’t want offend him. . . and break all that we built. As time gradually went on, he felt comfortable to tell me. He’d make a comment and then if I responded correctly, then he probably felt like oh I can trust him with this information and which he did and then he did. And I accepted whatever he was gon’ say.

While it is nice to know that there are allies who use their privilege to alleviate homophobia in BGLFs; BGGM find comfort, unity, and a place to commiserate; and some gay potential members are able to circumvent the gay prescreening through nepotism, that is not enough, if BGLFs want to provide an affirming space for BGGM. The fact that a gay culture must be kept underground, in order to protect themselves (i.e. BBGM) and/or save face for the fraternity, is an injustice to BGGM. Such a practice only further marginalizes BBGM and perpetuates cis-hetero-patriarchy.

### **BGGM Identify as Black Before Gay**

One may wonder why, if these organizations are so oppressive, did Farrakhan, DeRay, Martin, Harvey, and Perry pursue and remain in them. BGLFs have a long, rich history in the black community, especially in the educated, black community. BGLFs’ philanthropy, legacy, popularity, networking, development of members, and other attributes are alluring to many non-members. To no surprise, my participants wanted to be involved in these organizations, even if that meant dealing with homophobia. While heteropatriarchy is intensified in these fraternal contexts, my participants have to face homophobia from the black community and society all the time. If they limited themselves to only affirming places, their livelihood would be limited, too, as cis-hetero-patriarchy is ever-present.

On the other hand, it is a trying time to be black in America. Arguably, the idea that black gay men identify as black before they identify with their sexual orientation is predictable, given the racial climate in America. While homophobia and heterosexism still plague America, society is becoming increasingly more accepting to the LGBT community, while regressing toward anti-blackness. Since 2000, there have been at least 20 murders of black people (e.g., Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Mike Brown, Freddie Gray, Sean Bell, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and too many more) at the hands of law enforcement and the killers were never charged or were acquitted. We witnessed racism rear its ugly head all over media for over eight years, as Barack Obama pursued and inhabited the White House. It is a society where police treated Dylann Roof, the 23-year-old white supremacist who fatally shot nine black members of a Charleston, S.C., Bible study class, to Burger King while he was detained. Furthermore, systemic racism is evident in our criminal justice systems, our educational systems, wealth gaps, surveillance, etc. With so much anti-blackness in the news every day, my participants are confronted with their racial identity constantly. BGLFs were founded to confront such anti-blackness, instill a sense of black pride, create an intracultural bond, and to uplift the black community, and the effects are still present today. Accordingly, my participants who wholly identify as black wanted to join in, continue, and benefit from that legacy.

The participants feel that dealing with racism on campus and in society is more difficult than dealing with heterosexism in the black community or general society. My participants were all raised around black people and are accustomed to negotiating

predominantly black spaces, so the fraternal context is not an entirely new experience regarding heteropatriarchy. Dealing with racism is an ongoing battle for my participants, so they would rather risk combating homophobia in predominantly black spaces, like fraternities, than constant subjection to racism (and homophobia) in predominantly white or other spaces:

**DeRay:** ...Being gay is like this other thing. Like to add that on top of being black. I know that it is different and I don't think that it should matter. So by that I mean, I guess I mean a couple of things, one it's not one of my like primary identifiers, like if I have to write down who I am, gay is up there, but it's not like something that I access as readily as like black and male. Black and male mean something, like right now, all the time. Gay does too, but it's like third. . . I wouldn't say that I don't readily identify with [gay people], I just think that issues facing black men are more important, if that makes any kind of sense. . . I can check that [gay] part of my identity at the door because I don't ask people to deal with that versus you have no choice, but to deal with me as a black male. . . I mean I think like when it comes up like politically and stuff like that, I mean I don't hesitate to like acknowledge those things in a professional setting. But they're not like...they don't become...maybe because they are more taboo and they make people uncomfortable, they don't come up as much versus race is always present, because we deal, because we can't get rid of, because we can't negotiate our way out of color existing.

. . .

**Williams:** Do you think that it's more difficult to be a black man in the gay community or a gay man in the black community?

**DeRay:** More difficulty to be a black man in a gay community or a gay man in a black community? Both are hard. Yes, both are very hard, I think regardless of how you choose to think about it. Do I need to explain why?

**Williams:** Please.

**DeRay:** Okay. . .Um, I think that both are hard because...when you say the gay community, I'm assuming...when you say the gay community, I think of like a predominantly white community and in that space, I think the way that blackness is sexualized and objectified and the way that white people in general interact with black people makes that complicated. Like racism knows no sexuality, so white men being racist, white gay men being racist or whomever. Both being

gay doesn't help to equalize that. I guess it kind of adds a level of insult to injury. As if there isn't enough facing us as like a gay community. And I think the gay community has so many other things going on within it from my perspective, like just like there are lots of ways to be black, there are lots of ways to be gay. And as people negotiate that and I mean, it's just, then you add black on top of it and it just becomes a lot. I think because it is a lot, I choose not to spend very much time and energy in the gay community 'cause I don't need to expend more energy feeling discriminated against or angry, especially if I'm not all that interested in what I feel that community has to offer me as an individual. . . . At least with black people, for the most part, I know where I stand with black people. Like I know, and like, if I had to think about the circle of like hypersexual, hypermasculine black men that I know, if I'm being myself, if I was to be like "And I'm gay", I probably wouldn't be... I would just feel uncomfortable, but I wouldn't be rejected in that group. Versus I feel like among gay men, if something racial happened like... I guess I just don't trust white people. I don't trust white people, so I wouldn't really want to be with them. And if I had to choose, Imma choose like the ignorance that I know and that I feel like I can better negotiate and that would be black people.

...

**DeRay:** I feel like a huge sense of pride when I think about being black. And I also have a lot of criticisms about my brothers and sisters who I feel like make it difficult. But on the whole, I'm proud to be black and I wouldn't not want to be black. But it must be real easy to be white cause you ain't gotta think about none of that stuff.

Like DeRay, Martin and Farrakhan attribute a more salient racial identity to it being the first thing people see; you cannot hide your blackness while navigating society:

**Martin:** Because I think [my black identity] that's the identity that I came in contact with first. The one that I am probably more intimate with. The one that I may have to defend the most. The one that that's the first thing people see when they see me. They see I'm black. So, that's the one that I've cultivated more. That's the one that I have, you know, I've taken courses on Africana Studies. I've taken courses in diversity and things of that nature. So, and the courses and things that I've taken, as it relates to diversity, more so have to do with race than anything else. So, I've become a little bit more intimate with that aspect of my life than the other.

...

**Farrakhan:** I don't know. I always feel I'm a black man first because people see me, you know, when you look at somebody you don't see a gay man. You see a black man. You can stereotype and say ah that guy's gay, but you're going based off perception. When you look at me, I'm visually a black man and along with that comes a lot of preconceived notions, stereotypes, stigmas, everything. You can readily identify a black person on the street. I can be a flamboyant black man that's heterosexual and I might be identified as a gay man.

It was important for my participants to be connected to an organization that affirmed their black maleness because that is their most salient identity when compared to sexuality. In return for their connections with their fraternity, Farrakhan, DeRay, Martin, Harvey, and Perry were able to be in a space that affirmed their racially identity and helped them cultivate a sense of pride surrounding that identity, during a time when anti-blackness is prominent. The participants spoke about the benefits of being in these organizations, as it relates to connecting to their history, philanthropy, and a sense of black pride:

**DeRay:** Like we're [one of the oldest black fraternities] in the nation, like we have had members who have made these huge contributions to the world, to like the nation and I think it would be something weird if we didn't talk about [this prominent fraternity brother] and you know. There would be something wrong with that. And we did. We had to know facts and stuff like that, that were like about black members in our organization. Yeah. I didn't need that but there was definitely an element of cultivating pride and who we were as a part of process and afterwards. I mean the stuff that...there was acknowledgement that maybe most of the things that we did were going to impact the black community and there was encouragement from the older brothers...

...

**Martin:** ...I think they made me feel that because I'm a black man, I'm going to have a few more struggles but I can overcome them. That they have my back. They made me feel like as a black man, you have to work harder than your white counterparts to get to the same level, just because of some of the struggles that you have, and helping us, helping me get there through mentorship, through programs and things of that nature. And in turn putting it on me to help other

black men do the same thing that they did for me. So, it was all about community building and looking out for the greater good. I think. In my experience.

...

**Farrakhan:** ...I'm actually a lot more proud because of them. It's actually why, I like to think of myself as a little more conscious now than what I was before I came in and that was largely due to some programs I had visited among, that the brothers had done and it kind of opened my eyes to the realities of the world and our history and all that.

...

**Williams:** How did your fraternity brothers make you feel about being black?

**Harvey:** I know, for one instance, we all have to read...we have to bring back different quotes from [prominent fraternity member], so we really respected [prominent fraternity member] for being a black male, being black period. Black history, like looked at black people very strong, very strong minded people. . Just making us read up on black history. Making us being aware of what our founders did, all of them being black and being a part of making history.

...

**Perry:** ...I mean pledging a black fraternity it's already understood that we are strong black men who are trying to achieve, you know, something greater. So it wasn't like we're just...it was like almost unspoken as well, like you just see within them how majority of your members are black. Not saying all of them but majority of the fraternity members are black, so of course they're gonna make sure that they represent you in a, you know, in a positive light. They're gonna instill those positive encouragement, give you that networking base that you need to get to travel and find different jobs, like just all that... It just was like, just being proud of who you are and try to be the best person that you can possibly be and that's the best way they probably instilled that.

The participants reference some of the benefits of being a part of their fraternity. In their experiences, it is better to be a black gay man in a homophobic fraternity, than a black gay man in greater society, the gay community, and no connection to the black fraternity at all. The participants spoke with pride about the benefits of their organization, which is

understandable; however, the costs associated with navigating the hostile environment as a BGGM went uncovered. All in all, the participants would do it again.

### **Chapter Summary**

There is significant evidence to highlight the purported anti-gay, homophobic culture of BGLFs. The participants were constantly subjected to anti-gay comments, made to feel like their sexuality is something of which to be ashamed or conceal, questioned about their sexuality, forced to work harder to be accepted or become members, and, in some cases, put in hostile environments because of their sexuality. Though these situations were troubling, they were able to find comfort and belonging in other BGGM. For them, the benefits of navigating their fraternity was worth dealing with the heteropatriarchy.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **INTERPRETATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

The previous chapter outlined findings related to the experiences of Farrakhan, DeRay, Martin, Harvey, and Perry, five black gay men who are or were members of the same historically black Greek letter fraternity (BGLF). This chapter presents a summary and discussion of findings, implications for the practice, future research, and recommendations. Additionally, limits to the study will be identified. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs with hopes that findings will progress BGLFs to a culture of empathy and acceptance by highlighting the significance anti-homosexuality plays in BGGM's experiences within BGLFs. This study was explored through the lens of Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory, which allowed me to question and understand the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality and examine society and culture with regards to the intersection of race and power, in which BGLFs operate. The following two research questions guided this study: 1) What are the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs? and 2) How do BGGM understand their sexual and racial identity within their respective BGLF?

#### **Findings**

##### **Research Question One**

What are the experiences of BGGM in BGLFs?

Overall, Farrakhan's, DeRay's, Martin's, Harvey's, and Perry's experiences within their fraternity were favorable, according to them. They developed a (deeper) sense of black pride through their fraternity chapters' pledging processes and campus

events. Additionally, the participants were able to develop a brotherhood on campus that helped them matriculate. Today, the participants still benefit from the fraternity in the form of life-long friendships, professional networking, self-pride and self-confidence, and, most likely, in other ways that were not uncovered in the interviews.

While the benefits of the fraternity seemingly outweigh the costs, Farrakhan, DeRay, Martin, Harvey, and Perry still faced homophobia and heterosexism as part of their fraternal experiences. They were marginalized in their fraternity and not allowed the same freedom to express their whole, true selves like their heterosexual fraternity brothers. Additionally, they were often victimized by verbal violence regarding their sexuality, even if indirectly. Lastly, they were implicitly or explicitly informed they were selected, despite their sexuality, because they were beneficial to the chapter.

When discussing the anti-gay culture of the respective chapters, issues of homophobia appear traumatic. However, when the participants discuss their fraternal experiences holistically, they tend to overlook their fraternity's homophobia, and also express they would do it all over again. While it could be argued that it is simply a situation in which the benefits of membership outweighed the costs of navigating the space, it seems to be different here. Remember DeRay, for example, who adamantly rejected the notion that his chapter was homophobic, until he recalled specific events that revealed to him his chapter was, indeed, homophobic. Until that moment, he suppressed his experiences with anti-homosexuality in his chapter.

As a result of the interviews, I propose three reasons the participants ignored, forgave, or overlooked the heterosexism in their respective chapters. First, participants

minimized their experiences with heterosexism in their chapters because they deal with heterosexism all the time outside of the fraternal context. For them, heterosexism is the norm of navigating *any* space, including predominantly black spaces like BGLFs. Accordingly, although portentous, homophobic experiences in the fraternity are not entirely unlike what they face in their day-to-day lives. Subsequently, they are more forgiving when it happens in the fraternal context from which they have gained so much.

Next, the participants are able to forgive the heterosexism in their fraternities for two other reasons: 1) they were accepted and affirmed (aside from their sexuality) and 2) there were other gay members present. The first is a bit more difficult to discuss. When it surfaced, I likened it to my experiences with sizeism in my friend group. All of my friends, with almost no exceptions, are “attractive” and “normal”-sized. Occasionally, they say sizeist things (e.g., “I ate too much; I’m so fat!” or “Ooo! Look at him; he know he too big to be wearing that!”, etc.). I can fully recognize that they perpetuate sizeism, but I forgive them. I do not forgive them because I cannot find other friends (read: another fraternity), rather I forgive them because I have been accepted and receive love and acceptance in the friend group, despite the oppression. I recognize that, even though it is problematic, sizeism (read: heterosexism) is not solely this friend group’s issue; it is a societal issue, and I would prefer to be with people who love and accept me than deal with the same (or even more) oppression elsewhere. The participants had a similar mindset about their chapters and fraternity brothers: “Yes, they are heterosexist, but they accept me and love me. They are my brothers.”

The participants were also able to forgive the heterosexism because there were so many other gay members present in the fraternity. The presence of other gay members did not eliminate the heterosexism, of course, but it helped to alleviate the consequences of the fraternity's heterosexism. The participants had a cornerstone in other BGGM, which helped them better navigate that space because they had other safe spaces within the organization to fully be themselves, commiserate, and discuss issues that are pertinent to that subgroup.

Literature supports the assertion that BGLFs are beneficial to my participants and that heterosexism is present in said organizations (McClure, 2006; Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998). However, my findings add to the literature in a different way. Namely, this study privileges the voices of BGGM, while the previous literature predominantly uses the experiences of heterosexual men or men with undisclosed sexualities. This is important because BGGM's voices should be at the forefront when discussing homophobia in BGLFs. Otherwise, it would be similar to asking a man to describe the sexism women face in his workplace. It would not be as beneficial (or accurate) as it could be using the person who is dealing with the oppression. As such, research of this nature that directly voices the experiences of BGGM is critical.

The findings also introduce the "why" BGGM persist in these organizations, which has been absent from the literature. Though previous research highlight the benefits of joining a BGLF and other research highlight heterosexism exists within these

organizations, there is a dearth of research that explores why BBGM pursue BGLFs and why they remain. This study helps to fill that gap.

Lastly, this study corroborates previous literature that suggest that black gay males treat heterosexism as less oppressive than racism in their experiences (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Goode-Cross & Good, Managing multiple-minority identities: African American men who have sex with men at predominantly white universities, 2009). My participants were willing to navigate homophobia in the black community. It was better to face heterosexism in the fraternity, than not have that support and deal with racism *and* homophobia on campus and in society at large.

### **Research Question Two**

How do BBGM understand their sexual and racial identity within their respective BGLF?

#### ***Racial Identity***

The participants' racial identity was affirmed within their BGLF. Chapter and fraternity events helped the members gain a sense of pride and participants were able to learn more about black history while pledging, which gave them a stronger connection to their racial identity. Additionally, the participants formed a strong brotherhood with their chapter members, which provided them with stable black community on campus and after graduation. From their experiences in their chapters and fraternity, the participants understood that their racial identity is something of which to be proud. They developed and understanding of their racial identity and what it means to be black, more

specifically a black male, and how to navigate college and society with that identity, including overcoming racial oppression.

### ***Sexual identity***

While the participants' racial identity was affirmed in the BGLF, their sexual identity was not. Their experiences with heterosexism and homophobia within their chapters and fraternity gave them the understanding that non-heterosexuality is not acceptable and must be concealed in order to achieve goals. They also understood how to navigate sexually oppressive environments successfully by finding an affirming community or by proper screening for safe people to come out to. It is difficult to note if their experiences with the fraternity are the catalyst for these understandings or if the fraternity only exacerbated these understandings from other experiences.

With the exception of Harvey, the participants never expressed any notable sadness about their experiences with heterosexism in their fraternity, and even Harvey only mentioned one event that made him markedly "uncomfortable". It is difficult to discern if the experiences were not significant enough or if the participants overlooked or forgave homophobic encounters, as discussed with research question one. Their understanding about their sexual identity in their fraternities are still problematic, as they can stifle their gay identity develop, adversely impact their academic performance, and/or affect their self-concept.

Those effects support previous literature. For example, previous literature notes BGM often choose to leave their sexual orientation identity on the back burner in order to maintain positive affiliation with the Black community (Patton L. , 2011; Goode-

Cross & Tager, 2011), in this case BGLFs. Delaying their sexual orientation identity, delays self-acceptance and impacts their self-concept, which can adversely impact various other areas of their lives.

On another note, the benefits of membership in BGLFs are indisputable. These organizations do a lot for the black community on and off college campuses in addition to being a pillar for black Greek men. Current research suggests that BGLFs improve persistence for their members (McClure, 2006; Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998). However, while all of my participants graduated from their undergraduates, it cannot be determined the influence their fraternity had in their successful matriculation. Accordingly, this study does not necessarily authenticate or invalidate preexisting literature about BGLFs influence on persistence.

## **Limitations**

### ***The Word “Gay”***

“Gay” is an incredibly nuanced word that has no real, concrete definition. Though my participants are non-heterosexual, “gay” may not be the best word to describe them. For example, Farrakhan initially rejected that label and, in fact, any sexual orientation label. Savin-Williams (2006) makes a sound argument about the difficulty and inaccuracy of research about “gay” people:

When researchers assess the number or characteristics of homosexual individuals, they base their findings on a single sexual-orientation component-- usually identity. This approach, however, excludes many same-sex-oriented individuals and misidentifies some heterosexuals as homosexual. Those who

self-ascribe a gay/lesbian label are neither exhaustive nor representative of those with a same-sex orientation. If homosexual is assessed by same-sex attraction, there is no consensus about what proportion of an individual's attractions must be directed toward same-sex others, or how strong the attractions must be, in order to count as homosexual. If homosexual is defined by same sex behavior, gay virgins are omitted, heterosexuals engaging in same-sex behavior for reasons other than preferred sexual arousal are miscounted, and those with same-sex attraction who only have opposite-sex relations are excluded. If, however, homosexual is defined by an identity label, those who experience same-sex arousal or engage in same-sex behavior but who do not identify as gay or lesbian are omitted. . . [Accordingly, u]ntil conceptually well-positioned and psychometrically sound and tested definitions are used, it is unlikely that research can possibly or reliably identify the prevalence, causes, and consequences of homosexuality. Although multiple components of sexual orientation can be assessed, little is known about their stability over time, their consistency with each other, or their predictive power for various characteristics of homosexual populations. (pp. 40-43).

### *Sample size*

While I was able to reach saturation, another limitation of this study is the small sample size. Snowball sampling did limit the amount and representation of potential participants of the study and it is possible that the participants who chose to participate are different from individuals who are not participants. However, given that BGGM is a

hidden population snowball sampling was the most appropriate measure to garner participants.

## **Implications for Practice**

### *Practitioners*

Student affairs practitioners need to take an active role in dismantling heterosexism in fraternities on their college campuses, particularly black ones, considering educational attainment gaps and the benefits racially affiliated organizations have for students' of color persistence. Particularly, practitioners should be more involved in the recruitment and educational training aspects of fraternities. I suggest the following practices to help alleviate the burdens of heterosexism within black fraternities:

### *Training*

Fraternity members need to be educated about the effects of heterosexism in their organizations and their impact on aspirants and current members and trained on how to be more inclusive. Additionally, practitioners must develop a way to fortify the training to make sure it is not something that is done haphazardly, just to get it checked off the list. For example, perhaps an incentive program could be executed that incentivizes Greek organizations who host programs that highlight LGBT and gender issues, among other things. In order to create a more affirming climate in BGLFs, there needs to be a culture of change at the campus level, which will not only help BGGM, but it would also be beneficial to all LBG people on campus.

### *Review fraternity policies*

Practitioners need to review fraternities' policies to ensure the policies do not reify heterosexism. If practitioners notice problematic policies, they should work with members to amend the policy. If the policy is a national one (i.e., beyond the chapter's control), practitioners should challenge the national organizations to change, if said organizations wish to continue having a presence at the institution.

#### *Review programming*

Practitioners should review fraternities' programming to make sure it does not marginalize the LGBT community. Additionally, practitioners should work with fraternity chapters to create more inclusive programming on campuses.

#### *Administrators*

Campus administrators must do a better job creating a campus culture that is affirming to LGBT students. Specifically, there must be a deeply ingrained value system that affirms and celebrates all students, including LGBT students of color. Practitioners can work tirelessly to improve the experiences for BGGM; however, if their efforts are not mirrored in the overall campus culture, their efforts may be futile. Instead campus administrators should have a zero tolerance approach for heterosexism and clearly message their affirmation across campus and beyond. Such a culture would create an atmosphere where LGBT allies and students feel safe and supported. Additionally, when the culture changes at the campus level, it will ideally influence the attitudes and behaviors represented by the faculty and staff, the students and student organizations like BGLFs.

#### **BGLF Officials**

The culture of BGLFs starts at the national level, which, admittedly, enhances difficulty for practitioners to accomplish some of the suggestions above. If BGLFs want to fulfill their missions for being an aegis for the black community, they must affirm all black people, not just heterosexuals. The current climate in BGLFs limits access for potential members who happen to be non-heterosexual and could do great things for the organization and the community. Additionally, the current climate does not foster an environment where BGLFs can reach their full potential as a portion of their identity is stifled, which has adverse effects, as previously discussed. In order to progress these organizations, BGLFs should openly affirm gay men and outright condemn gay discrimination in their respective organizations' chapters. Furthermore, BGLFs should dismantle toxic notions of manhood and masculinity, which victimize straight and gay men alike who pursue or are members of these organizations. If BGLFs are sincerely intentioned on improving the lives of the black community and black people and substantiating love and philanthropy to them, the actions must begin to mirror their respective aims and support *all* black people, including gay men.

### **Future Research**

Higher education scholars whose areas of research include Black Greek letter organizations and/or LGBT students of color should unapologetically focus on ways to improve the heterosexist culture of said organizations. Current studies highlight the benefits of these organizations (McClure, 2006; Kimbrough W. M., 1995; Kimbrough & Hutchinson, 1998) and other studies highlight their anti-gay nature (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Hughey & Parks, 2011). Research also highlights the educational

attainment gap, which situates black men as the bottom regarding degree attainment (Strayhorn, 2010). More research that highlights how a more affirming BGLF culture could improve degree attainment for black men would ideally create more conversations that eventually lead to change.

Furthermore, we need more research focused on the experiences of black Greek gay men in historically BGLFs. Specifically, this research should focus on the adverse impacts on achieving a salient sexual identity. Current research highlights black gay men have a stifled sexual identity, as a result of leaving their sexual identity on the back burner to maintain a good relationship with the black community (Patton L., 2011; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). This affects their self-concept and, potentially, their achievement so research that focuses on how this happens in the fraternal context would make ways to improve the culture readily available.

## **Conclusion**

BGGM and gay aspirants are marginalized in the fraternal context; however, these organizations are beneficial regarding the participants' racial identity and navigating college. If BGLFs move to a more affirming culture for BGGM, they have the potential to help even more young men achieve postsecondary and professional success, which benefits society, at large, and those individuals directly.

My hesitation with conducting this study was that it would be viewed as an attack on BGLFs. That, however, could not be further from the truth. My hope is that people understand the deep admiration I have for these organizations, their contributions to the black community, the strength and foresight their founders enacted, and the

positive impacts they have had on college students all over the world, especially black ones. I respect these organizations enough to humbly offer constructive criticism, so they can be even more beneficial for black gay men who are members of or aspirants for these illustrious organizations, which, in turn, would intensify BGLFs' positive impact on the black community altogether.

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