

Introduction

Black Fraternal Organizations: Systems, Secrecy, and Solace

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The Allure of Black Fraternal Organizations

Fraternal organizations hold a storied place in the Western world. Sometimes romanticized and occasionally framed as malevolent and controlling forces, fraternal organizations are often thought to influence, if not rule, the social order from the shadows. Membership in these organizations is often simultaneously revered and misunderstood. The reverence toward these organizations is both a product and a cause of recent popular cultural fascination with the secret world of fraternal orders. For example, the 2006 film *The Good Shepherd* portrayed Matt Damon's character's coming of age via the Yale University secret society “Skull and Bones,” all against the backdrop of the burgeoning Cold War and McCarthyism. Dan Brown's recent books qua films (*The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels & Demons*, and *The Lost Symbol*) follow Tom Hanks' character “Harvard Professor Robert Langdon” and his attempts to disentangle the web of deceit and manipulation that supposedly characterize secret fraternal organizations from the Freemasons and Illuminati to the Knights Templar and Rosicrucian Order. Reflecting popular intrigue, U.S. News & World Report released a “collector's edition” entitled “Mysteries of History: Secret Societies” in 2011. The editors surreptitiously alleged similarities between Freemasons, the Chinese Triad, and Al Qaeda, but went on to write, “In fact, even though secret societies in general have gained a reputation as a pernicious influence, a subsection of them have at times played a beneficial role in human history. This is particularly true in the case of fraternal orders” (Bernstein 2011, p. 7).

With such varied, sensationalist, and mystified discourse surrounding fraternal organizations—all coupled with the hot button topic of race in the Age of Obama—

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what is one to make of the curious case of Black Fraternal Organizations (BFOs)? Groups like African American fraternities and sororities (also known as “Black Greek Letter Organizations” or “BGLOs”), Prince Hall Freemasonry, and various iterations of black church groups, together suffer a dichotomous fate. On one hand, to most mainstream eyes, these groups come into focus through a particularly narrow lens. They exist as leftovers of a by-gone age that “self-segregate” and thereby perpetuate racial antagonism; they are self-serving and loutish elitists that represent the worst of both the “Talented Tenth” (Du Bois 1903) and the “Black Bourgeoisie” (Frazier 1957); they are strange and bizarre fundamentalists and hucksters hostile to intellectual inquiry and free thought, and/or they are little more than “educated gangs” (cf. Hughey 2008).

Such distortions are counter-balanced by an equally radical viewpoint. For many, black masons, black fraternalists, or black churchgoers do not occupy their social world—they and their contributions are simply invisibilized. We have witnessed disbelief from others upon hearing that 95 % of churches today are racially segregated (DeYoung 2004); we have frequently heard young white college students (ironically while sporting t-shirts emblazoned with their own Greek letter paraphernalia) to remark, “What? There are black fraternities?” And in regard to Freemasonry, many white lodges either do not know about, or refuse to recognize, Prince Hall masons (the black arm of masonry since the late 1700s) as an integral part of their worldwide fraternal order.

Despite this double-edged predicament, BFOs are slowly gaining entrée into the mainstream and are recovering an image of themselves as a heterogeneous and varied collection of organizations across the political spectrum: from African Methodist Episcopal and ethnic-based Black churches' (e.g., West Indian, West African, etc.) recent public offers of sanctuary to undocumented residents, to the 2010 National Heritage Museum's exhibitions of Prince Hall Freemason history. With uneven, yet important, steps forward, BFOs are now staking their claim as important social and civic institutions. How they have been portrayed in scholarship is another matter.

The Scholarly Treatment of Black Fraternal Organizations

Like most US social institutions, the “problem of the color line” (Du Bois 1903) structured a racially segregated and exclusionary fraternal system. From the Irish Ancient Order of Hibernians (1836), the Hebrew B'nai B'rith (1843), to the German Sons of Hermann (1852), the golden age of US fraternalism (1700–1950) was explicitly organized by racial/ethnic boundaries and class distinctions. By the early 1800s, these class- and race-based secret and private organizations, in the form of Greek letter organizations, mutual aid associations, resistive and revolutionary orders, and ethnic-based economic networks, became a staple of the young republic.

When the French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville traveled in the USA in the early 1830s, he made extensive and sundry observations on the social and political climate of the USA. His analysis resulted in the two-volume set *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (*Democracy in America*), in which he famously penned:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations

in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute... [They are the most fraternal people in the world]. (de Tocqueville 1969 [1840], p. 513)

Even as some organizations advocated racially egalitarian principles, many were forced to adopt racial exclusion policies. For example, in 1892, the Modern Woodmen of America were the “only major order that did not specify the exclusion of blacks” (Clawson 1989, p. 134), yet shortly thereafter, they were forced by other fraternal orders to enact a “whites-only regulation” after allowing a black man to join. By 1900, close to 40 % of white males in the USA belonged to one or more of the freemason societies (Stevens 1966; Whalen 1966).

More than 100 years after de Tocqueville's 1840 study, a Swedish economist named Gunnar Myrdal headed a comprehensive examination of the sociological, economic, and legal status of US race relations, which resulted in another two-volume set entitled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (Myrdal 1944, pp. 639, 952). Myrdal wrote:

Because of their exclusion from the various associations, Negroes have formed their own associations. Every Negro community is abundantly supplied with social and fraternal organizations... Negroes are more inclined to join associations than are whites; in this respect... Negroes are ‘exaggerated’ Americans.

Myrdal realized a subtle, yet no less important, phenomenon. White supremacy paternalism and violence that was designed to cripple and control African Americans did not stop black fraternal from organizing. Rather, secret and semi-secret organizations—in the form of freemasonry, black church groups, mutual aid, and literary societies—provided a buffer from the ferocity and surveillance of Jim Crow.

Today, scholars remain concerned with the central role that civil society, fictive kinship, and voluntary organizations play in the practice of American democracy and political and social participation (Barber 1984; Sandel 1996; Putnam 1995a, 1995b). Given the centrality of fraternalism to the American project, it is striking that mainstream scholarship has either ignored, marginalized, or discredited the profound contribution of BFOs. Given the significance of these groups in African American education and intellectual development, artistic growth during the Harlem Renaissance, economic and social uplift, the quest for political enfranchisement, and their financial and human capital contributions to the civil and human rights movement, this absence signals both a troubling myopia within intellectual inquiry and a problematic political climate.

Such decisive invisibilization of BFOs amongst mainstream scholarship is all the more disquieting in consideration of a substantial literature authored by scholars of color—inclusive of a mixture of celebration and condemnation—that has sat upon shelves for a number of years; the color line divided not only residences and drinking fountains, but epistemological traditions and readership audiences. For example, Grimshaw (1903), Wesley (1954), Frazier (1957), and Fauset (1970) all stand as vital texts that highlight BFOs within the social, political, and/or religious context of a young nation wrestling with the question of race. Yet, these texts are often overlooked or unknown by leading scholars of race and ethnicity.

Despite this patterned absence, a nascent scholarship does reflect the import of BFOs. This newer body of work seeks to not only illuminate the oft-forgotten legacy of these secret and semi-secret orders, but how their origins, development, struggles, inconsistencies, and strengths bare out in a world marked by the paradoxical mixture of “post-racial” and “color-blind” discourse alongside resilient racial inequalities and discrimination. Upton (1975), Williams (1980), Kuyk (1983), Giddings (1994), Kaufman (2003), Kimbrough (2003), Brown et al. (2005), Skocpol et al. (2006), Parks (2008), Walker (2008), Parks and Hughey (2011), and Parks and Bradley (2012) together interrogate BFO's interplay within the current exigencies of black social and political status.

Despite this burgeoning corpus of work, it is rare that one finds a robust or serious treatment of BFOs in modern courses in anthropology, business, education, history, organizational management, religion, social movements, sociology, psychology, or even classes that concentrate on race and ethnicity in a US context. It would seem that this rich tradition remains undervalued and hidden in the eyes of mainstream academic discourse and inquiry. For example, noted social movement scholar Douglas McAdam wrote, “I count myself as reasonably knowledgeable of black history, but I was almost entirely ignorant of the African American fraternal tradition and its surprising links to the broader freedom struggle” (in Skocpol et al. 2006, back cover).

Such unawareness is all the more shocking given that, for example, BGLOs were an integral part of what W. E. B. Du Bois fashioned as the Talented Tenth—the top 10 % of educated, upper-class, and motivated individuals who acquired the professional credentials, legitimated skills, and economic (as well as cultural) capital to assist the remaining 90 % of the race attain socioeconomic parity. Moreover, BGLOs today possess an estimated 1.5 million members worldwide, over 6,400 chapters, and are “among the oldest black campus organizations on most predominately white campuses and are possibly the strongest nationwide social institutions in black America” (McKee 1987, p. 27). BGLOs engage in an array of nationwide service programs such as offering scholarships and grants, housing and food assistance, academic support, and positive role modeling (Gadson 1989). Scholars acknowledge that, aside from the black church and organizations like the NAACP, BGLOs were the largest positive influence on the black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. A poignant example is offered by Kimbrough (2003, p. 52):

A famous Associated Press photo shows, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis prior to the assassination of Dr. King, four Black Greek men who were key figures in the Civil Rights movement: Martin Luther King Jr. (Alpha Phi Alpha), Jessie Jackson (Omega Psi Phi), Hosea Williams (Phi Beta Sigma), and Ralph Abernathy (Kappa Alpha Phi).

Yet, BGLOs' role in society has not been without controversy. One of the most vicious chastisements of BGLOs stemmed from E. Franklin Frazier, a noted sociologist and himself a member of the BGLO Alpha Phi Alpha. Frazier wrote in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957, p. 94) that BGLOs were little more than elitist social clubs of a self-congratulatory nature:

[BGLOs] are especially important in molding the outlook of the black bourgeoisie. In the Negro colleges, membership in these organizations indicated that

the student has escaped from his working-class background and achieved middle-class status. In their social activities these societies foster all the middle-class values, especially conspicuous consumption.

So also, Howard professor Nathan Hare began to label BGLO members “Black Anglo-Saxons” due to their perceived failure to identify with fellow blacks of differing socioeconomic backgrounds (Smith 1994). Today, controversy surrounds BGLO members' engagement with issues of homosexuality, non-Christian religious beliefs or atheism, and their own hazing and financial scandals. The diversity of thought, socioeconomic background, and ideological orientations within BGLOs should signal a clarion call to scholars to investigate BFOs' relationship to black heterogeneity, identity politics, and contemporary struggles against white supremacy. Indeed, we vigorously object to the oft-repeated sentiment that black folks should shun such public discussion and privately settle matters (in order to provide a unified stance “in front of company”) because this strategy of silence often marginalizes black women, the black poor, black youth, and black LGBT folks. The exclusionary and secretive nature of BGLOs and other BFOs means that the question of organizing across race, class, gendered, and sexual lines is still very much an unsettled powder keg for BFO supporters and critics, alike.

This Special Issue on Black Fraternal Organizations

These articles assembled herein represent a microcosm of the growing scholastic interest in how BFOs serve as both catalyst and impediment to social egalitarianism. Together, work of this ilk illuminates how BFOs arose out of a history of colonization, segregation, and subjugation and are generally linked via a tripartite mission—developing personal excellence, creating fictive kinship ties, and fostering racial uplift activity (e.g., civic action, community service, and philanthropy).

In “Breaking Bread with the Brethren: Fraternalism and Text in a Black Atlantic Church Community,” Todne Chipumuro provides an ethnographic analysis of a West Indian and African American Brethren church community (the Dixon Bible Chapel, “DBC”). Based on Chipumuro's 2 years of fieldwork and analysis of interview, oral history, and church historical texts, she proposes that DBC brothers conceptualize their bond as a close fictive kinship rooted in faith and inspired by the New Testament that further provides a framework for male democratic religious organization. The DBC members invest in a particular concept of brotherhood as a way to sidestep the exclusivity of mainstream religious institutions despite the various gender and political hierarchies that permeate both the DBC brotherhood and the church community. Chipumuro extends the implications of the DBC brotherhood to broader issues related to the practice of black fraternalism.

Paul Dunbar, in his work “Hidden in Plain Sight: African American Secret Societies and Black Freemasonry,” demonstrates how African American fraternal and mutual aid societies provided some of the dominant organizational structures for blacks in late 1700s. Internally, these organizations gave their members social protection from a hostile racial and economic environment. Due to this support, Dunbar contends that Black Freemasonry encompassed a significant portion of

members' identity and everyday activities—religious, cultural, social, recreational, economic, and political. Of consequence, Dunbar notes that these organizations also created a “staging ground” for future African American reform and protest organizations.

In Rashawn Ray's empirical study entitled “Sophisticated Practitioners: Black Fraternity Men's Treatment of Women,” he explores how black fraternity men treat women. Ray's data stem from interviews and field observation amidst a small black community at one Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Ray contends that black fraternity men become “sophisticated practitioners”—strategic actors that deeply contemplate the best ways to romantically and sexually interact with women. Three factors (perception of the type of woman being engaged; desired relationship status; and structural conditions) facilitated these black fraternal strategies. Through a comparative component of his study, Ray found that black fraternity men treated women more respectfully than their white fraternity counterparts and non-fraternal-affiliated black men, alike. He attributes these strategies and outcomes to the intense socialization process that black fraternity men typically undergo to become fraternity members.

In their article, “The Harvest is Plentiful but the Laborers are Few: An Interdisciplinary Examination of Career Choice and African American Sororities,” Hernandez and Arnold underscore the role of black sororities in the teaching profession. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, Hernandez and Arnold examine how Black sororities have historically recruited African American women to teaching positions by providing supportive social networks based on an ethic of care and “other-mothering.” While teaching has declined in popularity for African American women since 1970, Hernandez and Arnold suggest that African American sororities may push back against the question of whether their organizations are still relevant today through sorority provisions and programs to recruit and retain African American female educators.

Patricia E. Literte and Candice Hodge's article “Sisterhood and Sexuality” brings a critical eye to the dynamics that continue to socially stop, exclude, and/or marginalize lesbian black sorority prospectives and members. Many of the exclusion processes were found to stem from the influence of fundamentalist Christian ideologies, conservative older members, and constructs of heterosexual femininity as socially de rigueur. Moreover, the authors present a counterintuitive and controversial finding: despite attempts to silence discussions about homosexuality in black sorority contexts, there is evidence that black sorority members are far from one-dimensional homophobes.

Strayhorn and McCall's “Cultural Competency of Black Greek-Letter Organization Advisors” explores the cultural competence of student affairs personnel who advise BGLO collegiate chapters. They highlight how an ever-growing diversity among higher education student populations necessitates competent student affairs personnel—inclusive of BGLO advisors who may lack appropriate and crucial knowledge of BGLO and African American historic and modern exigencies. Based on self-reported data on advisor cultural competence, Strayhorn and McCall find that advisors across the color line can, and often do, gain a great deal of knowledge and skills necessary for effective advising. However, their study signals a warning regarding a pattern in which advisors' often overestimate their own levels of cultural competence.

In addition to this primary research, we asked three different scholars to review three books new to the study of black fraternal organizing. First, David Canton (Associate Professor of History at Connecticut College) reviews Deborah Whaley's, *Disciplining Women: Alpha Kappa Alpha, Black Counterpublics, and the Cultural Politics of Black Sororities* (State University of New York Press, 2010). Canton notes Whaley's concentration on the cultural impact of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) and other black sororities. In particular, Canton picks up on Whaley's dominant and dichotomous theme: AKA has long struggled with issues of internalized colorism, sexism, and classism, while the sorority has aided considerably in the uplift of African Americans. Canton underscores the unique thread that weaves these topics together: Whaley's book is distinguished from other BGLO monographs by its focus on how black sororities are both producers of, and influenced by, popular culture.

Following suit, we then asked Deborah Whaley (Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Iowa) to review our book *Black Greek-Letter Organizations, 2.0: New Directions in the Study of African American Fraternities and Sororities* (University Press of Mississippi, 2011, edited by Matthew W. Hughey and Gregory S. Parks). Whaley couches her review within the broader and recent proliferation of BGLO scholarship in recent years. Noting its uniqueness, Whaley highlights our framing of BGLO scholarship around the tension between realist versus formalist legal theory as well as professional versus public methods of sociological inquiry. In short, Whaley asks how BGLO scholarship can be rigorous yet accessible and, even more, incorporated into how BGLOs tackle issues that they confront. In her review of the various contributions of our text, Whaley articulates the structural organization and focus the chapters—"the politics of leadership, gender, racial identity and racism, representations of popular culture, hazing and pledging, and the place of BGLOs in higher education."

Finally, we asked Ariane Liazos (Preceptor at Harvard University) to give an extended review of Walker (2008). Liazos highlights Walker's analysis of Prince Hall Freemasonry's role in the African American struggle for American citizenship and equality. Walker's work illustrates how African American Freemasonry's ideology and networks facilitated social change for African American communities. Liazos finds Walker's use of Masonic lodge archival materials a huge strength, while she critiques the short shrift Walker pays to Prince Hall Freemasonry women's orders. Overall, Liazos applauds the contributions to the limited scholarship on African American Freemasonry.

We hope that readers will enjoy the scholarship in this special issue on Black Fraternal Organizations. As simultaneous members, supporters, and critics of various BFOs ourselves, we emphasize the multifaceted nature of these orders and emphasize the necessity of scholarship to illuminate both their first-rate and the unpleasant characteristics. Without grounded, sophisticated, and ethically minded scholarship geared toward inquiry and democratic action in the interest of Black folks, these organizations may continue to suffer from a reliance on ideologically constructed "common sense," destructive habits, and superstitious illusions. Scholarship, we contend, is a necessary component of these organizations' necessary transformation; from abstracted high ideals to implemented programs in the service of social justice and equality.

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