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# “In My Letters, But I Was Still by Myself”: Highlighting the Experiences of Queer Men of Color in Culturally Based Fraternities

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## **Abstract**

This narrative inquiry study examined the ways Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities navigated issues of sexuality and gender expression in these organizations. Eight men from four different National Pan-Hellenic Council and Multi-cultural Greek Council fraternities shared their experiences through interviews and reflective journals. Using queer of color critique as a framework, findings showed how their sexuality substantially shaped their experiences in these culturally based organizations. In particular, participants communicated how their sexuality played a role in their motivations to join their fraternity. Additionally, once they became

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“This paper is not the copy of record and may not exactly replicate the authoritative  
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members, these eight Queer Men of Color explained how these organizations at times affirmed their sexuality, but also marginalized their sexual identities and policed their gender expression. Furthermore, participants discussed how they responded to these cultures. While some men conformed to hegemonic behaviors, others engaged in disidentificatory actions, enacting forms of resistance to oppressive norms. Implications for future research and practice are offered.

**Keywords:** Queer Men of Color, fraternity and sorority life, sexuality, gender, narrative inquiry

Culturally based fraternities and sororities have long played a positive role in the experiences of Students of Color on college campuses (e.g., Dancy & Hotchkins, 2015; Garcia, 2019; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Harper, 2007; McCoy, 2011; McGuire, McTier, Ikegwuonu, Sweet, & Bryant-Scott, 2018; Orta, Murguia, & Cruz, 2019). Notably, scholars have underscored that these organizations can affirm collegians' racial/ethnic identities, especially for those at predominantly white institutions (e.g., Guardia & Evans, 2008; McCoy, 2011; Orta et al., 2019). Connected to these sentiments of affirmation, the literature has highlighted how culturally based fraternities and sororities are sites where students develop meaningful relationships with other Students of Color (e.g., McGuire et al., 2018). Although these organizations serve students in beneficial ways, researchers have painted a complex view of these groups by investigating how they differentially impact members based on their multiple identities.

As scholarship revealed, Queer<sup>1</sup> People of Color encounter difficulties in spaces that emphasize one oppressed identity over another (e.g., race and not sexuality; see Duran, 2019; Kumashiro, 2001; Misawa, 2010). As one of these spaces, it is important to understand how culturally based fraternities create environments for those who hold numerous marginalized identities. Within this exploration, we centered the concept of productive masculinities as conceptualized by F. Harris and Harper (2014). Productive masculinities actively challenge systems such as sexism and heterosexism “and, if made known, can reshape campus social norms in positive ways for men” (F. Harris & Harper, 2014, p. 706). Findings from various studies pointed to ways that culturally based fraternities cultivate productive constructions

<sup>1</sup> Rocco and Gallagher (2006) defined *queer* as a term used to “encompass all the variations in sexual desire, activity, and identity that are not straight” (p. 30).

of masculinities; yet, at the same time, these organizations also produce hegemonic forms of masculinities that negatively impact sexual minorities (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Williams, 2017). Although the findings of studies focused broadly on fraternity and sorority life (FSL) organizations have described the ways in which queer members are often marginalized within these spaces, a limited amount of research centering the perspectives of Queer Men of Color within these fraternities exists (see Williams, 2017, for a notable exception). Consequently, further scholarship is needed to understand how Queer Men of Color experience and navigate fraternal environments, especially in culturally based organizations; such research would inform chapters, FSL professionals, and national organizations about approaches they can take to cultivate equitable climates for all members, especially those that identify as queer.

This narrative inquiry study thus provides a contribution by exploring the role that sexuality and gender expression play in the experiences of Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities. By centering the stories of these individuals through queer of color critique (Brockenbrough, 2013; Ferguson, 2004, 2018), this research sought to illuminate the connections that Queer Men of Color developed to their organizations and how they navigated issues pertaining to their identities in these fraternities. The specific questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do Queer Men of Color describe their motivations to join multicultural and National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities?
2. How do Queer Men of Color in multicultural and NPHC fraternities discuss navigating issues of sexuality and gender expression in these organizations?

Higher education professionals who work across different functional areas will be interested in the findings from this research, especially as they seek to support Queer Men of Color who negotiate their identities in culturally based organizations.

## Literature Review

To provide context for this study, we turn to scholarship that contextualizes the experiences of Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities. First, we discuss research focused broadly on Queer Men of Color in higher education followed by a review of literature that examines culturally based fraternities and Queer Men of Color. Importantly, we find it necessary to contextualize these bodies of literature by underscoring that discourses related to gender and sexuality are oftentimes intricately connected for Queer Men of Color. Specifically, policing a person's gender expression becomes another way of regulating a person's sexuality (Pascoe, 2007). The interconnections between gender expression and sexuality seen in the scholarship led us to investigate these constructs in this research.

### *Queer Men of Color in Postsecondary Institutions*

Although scholarship highlighting the experiences of Queer Men of Color in postsecondary institutions is a relatively emergent area of higher education research, studies increasingly centered Queer (cis-gender) Men of Color by examining how they negotiate their gender expression and sexuality on campus (e.g., Blockett, 2017; Chan, 2017; Duran & Pérez, 2017, 2019; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Peña-Talamantes, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013, 2014). Findings from this body of literature underscore that overlapping systems of oppression inform how Queer Men of Color navigate campus environments, which define their experiences as distinct from queer white men and heterosexual Men of Color. For example, this reality appeared in Means and Jaeger's (2013) study, which shed light on Black gay men attending historically Black colleges and universities. Although participants discussed feeling a sense of belonging at their institution, they also shared sentiments of disconnection as a result of their sexual identity and "by being called homophobic slurs or feeling like they are the 'only one'" (p. 130). These experiences of homophobia were heightened in NPHC organizations, spaces in which these Black gay men felt that they had to conceal their sexuality and perform certain types of masculinities in order to conform. Similarly, research like Duran and Pérez (2019) showed how queer Latino men saw their predominantly white institutions as

perpetuating racist and heterosexist norms, which affected how students perceived their place on campus.

Beyond encountering marginalizing environments on the institutional level, research has acknowledged ways in which siloed identity spaces serve to marginalize Queer Men of Color (Blockett, 2017; Duran, 2019; Duran & Pérez, 2017; Strayhorn, 2013). This reality appeared in Blockett's (2017) qualitative critical ethnography of the experiences of Black queer men within a student-led peer support group for queer and trans\_ students. His findings showed that Black queer men struggled within white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) spaces. Although these spaces affirmed their sexual identities, they did not affirm their Black identity. Thus, participants discussed navigating dichotomous communities—a predominantly white LGBT space and the Black community. Other studies on Black gay men (e.g., Strayhorn, 2013) and queer Latino men (Duran & Pérez, 2017) echoed this phenomenon of encountering marginalization in these types of groups. In addition to the scholarship on Queer Men of Color broadly, extant literature also took a specific look at culturally based fraternities.

### ***Culturally Based Fraternities and Queer Men of Color***

Culturally based fraternities include organizations under the NPHC (Ross, 2000) and those grouped under Multicultural Greek Councils (MGCs; e.g., Latina/o, Asian American, and multicultural; S. M. Muñoz & Guardia, 2009). Similar to the broader FSL literature, research on culturally based fraternities has highlighted productive and hegemonic ways in which masculinities are enacted within these communities (DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Jenkins, 2012; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Williams, 2017). DeSantis and Coleman's (2008) study emphasized how homophobia may manifest within Black Greek-letter organizations, calling attention to the role of religious beliefs in relation to these behaviors. Similarly, Williams (2017) discussed the homophobia and heterosexism that Black gay men face in culturally based fraternities. Relevant to discourses of gender expression and sexuality, participants in his research mentioned that individuals mitigated heterosexism if they performed in more normative masculine ways.

Although much of the research that exists on culturally based fraternities and sexuality focused on hegemonic forms of masculinities, Chan (2017) and McClure (2006) were two notable studies that shed light on productive masculinities. McClure's research on Black men in an NPHC fraternity showed that participants recognized, and were often frustrated by, the stereotypical views of Black men. Instead, these men displayed productive masculinities by communicating their sense of interdependence on their fraternity brothers as well as their ability to show real emotion and connect with these individuals. Chan's study of five queer Filipino college men's understanding of masculinities similarly communicated how a participant affiliated with a multicultural organization felt that his fraternity involvement made him more self-assured in his sense of masculinities; this then caused him to feel included in his fraternity and more comfortable within the larger campus environment. What these aforementioned studies showcased is the potential of culturally based fraternities to provide Queer Men of Color spaces to positively explore their identities when shaped by productive masculinities. To investigate the multifaceted realities that these individuals face in these organizations, this study utilized a conceptual framework that centers the lives of Queer People of Color.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

Queer of color critique brings to light the social structures and cultural discourses around race, gender, and sexuality that disenfranchise Queer People of Color (Brockenbrough, 2013; Ferguson, 2004, 2018). Queer of color critique emerged in response to numerous academic disciplines (e.g., queer studies and ethnic studies) failing to attend to how race and racial capitalism play an integral role in discussions on sexuality and gender (Ferguson, 2018). Brockenbrough (2013) described two central components of queer of color critique: "it names and contextualizes the marginalization of queer of color difference; and it differentiates strategies of resistance to account for the shifting exigencies of the lives of queers of color" (p. 428). We used two critical theories stemming from queer of color critique to examine systemic and structural dynamics that influenced our participants' fraternal experiences — queer crit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010) and J. E.

Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification— both of which are compatible in exploring the experiences of Queers of Color (Blockett, 2018).

Queer crit extends from critical race theory and adopts an intersectional perspective accounting for “the interplay between sexual norms and race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010, p. 94). Misawa (2012) further described this:

There are six components in the queer crit perspective: 1) the centrality of the intersection of race and racism with sexual orientation and homophobia; 2) the challenge to mainstream ideologies; 3) confrontations with ahistoricism; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; 5) multidisciplinary aspects; and 6) the social justice perspective. (p. 242)

Interrogating intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the systemic inequalities that are connected to these identities, queer crit functions as an analytical tool to articulate how society oppresses Queer People of Color based on these interconnections. Aligning well with queer crit, a theory of disidentification (J. E. Muñoz, 1999) provides further insight to how Queer People of Color practice agency within a society that inherently marginalizes bodies that deviate from norms rooted in whiteness, heteronormativity, and binary gender roles. Notably, J. E. Muñoz (1999) illuminated the strategies that Queer People of Color employ, termed *disidentification*, in order to challenge dominant discourses while still existing within these structures (as opposed to counteridentifying or identifying with them fully). In performing disidentificatory actions, Queers of Color create queer worlds, pushing against hegemonic ideologies that serve to oppress them. With these bodies of literature in mind, we used queer crit and disidentification to explore the labor that Queer Men of Color endure to deconstruct normative structures of heterosexism and hegemonic masculinities, engaging in queer worldmaking in the process.

## **Method**

This work was drawn from a larger study focused on how Queer Men of Color in multicultural and NPHC fraternities made meaning of their

race, gender, and sexuality in these racialized and gendered organizations. For this particular research project, we attended to the conversations that we had with participants about how they navigated issues of sexuality and gender expression in culturally based fraternities. Importantly, plentiful data existed, because in order to comprehend how Queer Men of Color engaged in meaning making, we needed to ask extensively about their environment and how they responded to these contexts. Like CRT, queer crit asserts “the centrality of experiential knowledge” (Misawa, 2012, p. 242); accordingly, we relied on a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to center our participants’ voice. Narrative inquiry recognizes that “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). A narrator researcher attempts to understand the storied constructions shared by participants, attending to three dimensions that characterize narratives (personal/social, contextual, and temporal). Through our analysis, we particularly focused on what drew participants to their fraternities, together with understanding how their sexuality and gender expression played a role in these spaces.

### ***Participant Selection and Data Collection***

We sent out a national call for participants that identified as (a) part of the queer community, (b) a Person of Color, (c) a man aged 18 or older, and (d) a member of an MGC or NPHC fraternal organization. We intentionally sought out participants that already completed their undergraduate degree. We believed these individuals could more critically reflect on their fraternal experience, including their experience as alumni. Nine individuals from four different NPHC and MGC organizations based in chapters<sup>2</sup> across the country chose to participate. Participants engaged in two semistructured interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. After the first interview, participants wrote in a reflective journal using prompts probing them about their fraternal experience with a specific attention to their identities as Queer Men of Color. Eight

<sup>2</sup> *Chapter* refers to an individual campus group of a national fraternity or sorority. *Organization* describes the national fraternity or sorority.

**Table 1** Profile of Queer Men of Color (Self-Reported on a Demographic Form)

Name <sup>a</sup>	Pronouns	Race/ethnicity	NPHC or MGC organization?	Organization name	Years since graduating from undergraduate institution
Aaron	He/him	African American	NPHC	Upsilon	10 or more
August	He/him	Black	NPHC	Omicron	1-3
Derek	He/him	Latino	MGC	Phi	1-3
Evan	He/him	African-American	NPHC	Upsilon	10 or more
Jeff	He/him	Black	NPHC	Upsilon	10 or more
Komplexity	He/him	African-American	NPHC	Tau	7-9
Scott	He/him	Black	NPHC	Omicron	10 or more
Valentino	He/him	Afro Latinx	MGC	Phi	7-9

NPHC = National Pan-Hellenic Council; MGC = Multicultural Greek Council.

a. Pseudonyms used for research participants and their organizations.

individuals completed the study in its entirety; one individual chose not to continue their participation after the first interview. For this reason, we made the decision to omit his data from this investigation. **Table 1** lists additional participant details.

### ***Data Analysis***

As we transcribed the first round of interviews and reviewed reflection journals, we constructed preliminary jottings (Saldaña, 2016) of emerging themes and points of significance in the participants' reflections. We used these to collaboratively develop the protocol for the second interview. After transcribing the second interview, we turned to narrative analysis as described by Polkinghorne (1995) in which "researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story or stories" (p. 12). Accordingly, we developed narratives, ranging from five to seven pages of single-spaced text, for each participant, focusing on their college transition, process of joining their fraternity, and experiences as a member of the fraternity. We divided the participants evenly so that each researcher took the lead on a group of narratives. We then reviewed one another's constructions adding detail and noting any discrepancies. While constructing the narratives, we paid particular attention to time, place, and people. After writing the narratives, we then began analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), looking across participant stories for common themes in which their experiences

coalesced and where they diverged. We used axial coding to further refine the relationships among these themes (Saldaña, 2016). In addition to this analytical process, the study design included an attention to trustworthiness strategies.

### ***Trustworthiness and Positionalities***

We took several measures to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. Our use of multiple researchers and multiple data sources by way of interviews, demographic surveys, and journals allowed us to triangulate data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, these approaches resulted in rich data and thick description, which enhanced the trustworthiness of this work (Glesne, 2015). We also conducted member checks and provided participants the opportunity to review their individual narratives and provide feedback. Four participants reviewed their narratives and felt they were representative of their experiences, whereas the other participants did not respond to the opportunity.

Finally, we remained reflexive of our identities and roles as researchers, recognizing that our subjectivities were part of the research process (Maxwell, 2013). Engaging in narrative research specifically challenged us to consider how our own backgrounds informed the interpretations that we made during data analysis. To practice this reflexivity, we engaged in memoing (Saldaña, 2016) and discussions with one another regarding our lens and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following statements highlight salient parts of our own histories that were present throughout this project.

Crystal Garcia (she/her) identifies as a multiracial Latina and white heterosexual cisgender woman. Her FSL experience stems from her research in the area as well as her roles as a member of a Panhellenic Sorority, chapter advisor, and student affairs professional. Although her research and experiences have expanded her knowledge of culturally based FSL, she does not identify as a Queer Man of Color or as a member of a culturally based fraternity. She entered the study with the understanding that her sexuality has not been a point of contention in her life; others have never been actively hostile toward her because of her sexuality or attempted to erase her sexuality. Thus, her lived experiences differ significantly from the participants in this

study. She reconciled this reality by relying on the participants' voices to comprehend their experiences and by engaging in frequent discussions with Antonio Duran about ways she was making sense of participants' experiences during data collection and analysis.

Antonio Duran (he/him) identifies as a queer Latino cisgender man. As a past house director for a historically white fraternity, Antonio was intrigued with the complexities of FSL. Namely, in witnessing organizations promote positive relationship building as well as problematic practices, he questioned how these environments further oppress those with multiple marginalized identities. With Antonio's research agenda focusing on the experiences of Queer Students of Color, this study allowed him to consider how the context of culturally based fraternities impact individuals who are racial and sexual minorities. Specifically, he entered into the project sensitized to when participants described instances of Queer of Color marginality yet did not discuss it as such due to the cultural context of fraternities. He then had to reconcile these ideas during analysis and while writing the individuals' narratives.

The authors entered this study with a symbiotic relationship, recognizing strengths from our particular areas of expertise. Crystal frequently engaged in conversations with Antonio around topics of intersectionality particularly as it relates to the systems of oppression affecting Queer People of Color, while Antonio frequently deferred to Crystal's understanding of FSL communities. In essence, when one of the researchers experienced uncertainty around a particular topic, the other researcher was able to help reconcile the gaps in their knowledge.

## **Results**

Using queer crit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010) and J. E. Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification, we found that participants' intersecting identities as Queer Men of Color played a defining role in their fraternal experiences. Furthermore, their fraternal context heavily influenced their engagement in worldmaking (J. E. Muñoz, 1999). As a backdrop for this discussion, our findings first focus on the reasons why participants chose to join their fraternities. We then discuss

fraternal behaviors surrounding sexuality and gender followed by how participants responded to these behaviors through conformity and resistance.

### ***Motivation to Join Culturally Based Fraternities***

Participants named a number of reasons they chose for joining their fraternities, including a family history in FSL and wanting to develop more friendships with men. Regardless of their different reasoning, all participants' responses centered their identities as Men of Color. Here, we highlight two interconnected reasons that emerged across participants' decisions to join their fraternities: (a) a draw to the members of the local chapter and/or national organization, and (b) a connection to the organizational values.

The Queer Men of Color in this study articulated how they were drawn to the members of their eventual organization. For example, Komplexity was attracted to his fraternity because of the way the chapter members represented Black men. He was a member of a youth auxiliary group under Omicron Fraternity during high school, so he entered his freshman year with the expectation that he would join Omicron. However, during the fraternity's probate in the spring semester of Komplexity's freshman year, the chapter members made "some derogatory comments during their time on the yard" that were highly sexualized and belittled women. Komplexity "was very discouraged" by these behaviors, which were "not living up to what I understand the organization to be." He decided not to pledge Omicron and instead he felt a draw to Tau Fraternity:

From the time that they walked in ... you notice them and it was not because of you know, a sense of arrogance or anything of that nature. But there was a confidence that exuded from them as young Black men that I admired. And I had that same form of confidence, but I wanted to continue to build upon it.

Komplexity saw the members of Tau as examples of the Black man he wanted to be in the future, differing from the hegemonic ways that masculinities manifested in Omicron.

Similarly, when Jeff started at his institution, he met Upsilon fraternity chapter members that he found relatable and approachable. Even further, discovering the values of the organization and the Civil Rights figures who had been a part of the fraternity greatly influenced his views. He reflected that after learning “these people that changed the face of Black history, changed the face of the history of our nation fighting for equity and justice had this bond and this brotherhood just, I just fell in love with the organization.” All of these factors thus solidified his decision to pledge Upsilon fraternity.

Valentino differed from the other participants in that he started own chapter of Phi Fraternity. When he began his college experience, he joined the LGBT Club, but “it was predominantly white ... there were a few People of Color.” Eventually he “replaced” this organization with fraternal membership. Valentino explained that he chose to pursue membership in a fraternity as “a challenge ... to see this as a way to have stronger bonds with straight men.” Rather than join one of the preexisting Latino fraternities, Valentino decided to help found a chapter of Phi on campus because the existing Latino fraternities felt “very exclusionary” in his mind. In particular, these chapters placed such a strong emphasis on a particular form of Latino culture that if people did not fit a certain image of Latino identity, then they were not accepted. Yet he believed that Phi was more inclusive than other Latino fraternities.

Unlike other participants, Derek struggled to decide between joining an MGC or historically white fraternity within the Interfraternity Council. In addition to wondering about how his sexuality would fit with the organization, Derek was not familiar with MGC fraternities and questioned, “Since we’re Hispanic based I was like will I fit in?” Derek described himself as “whitewashed” or “more Americanized,” whereas most MGC members “speak Spanish or another language” and are “very into their culture.” It took him over a year to decide, but he was ultimately drawn to the strong brotherhood he witnessed while attending one of the member’s birthdays. Derek’s observations of the brotherhood shared among the members was indicative of productive forms of masculinities. In addition, the members gave special attention to building a relationship with Derek, which proved to Derek this was where he belonged.

Scott wanted to affiliate with Omicron Fraternity largely because of the values the national fraternity espoused, primarily their emphasis on inclusivity. Scott reflected,

The founders of Omicron wanted to establish an organization that did not necessarily look at the color of a man's skin, the texture of his hair, or family affluence. You could be a rich kid and you could be a poor kid, and there was still a place for you in Omicron. You could have very coarse hair or you can have very straight hair and there's still a place for you in Omicron. And so that's something that really resonated with me at that point in time, especially as I was struggling with my sexuality.

Hearing that the fraternity valued individual differences caused Scott to believe that his sexuality would also be accepted in this space, which reinforced his decision to join. However, Scott later discovered that his fraternity did not encompass sexuality within their definition of inclusion, noting that they were inclusive up until sexuality was introduced. Experiences like Scott's reflected the first component of queer crit: "the centrality of the intersection of race and racism with sexual orientation and homophobia" (Misawa, 2012, p. 242). The culturally based fraternities were spaces created to counter racism and affirm racial/ethnic identities, yet they failed to recognize the homophobia that members such as Scott experienced and ways the organization perpetuated this form of oppression. In particular, these environments led to conflicting behaviors concerning sexuality and gender.

### ***Fraternal Behaviors Surrounding Sexuality and Gender***

Participants reflected on the behaviors their fraternities engaged in surrounding sexuality and how these discourses tied into larger conversations about gender. Some of these behaviors were indicative of productive masculinities, whereas others were hegemonic forms. Here, we discuss how members engaged in inclusive practices by having respectful discussions around sexuality and by explicitly accepting brothers' sexualities. We then address two primary ways hegemonic masculinities manifested within chapters: regulating sexualities and

gender of incoming and current members through intake processes and rendering queer identities invisible. Of note, ideals tied to hegemonic masculinities posited queer people as “other” in these racialized organizations, emphasizing the marginalization that emerges from the perceived difference of Queers of Color (Brockenbrough, 2013). The designation of queer brothers as other was centered in Evan’s reflection: “It’s like I was, I was in my letters, but I was still by myself. And so I gained what I thought were more brothers. But in reality, you know, I just felt even more isolated.” Evan assumed that being part of his brotherhood meant he was an insider within this community, yet he did not realize that being a queer brother meant that, in some ways, he would still remain as an outsider. The following sections further detail how these Queer Men of Color described the environments that led to feelings such as Evan’s; in particular, we cover how fraternity members enacted productive masculinities as well as behaviors that marginalized queer brothers within these spaces.

**Enacting productive masculinities.** One way chapter members enacted productive masculinities involved having respectful conversations centered on sexuality. August explained that when his fraternity brothers engaged in “conversations about like women or men or sexuality or anything surrounding it—we try to be as respectful as possible.” A culture of respect did not necessarily mean conversations never conveyed hegemonic ideals or behaviors; August clarified,

They definitely still talk about women while I’m around. ... I mean, it doesn’t bother me as long as it doesn’t, you know, get outrageous or even if they have those conversations about what they feel about homosexual men. They can still say whatever they like but as long as it’s respectful.

August valued that although his brothers were not perfect, they established a level of respect surrounding sexuality that reinforced that he was welcome and valued within the fraternity. He expressed, “I can say any day or time, I know my brothers are going to be there for me, regardless of my sexuality.” August recognized that this was unique to his chapter and that other chapters or fraternities may not accept individuals that identified as queer.

Another way fraternities enacted productive masculinities was when members explicitly accepted their brothers' sexuality. The summer before his second year at the university, Derek worked with a member of Phi Fraternity. The member invited Derek to the fraternity's events, but because of the stereotypes Derek had seen played out "on TV and news," he did not think being gay would work in a fraternity: "So, the first thing I told him was that I can't join because I'm gay. And he was kind of shocked that I said that." Derek then followed up by saying that his brother immediately shared acceptance concerning his gay identity. As Derek described, "He didn't look at it as my sexuality. He looked at me as a person like what I could bring to the table. What I could bring to this organization." Derek was happy he disclosed his sexuality to this brother, saying, "I love him to death and like he's, like he's family." August and Derek's fraternal experiences show the ways in which productive masculinities contribute to members' sense of belonging. Other participants recalled manners in which hegemonic masculinities marginalized or erased their identities as queer men.

**Enacting hegemonic masculinities.** A primary way in which hegemonic masculinities were embodied within participants' fraternities was by regulating sexualities of incoming members through member selection processes. Importantly, this policing of sexualities was oftentimes tied to gender-based value judgments, looking down upon those who expressed their gender in more feminine ways. For instance, even though his fraternity was increasingly inclusive of its queer members, Derek discussed "a small group" of members of his chapter that "don't want to recruit any more gays because there's too many of us." Valentino's experience shared some parallels with Derek's; however, instead of his chapter regulating membership based on sexuality, the campus community did so. Valentino explained that his chapter was known as the "gay chapter," which he largely attributed to his own involvement; as a result, the chapter failed to recruit enough new members and was unable to move from being a colony to an official chapter. Valentino was emotional reflecting on his frustration with these labels and their effect on the chapter that he started:

On paper, I was like the number one brother. ... Yet somehow we were still labeled the gay fraternity. People didn't want to join the fraternity. ... I was involved in so many things. And again, none of that mattered because I was gay.

Unfortunately, Valentino's experience resembled those of other Queer Men of Color in the study.

In an effort to avoid being known as the "gay chapter," participants described ways in which their chapters regulated membership by identifying particular traits that were and were not desirable for incoming members, such as "guys who can bring the ladies," as Scott said. Another practice that participants communicated involved voting down potential members that appeared too flamboyant or were openly queer. In fact, some of our participants experienced scrutiny about their sexuality when they entered their fraternity. After joining Upsilon, Evan discovered that his vote for membership was met with resistance because of how people perceived his sexuality— even though he was not openly queer until he was in graduate school. One of his big brothers approached him and said that during the conversation on Evan's membership, "I really had to fight for you." Evan questioned, "Why did you have to fight for me? I had a 3.7 GPA, I had the hours. I had the money to go ahead and pay. I was very involved co-curricularly on campus." Evan's brother responded, "I'll be honest with you, they think you a little fruity." This comment took Evan back, particularly because the brother that fought for him also faced rumors surrounding his sexuality. Evan thought, "I guess he hid it on the DL [down-low] more so than I did." Even though Evan felt he had more accomplishments than other potential members, his membership was still questioned because of his sexuality. Similar to Evan, other members such as Aaron and Jeff reflected on ways that sexualities of potential members were discussed during intake processes.

In addition to policing new members' sexualities during intake, the chapters regulated sexualities of current members by cultivating cultures that emphasized heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual identity and by rendering queer identities invisible. Half of the participants—Aaron, Evan, Jeff, and Scott—explicitly described organizational behaviors that did not accept queer identities. Several of the organizations rendered queer identities invisible by not directly discussing

other identities or insinuating that members should hide their relationships with other men. For instance, Komplexity explained that he did not hide his sexuality, yet the subject seemed to be a topic to avoid. Komplexity stated that he had a boyfriend when he was an undergraduate student. Although the relationship was not a secret, Komplexity shared the following:

That was something that was not discussed, you know ... it never came up as a question directly to me, you know, of course, people will talk around you, but actually talking to you—a lot of times people do not have that courage.

Based on Komplexity's understanding of how other queer men in the fraternity disclose their sexual identity, it is typically "on an as needed basis or need to know if asked basis for the majority." In this light, Komplexity's sexuality was rendered invisible within his fraternity, though not by his choice. Komplexity's experience resembled ways that other participants, such as Aaron, Scott, and Jeff, described organizational norms surrounding sexuality.

### ***Responses to Fraternal Behaviors Surrounding Sexuality and Gender***

Participants enacted a number of responses to fraternal behaviors surrounding sexuality and gender. Some participants were situated in hostile environments in which they were forced to conform by hiding their sexuality and adopting hegemonic forms of masculinities. Yet regardless of how participants performed their gender and shared their sexuality within these spaces during their undergraduate experience, all participants described engaging in acts of resistance by challenging heteronormative behaviors and hegemonic masculinities. This took the form of serving as mentors for other Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities, together with forming subcultures within their organizations.

**Conforming within hostile environments.** One manner in which participants responded to hostile environments was by conforming to heteronormative behaviors in the form of hiding their sexuality. Aaron,

Scott, Evan, and Jeff's chapters were hostile environments wherein queer members were forced to keep their identities on the "down-low" (DL). These participants believed that staying on the DL was their only option if they wanted to remain members of their fraternities. Evan explained he was not openly gay because he "just feared the stigma." Yet he was not the only member in his chapter that kept his sexuality on the DL. As he discussed, it "would be almost chapter suicide if you were to admit it." Rather than commit "chapter suicide," Evan developed strategies to remain on the DL, reminding himself,

I just compartmentalized my sexuality. Because I was surrounded and saturated so much by heteronormative, misogynistic behavior. And so it was almost as if rather than behaving like them, I guess I tried to become neutral. So I was not acting out to a certain degree on my homosexual behavior ... I did everything in my power to divert from my sexuality.

Evan's efforts to compartmentalize his sexuality did not mean that people suspended their suspicions about Evan. In fact, he commented, "I did have people come to me and tell me that my sexuality was the topic of conversation when I was not there." Evan's attempts to "become neutral" and to "divert" from his sexuality fell short of members' desires to completely erase this aspect of Evan.

Like Evan, Jeff also developed strategies to keep his sexuality on the DL. He formed a close relationship with the NPHC president at the time, who was also gay and not completely open with his sexuality. This person taught Jeff some messages about codeswitching as it related to identifying as gay and holding membership in an NPHC organization:

He gave me like some cues, some nonverbal cues of how to move and navigate campus ... I subconsciously took it as like him modeling. ... Not how I should behave, but how I should navigate or move about campus ... to not be outed, right?

These learned behaviors were useful to Jeff as he maintained his DL life.

Another way in which participants negotiated their sexuality involved overcompensating with their work ethic. Scott asserted that being a gay man in culturally based fraternities means that they have to work harder than straight men: “Once we get in we have to be the hardest workers ... because they look at me as this deficit already coming in and I haven’t done anything wrong for them to look at me like that but because I’m gay.” Queer men were expected to not only enter their chapters with more accolades than their peers but also perform at higher rates to compensate for their sexuality.

In addition to efforts to minimize focus on their sexuality, participants diverted attention from their identities by enacting hegemonic forms of masculinities to remain DL. Though Scott was excited to become an Omicron, there were certain experiences and a culture that worried him in terms of being a gay man in this organization. As he described, the Omicrons at the time were extremely hypermasculine. This led him to pursue promiscuous behaviors with women in order to fit with the group:

Just the locker room talk as people say, and then they turn to you and ask you, well, well, how many, how much sex have you had this week? Well, now I have to go out and replicate that. Or surpass it.

Beyond hypersexuality, Queer Men of Color described other instances in which they engaged in hegemonic forms of masculinities to navigate their fraternal cultures.

Once Aaron was part of his chapter, he noticed the ways that he and the other members regulated the sexualities of people joining the organization. There were two flamboyant gay men who attempted to join the chapter whom Aaron was a part of voting down:

One guy I felt was just too flamboyant. And I just didn’t feel a thing. Nothing. It was a “no” and go on. The other guy, you know, the other, another time. I felt bad. Um, and fortunately, you know, I followed this person. He actually joined Upsilon through an alumni chapter after college.

Aaron was not the only participant that reported voting down flamboyant or openly gay potential brothers. Jeff also admitted that in

order to fit in, he sometimes went along with this perpetuation of homophobia and regulation of others' gender performance.

**Ways Queer Men of Color enacted resistance.** Although participants' fraternities frequently marginalized their sexual identities and the manners in which they performed their gender, there were also meaningful ways in which they enacted resistance to heteronormative behaviors, exemplifying disidentificatory actions (J. E. Muñoz, 1999). In these moments, the Queer Men of Color were still a part of their fraternal culture but subverted the dominant heterosexism and hegemonic masculinities that permeated these contexts. Participants reflected on educating their brothers by challenging heteronormative behaviors and hegemonic masculinities, serving as mentors for other Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities, and forming subcultures within their organizations.

**Challenging heteronormative behaviors.** As previously mentioned, other fraternity members often rendered sexuality invisible despite whether the participants wanted their sexuality to be known or not. For instance, on one occasion, Valentino danced with his boyfriend at a party when one of his brothers "came up to me while we were dancing and was like, 'You know, could you all . . .' [gestured to stop]." This was not the first time this particular brother attempted to regulate Valentino's sexuality, and Valentino did not always resist these behaviors. However, this time, Valentino responded by stating the following:

I was like, "No." I was like ... "everybody else is dancing with everyone else. This is my boyfriend and I barely see him so I'm gonna keep dancing with him. And if someone has a problem, it's our party and they can leave."

Discussing how he gained the confidence to challenge the heteronormative beliefs held by this brother, Valentino stated, "I think by the time I got to my senior year, I started exerting myself a lot stronger with in regards to censoring myself and like, 'I'm gay. I really don't care who has a problem with it.'" Valentino's stronger sense of self empowered him to challenge his brothers as they attempted to police his sexuality, resembling other participants who brought sexuality to the forefront.

For example, August enacted resistance by challenging others in conversations about sexuality. He did not have explicit discussions with all of his brothers about his sexuality but still felt that his identity as a queer man was accepted: "I never really had the conversation of, 'Hey, guys. I'm homosexual so, x, y, and z.' It was something that they figured out through conversation. I would complement a man here or I would talk about preference there." August also recalled times when he had to confront a brother, or other individuals, about displays of disrespect to the LGBT community. August explained, "I have an obligation to defend the LGBT community. And just like I have an obligation to defend the Black community or the male population or whatever." August admitted that there are times when he gets tired of having to respond or teach in these situations; however, he noted, "I know the risk of being tired ... it becomes my fault when I let the situation happen multiple times and I don't address it the first time."

For Derek, simply being his authentic self as he networked across campus was a way of challenging heteronormativity in fraternity life. He further explained,

I wanted to be a really big influence on everybody to be more Greek unified, be more open to sexuality, and also ... being a face, being a gay male in Greek life. So people see like, okay, I'm gay. If he's gay, he can join a fraternity.

Derek intentionally networked with other members of FSL to not only promote collaborations with his fraternity but also normalize being queer within FSL.

Scott found himself enacting resistance against heteronormative behaviors with his fraternity brothers by confronting them when they exhibited hegemonic masculinities. One day, he was talking with a couple of his brothers about another brother: "And one of my fraternity brothers, said, 'Oh, man he's just, he's just exhibiting that fag behavior.' ... I immediately was like, 'bro, you can't use that terminology.'" On another occasion, one of Scott's brothers told him, "I forget that you're gay." Scott responded,

That's a great luxury for you because I never forget the fact that I identify as homosexual because of the microaggressions or because of the hatred and the, the potential violence

that can come to me being somebody who identifies as person who is same gender loving.

These are just two examples of ways that Scott interrupted his brothers' hegemonic behaviors and raised their consciousness about his experience as a queer man.

***Serving as mentors for other Queer Men of Color.*** Another form of resistance against fraternal heteronormativity involved mentoring other men in culturally based fraternities and specifically other Queer Men of Color. Far removed from his undergraduate experience, Aaron was more willing to share his sexuality with people and students. He did not feel that "being gay and in my fraternity define who [he is]," rather, he is "more focused on being a positive role model for African American men in general." Aaron described,

I know and recognize that, you know, young African American males and females still have this perception of what being in a fraternity, especially a historically Black fraternity looks like. So maybe being a positive role model ... maybe those guys that are identifying as gay or queer and they see that old Aaron can do it, I know I can too. That's pretty cool.

By sharing his story, Aaron helped students recognize that there are other NPHC members that also experienced these struggles. He resisted heteronormative views of FSL by normalizing being a queer man in an NPHC fraternity.

August was another participant that helped other Queer Men of Color recognize and deconstruct hegemonic masculinities. One example he shared occurred when he attended a Pride parade with one of his gay fraternity brothers:

When it comes to how he dresses, he likes things, but he doesn't like them enough to buy them and wear them in the public because he doesn't have that courage yet. So I spent a lot of time telling him like, "Oh you know buy this so that—like if you want to wear it just wear it." ... Like you need to know that you're surrounded by what's like normal. Like this is normal.

August reaffirmed his brother's sexuality and gender expression, emphasizing that these were not something he should hide. August's use of the term "normal" prompted his brother to challenge hegemonic conceptions of masculinities and heterosexuality.

***Forming subcultures and engaging in worldmaking.*** A final approach that participants took to enact resistance to heteronormativity was through building subcultures with other Queer Men of Color and like-minded brothers within their fraternities, engaging in queer worldmaking in the process. Valentino began a Facebook group of fraternity members in his field of work because he wanted to connect with brothers that aligned with his ideologies. Valentino reflected on his rationale:

I can only surround myself around brothers of my organization who, at least in some way, shape, or form are ideologically similar to me ... I do not have time to be on a listserv and hear homophobic comments from someone who is in who knows what state. ... You know, I could not have that toxicity in my life. So I kind of situated myself in that one pocket.

Rather than remain in a hegemonic and damaging community, Valentino created his own sub-brotherhood that was inclusive of members and their sexualities.

Similarly, although Evan was glad to be a member of his fraternity, he realized that his brotherhood was "fragmented." To this point, he stated, "And so I think I just built up this wall where I got accustomed to it being a fragment of brotherhood or brotherhood with an asterisk by it with 'these exclusions apply.'" Evan found "brothers in a deeper sense" through same-gender-loving groups through social media for his fraternity and NPHC. This connection was forged through shared experiences as Queer Men of Color in NPHC:

I mean, we have a deeper sense and another layer that is not seen by, you know, brothers who are heterosexual. Because we have to couple with the fact of being Black gay men in a historically Black fraternity ... you're able to actually let your hair down with somebody that is in that sub brotherhood, or that subculture.

Jeff also eventually started taking other Queer Men of Color underneath his wing, creating a community that made him extremely connected: “There’s probably three or four of them that we’re still like, we’re still kind of like our own subchapter. ... It kind of formed into kind of this, this sub brotherhood.” Jeff explained that he and the members of the “sub-brotherhood” traveled together and experienced other firsts such as visiting gay clubs in various cities. Importantly, Jeff acknowledged,

They also like are my, you know, in some ways, my biggest cheerleaders. ... No matter how much time passes, there’s always, you always feel like, you know, you just pick up where you left off when you see each other.

Although not out in his undergraduate years, an important part of Jeff’s worldmaking involved eventually connecting with a group of brothers with whom he could be his authentic self.

## **Discussion**

Similar to previous research on inclusive and productive forms of masculinities (Anderson, 2008; Chan, 2017; F. Harris & Harper, 2014; McClure, 2006), these findings highlighted how culturally based fraternities can establish cultures in which members’ sexualities and forms of gender expression are accepted. Likewise, findings also point to ways that hegemonic and intolerant behaviors permeate chapters. This discussion centers these findings in relation to previous research as well as through a queer of color critique (Brockenbrough, 2013).

The participants were largely drawn to their fraternities because they wanted to connect with other Men of Color. However, although these individuals’ racial identities were affirmed in these organizations, it was clear that sexual identities were not always accepted within their fraternities. From a perspective grounded in a queer of color critique, it is evident that although these organizations argued for the centrality of race, they regularly failed to acknowledge how sexual difference plays a role in larger conversations about racial equity. This finding aligns with other studies that assert the

limitations of spaces that center only one form of oppression in affirming multiple marginalized identities (Duran, 2019; Kumashiro, 2001; Misawa, 2010). Further, Derek's hesitation in joining his fraternity also pointed to the challenges that culturally based fraternities and sororities may present for those that do not see themselves as being culturally connected enough to join the organization. For Derek, this was embodied through his uncertainty that he was too "whitewashed" to be part of a Latino-based fraternity. In Valentino's case, his views of the Latino-based fraternity on campus as too focused on a certain type of Latino identity led him to start his own chapter. Valentino's experience was reflective of one of the multiracial microaggressions identified in J. C. Harris's (2017) study on the experiences of multiracial college women—that students were "not (monoracial) enough to fit in" (p. 437).

Although fraternal spaces largely reaffirmed participants' racial identities, they often served to further marginalize participants' sexualities and gender expression. This phenomenon occurred directly within the fraternity and also in Valentino's discussion of being known as "the gay chapter" in relation to the greater institution. Valentino internalized responsibility for his fraternity's reputation, which was a reflection of homophobic culture on campus. Similarly, within the fraternal context, several participants responded to homophobic membership by staying on the DL. The findings showed that these Queer Men of Color responded in a number of different manners to navigate their chapters and organizations; thus, their narratives paralleled J. E. Muñoz's (1999) statement:

Disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. (p. 5)

As Muñoz described, participants recounted how they conformed within hostile environments as well as how these environments contributed to their acts of resistance through disidentification. The ways in which chapters enacted behaviors surrounding sexuality and gender

cultivated hostile or inclusive environments, which informed whether participants were able to present more authentic selves or were compelled to conform within these environments (J. E. Muñoz, 1999). Half of the participants felt the need to develop strategies to navigate and conceal their sexuality. For these participants, involvement in a culturally based fraternity meant they were forced to erase a part of themselves to affirm another. In addition to concealing their sexuality, participants commented on adopting hegemonic behaviors as a form of conformity within these environments.

All participants engaged in some form of queer worldmaking (J. E. Muñoz, 1999), a central concept in conversations surrounding queer of color critique. This process of worldmaking involves imagining queer futures by interrupting the present through disidentificatory actions. Although some participants were able to enact forms of resistance and worldmaking during their undergraduate experience, others did so after graduation as members of alumni chapters, chapter advisors, and unofficial mentors. Participants reworked their fraternal cultures by challenging heteronormative behaviors and serving as mentors for other Queer Men of Color. Forming subcultures was also a crucial form of worldmaking that many of our participants engaged in, identifying other Queer Men of Color or fraternity brothers that aligned with their values and with whom they could build community. Although the participants were agentic in enacting forms of resistance, it is also important to underscore the systemic issues that necessitate this resistance. These behaviors underscore the labor required of these men (Blockett, 2018; J. E. Muñoz, 1999).

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This work has direct implications for practice for fraternity members, FSL professionals, and national fraternal organizations. Notably, to devise our recommendations, we asked the participants themselves to offer their hopes for culturally based fraternities, honoring their knowledge and perspectives in the process. Though they spoke directly about culturally based fraternities, we would like to emphasize that these implications are also relevant to historically white fraternal organizations, as systems such as heterosexism and hegemonic

forms of masculinity are also present in those spaces. A key suggestion from participants moving forward is to engage these stakeholders in direct discussions regarding sexuality and to critically examine ways heteronormative behaviors, practices, and policies are perpetuated through these spaces. Fraternity and sorority life professionals have the unique opportunity to engage on the ground floor with fraternity members. Several participants argued that FSL professionals should implement programming that brings members into conversations surrounding sexuality and masculinities. Aaron noted that these conversations should embrace the “uncomfortable” nature of these conversations and engage students in them head on.

Rather than engaging in discussions around sexuality and masculinities once each year or solely including these topics as an optional session within FSL educational efforts, these conversations should be required and engaged in frequently. Within these discussions, presenters must equip students with the knowledge and language needed to recognize and interrupt heterosexist behaviors. Valentino emphasized that these trainings should include discussions on intersectionality to interrogate the systems of power affecting Queer People of Color, and further suggested that LGBTQ center and FSL professionals should work collaboratively toward this aim. Valentino’s comment brings to light the importance of tapping into the expertise of campus professionals as well as being intentional when inviting facilitators from outside the institution to lead educational sessions. These conversations can increase awareness of the experiences of queer members within fraternal spaces as well as how all members can intervene in hegemonic and homophobic behaviors. Importantly, examples such as Valentino’s fraternity being known on campus as “the gay chapter” illustrate that discussions around sexuality and gender performance are significant beyond fraternal spaces. These experiences can provide avenues for collegians to develop empathy and understanding that will serve them throughout their lifetime. FSL professional staff can be strategic in partnering with other campus organizations, centers for equity and inclusion, and student affairs broadly to ensure these opportunities are made available to students within FSL communities as well as the greater student body.

Furthermore, national organizations hold positions of power and influence on a broad scale and have the ability to influence climates

for queer members. Participants recommended actions such as releasing explicit statements addressing sexuality, requiring sexuality training, and identifying other ways to engage current members and alumni in conversations surrounding sexuality. Scott suggested that organizations also offer educational sessions around sexuality and gender for alumni advisors so that they are better prepared to guide their chapters. In addition to educational pieces, Komplexity noted that organizations must be conscientious about who they choose to serve in leadership roles to avoid perpetuating hegemonic culture.

Although not explicitly discussed by the participants, another implication for practice derived from their discussion on chapter selection processes. Although the participants all described the intentionality in their decision making when selecting an organization to be part of, their experiences within the organization did not necessarily align with those positive notions they had of the organization and members after they joined. To address this disparity, FSL practitioners, national organizations, and local chapters could more effectively incorporate discussions, workshops, and other experiences within their new member education processes that serve to reduce the marginalization of queer people and other marginalized populations (e.g., religious minorities and individuals with disabilities) within these organizations. We encourage stakeholders to have conversations with members that can change hegemonic aspects of fraternal culture serving to oppress queer people within these spaces.

When it comes for future directions for research, one limitation of this work is that it only included perspectives from men that identified as Black and Latino. Future research can further untangle nuances in individuals' experiences based on racial/ethnic identity. Extending a parallel study to include men that identify with other racial or ethnic groups could offer additional understanding of the experiences of Queer Men of Color. Furthermore, little research focuses on the experiences of Queer Women of Color. Future studies can also explore their experiences within culturally based sororities. Finally, Anderson's (2008) work pointed to differences in how an individual chapter enacted inclusivity compared with the national fraternal organization. Future research could further investigate nuances in how culturally based organizations have effectively addressed inequities versus that of chapters.

## Conclusion

The narratives provided by the Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities have the potential to substantially shape practice and research in higher education. Using queer of color critique (Brockenbrough, 2013; Ferguson, 2004, 2018) as a framework, this research illuminated how participants were marginalized in organizations based on their sexuality and at times, gender expression. Though they replicated problematic behaviors at times in order to navigate their chapters, Queer Men of Color also discussed how they engaged in disidentificatory behaviors that allowed them to resist dominant discourses of heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity. Despite laboring for brotherhood, Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities also built queer worlds in these environments. Higher education professionals should thus listen to these stories in order to address inequalities in FSL and to value the agency of Queer Men of Color.

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