

Corporate Bodies, Disdainful and Aloof: Columbia Fraternities and White Supremacy

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Columbia University and Slavery Course

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On May 16, 1908, the Columbia Daily Spectator published an article on the planned entertainment of students from sixteen different high schools who were staying at the university for an Interscholastic Track Meet. The students were staying with Columbia fraternity brothers. After laying out a schedule of the meet, the article describes the evening itinerary:

Following the contest the men will be entertained at supper by the fraternities after which there will be a special smoker and entertainment for which extensive preparations have been made. It is expected that several members of the Faculty will be present and speak briefly on the various fields of student activity. Arrangements have been made to have a quartet from the Glee Club lead in the general singing, L. Bartow '09 to do some clog-dancing, and to have *a short minstrel performance*. (emphasis mine)[1]

The fraternities' organization of a minstrel show for students outside of the university bubble is an important point of departure in an investigation of Columbia fraternities and their legacies of racism. The tradition of minstrelsy at Columbia began at least in 1878, if not earlier. At the beginning of the 20th century, minstrel shows had not yet begun

their decline in national popularity. The origin of these shows is historically rooted in the crafting of blackness as inferior. They involved white actors putting on blackface and acting as caricatures of black people, often for the purposes of reifying socially constructed categories of race. The fraternities, supervised by “members of the Faculty”, participated in this dehumanizing tradition and displayed it to prospective Columbia students as part of a vignette of university life. The fraternities were not the only student group to have engaged in minstrelsy; the gleeful reveling in blackface of the Glee Club, the Varsity Show, and the Soph Show are all documented in Columbia Daily Spectator and in student research from previous iterations of this course.[2] However, in this paper I will argue that Columbia fraternities occupy a unique position in the history of Columbia’s ties to enslavement. As bastions of whiteness, masculinity, and exclusivity, fraternities relied on a foundation of elitism. Like white people using caricatures of black people to feel more secure in their whiteness, fraternities relied on an ‘Other’ in order to reaffirm their own identities. I frame these identities in terms of ‘fraternal masculinity’, a term coined by Nicholas Syrett to describe how men have gained prestige and respect, especially from other men, by being masculine.[3] In this paper, I will explicate the history of how Columbia fraternities embodied the confluence of white supremacy and fraternal masculinity in ways that were inherently exclusionary and racist. I will do this through exploring the imagery fraternities deployed in the early 20th century, white bias clauses in the mid 20th century and their eventual abolition, and fraternities’ policing role in their interactions with the Harlem community (which originated in the late 19th century but maintains a contemporary legacy).

The question of who gets included in the sphere of fraternal masculinity is one that intersects with Columbia’s defining curriculum: The Core. The Core’s syllabi center around the Western canon and Western civilization, and the history of the Core is permeated with racist ideology. For example, John J. Coss, one of the founders of the Contemporary Civilization subset of the Core, “vigorously opposed admitting more Jewish, Black, and women students into the University” and “wrote a letter to the University’s president [in 1926] urging him to oppose the burgeoning population of Black people in Harlem by purchasing property surrounding Columbia”. After learning of Coss’s personal investment in Columbia’s practices of exclusion and displacement, it is

difficult to imagine that the Western focus of the Core is *not* informed by the white supremacist ideals of its creators.[4] Columbia fraternities, particularly academic fraternities, took this racist *modus operandi*, sustained it, focused it, and amplified it. The rhetoric of Columbia fraternities asserts Western superiority and a false dichotomy between the West and the East as the foundation of their understanding of the ‘Greek’ aspect of Greek life. The Columbia chapter of Sigma Xi, an honor fraternity primarily dedicated to science-based research, wrote in their 1907 constitution:

“We should realize the importance of holding up this educational position of science for recognition and honor. The practical side of science is felt and appreciated more in the institutions of the West where progress and activity are more vigorous; the value of a broad and liberal education is more deeply appreciated in the East where competition is closer and where the machinery of society and custom is more rigid and exacting.”[5]

In this passage, Sigma Xi’s regard for their specific position and the “recognition and honor” it afforded them served to legitimize their quest to expand their chapter at Columbia. A self-fulfilling prophecy follows from this statement. Which came first: the Sigma Xi members’ intellectual legitimacy and honor, or their specific position of being at a prestigious institution like Columbia? Additionally, their description of the philosophies and paradigms of ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ scholarship in binary terms replicates a false dichotomy that, in practice, “does not take account of the complexities and diversity of philosophies of education within and between their educational systems”. The words used to describe the East – “machinery”, “rigid”, and “exacting” – carefully erase the humanity of people in the East, who become useful, voiceless foils in the project of uncritically extolling Western “vigor” and “progress”. The constitution of Sigma Xi is a crucial example of Columbia fraternities using the disguise of “Western values” to mask their white supremacy.

This revisionist history of the West manifests again in editions of *Columbiad* (the Columbia yearbook) from the first two decades of the twentieth century, which reveal racialized imagery on the cover pages introducing the sections on ‘fraternities.’ While these cover pages cannot be assumed to have been authored by fraternity members themselves, they reflect the ways in which the larger Columbia community perceived

fraternities in the early 20th century and the images of fraternities that students brought home with them. In an image from 1907, a white woman stands upright, naked except for a golden loincloth and golden headdress reminiscent of that of an Egyptian pharaoh[6]. She holds a skull in her right hand, semi-cradling it, and a key in her left hand. She appears to be exiting a pyramid, given the hieroglyphics on the beige wall behind her. She is also standing on a red carpet. The bottom of the red carpet reads, in large capital letters: FRATERNITIES. The association of the classical world (through the imagery of ancient Egypt) with the white female body first and foremost whitewashes the history of the ancient world. The population of ancient Egypt was incredibly diverse: skin color varied between the peoples of Lower Egypt, Upper Egypt, and Nubia, who in various eras rose to power in Ancient Egypt. The whitewashing of Egypt has an insidious racist legacy. The debate over the race of the ancient Egyptians intensified during the 19th century movement to abolish slavery in the United States, as arguments relating to the justifications for slavery increasingly asserted the historical, mental and physical inferiority of black people. A prominent figure who argued for the whiteness of Egyptians was Samuel George Morton, an American physicist who infamously claimed that he could detect the intellectual capacity of a race by its skull capacity. This claim is seen by many to be the origin of scientific racism in the United States.[7] With regards to the race of Egyptians, Morton concluded, “Negroes were numerous in Egypt, but their social position in ancient times was the same that it now is [in the United States], that of servants and slaves. [...] There is one great difficulty, and to my mind an insurmountable one, which is that the advocates of the negro civilization of Egypt do not attempt to account for, how this civilization was lost.... Egypt progressed, and why, because it was Caucasian”.[8] It is in the shadow of this history of whitewashing that the fraternity imagery stands. Additionally, a fraternity cover image from 1906 depicts a white woman with long dark hair and a gray dress sitting on the external steps of what appears to be a temple.[9] She stares into a fire in a small, elevated metal pit. Above the temple entrance, FRATERNITIES is written in Greek lettering. The white woman in front of the temple combined with the white woman in front of the pyramid reflect an American tradition of using a white woman for national (or, in this case, organizational) personification: Columbia, described by *The Atlantic* as the “much older and classier

sister” of Uncle Sam.[10] *The Atlantic* further explains, “America was Columbia in the same way that England was Britannia and France was Marianne”. She was employed frequently in military propaganda. During World War I, she was portrayed in either a white dress or a dress with the pattern of the American flag, beseeching, “Columbia Calls – Enlist Now For U.S. Army”, “Wake Up, America! Civilization Calls Every Man, Woman, and Child!”, and “Sow the Seeds of Victory: Plant & Raise Your Own Vegetables (Write to the National War Garden Commission for Free Books on Gardening, Canning, and Drying)”. In “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean”, an American patriotic song popular in the early 20th century, the lyrics include, “The star spangled banner bring hither, / O’er Columbia’s true sons let it wave”. [11] Columbia functions as a symbol and advocate for the U.S. war machine. Her moral authority stems from her status as a white woman, as the standards for white women at the time were to be pious and maternal. Black women, conversely, were portrayed as hypersexual (and therefore immoral) and neglectful in motherhood. She also functions to reify notions of white male citizenship; in the anthem about her, the reference to “true sons” implies a counterpart: the “false sons”, or any men who were disconnected from or othered by U.S. exceptionalism and militarism. That category would have included Native American men who suffered from the legacies of U.S. settler colonialism, African-American men who experienced the continuing segregation and brutality of U.S. systemic racism, and Chinese immigrant men whose families were prevented from joining them in the U.S. by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As Columbia was a popular image at the time and the literal namesake of the university, the usage of similar imagery in the *Columbiad* fraternity cover pages is hardly surprising. The parallel between the general figure of Columbia and the two white women on the pages who guard the buildings of the fraternity demonstrates the fraternities’ function as microcosms or mimics of the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism through its whiteness and masculinity.

Additionally, the fact that the woman in front of the pyramid holds a skull and key symbolizes the secrecy and exclusivity of the fraternities. This secrecy and exclusivity is further emphasized in other fraternity cover pages. In a cover image from 1917, figures in pointed black hoods and robe are pictured walking up an open mountain path by the light of the full moon.[12] In a fraternity cover image from 1905, another figure in a black

hood and robe lifts his arms as if in celebration in the middle of a blazing fire.[13] In one from 1911, a figure in a black hood and robe stands with his arms crossed and head down in front of a gigantic crystal ball.[14] This particular imagery of disguise and ritual is relevant because its time period largely coincides with the time period of the second era of the Ku Klux Klan. In many ways, the second Klan modeled its structure after fraternal organizations. Historian Mary Ann Clawson writes:

“Although it is best known as a racist and nativist social movement, the twentieth-century version of the Klan began as a conventional fraternal order. Its founder, William J. Simmons, was a seasoned fraternal agent, who claimed to have earned \$15,000 a year as a district manager for the Woodmen of the World. [...] In 1915, the massive popularity of D. W. Griffith's film, “The Birth of a Nation,” with its glorification of the Klan's role in the Reconstruction South, inspired Simmons to found a new and potentially lucrative order. [...] Under the new regime the Klan met with Swift success, recruiting eighty-five thousand members and earning more than \$300,000 for Clarke, Tyler, and Simmons in its first fifteen months of operation.”[15]

For clarity, the fraternities mentioned by Clawson refer more to fraternal orders outside of universities, such as freemasons – the same orders that college fraternities used to model their structure. Further, Miguel Hernandez writes:

“Throughout the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan developed in step with the major fraternities in America. These influences would prove fundamental to its success. The Invisible Empire managed to selectively incorporate the most popular features of America's most beloved fraternities and soon became one of the nation's largest fraternal orders. Some of the order's most iconic customs, such as the lighting of the fiery cross or the organization's white robes and masks, are derived from their fraternal traditions.”[16]

Columbia fraternities' exhibitions of the very structures and images used to launch the most notorious white supremacist hate group in American history cannot be overlooked. The “lighting of the fiery cross” borrowed by the Klan is seen in the 1905 image of the hooded figure with his arms outstretched in the center of a blaze. The ceremonial walk in single file by the light of the full moon could be straight out of a

description of the Klan's arcane rituals and oaths. The robes and masks, although black instead of white, strongly resemble those of the Klan; the hoods are pointed and obscure the face so as to disguise one's identity. For the Klan, that disguise functioned to intimidate the people they were terrorizing, and one might speculate that the function of the Columbia fraternities' hoods was not much different.

The records and private actions of fraternity members in the early twentieth century are largely undocumented. To the surrounding Columbia community, this secrecy and exclusivity were discomfiting – and this discomfort, at least, was well documented. In an article from April 21, 1914, the Columbia Daily Spectator reported:

The following editorial appears in the current issue of the Alumni News and is quoted below in part: At Columbia fraternities are probably more ridiculously secret than at any other college or university. [...] The fact is the Columbia chapters should play the game with vizors up. In other colleges the campus paper publishes a list of the pledges. Why doesn't Spectator? In other colleges the campus paper gives an account of fraternity dances, smokers, teas, house parties. Why doesn't Spectator? In other college the whole activity of the Hellenists, their acquisition of new homes, their inter-chapter athletic contests, their inter-fraternity agreements and conferences, are part and parcel of the institution's interests, accorded place beside sports and administrative affairs. On the rare occasions when Spectator mentions one of these things the comment is sneaked furtively onto an inside page as if to indicate that it intends to commit no offence. [...] We but wish to indicate the stupid custom that has saddled itself on the Columbia bodies and makes them mere extra-University entities, supporting the college as individuals, as corporate bodies, disdainful and aloof.[17]

There are several items of interest in this alumni editorial. The first is the assertion that Columbia fraternities are more secretive than fraternities at other institutions. One can only speculate as to the reason that may be (if the statement is any more than a crude exaggeration on the part of the alumni): the prestige of Columbia, the decentralized nature of the campus giving more opportunity for privacy and exclusion, or perhaps the impulse to hide more indecorous (broadly defined) activities. Further, the alumni's depiction of Spectator as skittishly avoiding the implication that it would ever

offend or denigrate the fraternities – or even merely give fraternities enough attention to warrant a front-page spot – provokes the question: what consequences were Spectator avoiding? The fact that a contemporaneous, credible commentator viewed the frats as highly secretive and exclusive supports the idea that this secrecy operated to intimidate students of color in a similar way to the Klan's secret society. Finally, the disdain and aloofness described by the alumni are intriguing given that Columbia an institution that would most likely be defined by any community outside of its elite bubble as disdainful and aloof. Pretentious elitism, it seems, is only distasteful when it is intracommunal. The alumni go on to criticize Columbia fraternities for their lack of community service, but they do not mean community service the way one might hope they mean it – for example, some kind of act of solidarity with marginalized communities (perhaps the majority-black Harlem community, which was and remains right on their doorstep). Instead, the alumni ask the fraternities to “put service to the University ahead of aggrandizement for themselves”, “co-operate with the Deans and Faculty in the matter of scholarship”, “assist coach and manager in holding the men to training”, and “add to the human life of the campus by less puerile privacy over their social affairs”. The alumni's criticism and recommendations make visible the fact that although Columbia fraternity members often benefited from a perfect cocktail of societal privileges, they did not necessarily conduct themselves as the university would have preferred, prioritizing their own fraternal self-interest over the public image of the larger institution.

Here, I will move forward a few decades in the history of Columbia fraternities in order to shine a spotlight on another key moment in which fraternity interests conflicted with the university's reputational concerns: the issue of white bias clauses. These clauses refer to any membership clause, formal or implied, restricting fraternity membership to white men. The clauses were not instated by Columbia chapters specifically but rather the national fraternities generally, as Syrett reveals:

By the early 1910s...fraternities were adding codes of exclusion to their constitutions mandating that members must be white, Christian males. Although these codes were largely moot, as de facto exclusion had already been established by that point, these

codes demonstrate the concern that some renegade chapter might initiate an unsuitable member if it was not explicitly forbidden.[18]

References to Christianity illustrate that restrictive white clauses extended beyond race to religious homogeneity. While Columbia fraternities were not directly responsible for the creation of such clauses, fraternal opposition to them is largely absent from the archives. That is not to say that there was no resistance to the clauses; in December of 1948, the Columbia chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) wrote a letter to then president of the university, Dwight D. Eisenhower. They argued, "If Columbia University is to maintain its liberal traditions and educate for democracy, it must practice democracy in its own bailiwick. Students here and throughout the country expect you, as president of Columbia, to make a statement on this issue. We request that you do so immediately." [19] A short summary of the letter's contents was published in the New York Times, but that was as far as it went; Eisenhower made no public response to NAACP's demands. In the 1950s the opposition to white clauses was given national attention, and fraternity headquarters staff could not remain ambivalent once universities began demanding that fraternities remove their restrictive clauses or lose campus recognition.[20] In the 1950s several universities, supported by the U.S. Supreme Court, took issue with fraternity racial segregation including the University of Connecticut in 1954, the State University of New York in 1958, and the University of Minnesota in 1961[21]. These university stances and court decisions helped shift public perception against fraternity racial discrimination, pushing organizations to integrate, even before passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As for Columbia's specific struggle with the clauses, in 1949 the Columbia University Student Council asked the administration to set a deadline for removal of bias clauses. Pamphratria (Columbia's inter-fraternity council) and the Columbia College Board of Student Representatives demurred, as each organization refused to consider the issue within its realm. However, student opinion quickly registered itself in a Spectator poll. Over five-sixths of the students polled thought that Pamphratria should act to eliminate discrimination in campus fraternities. In February 1950, Pamphratria reversed its position and urged Columbia fraternities to attempt to change the restrictions on a national scale. In May of that year, an all-college referendum was held on the question

of empowering the Student Board to set a deadline for the removal of white clauses. Despite the opposition of *Spectator*, which claimed that since “the Board would be helpless to enforce its decree”, the passing of the proposal would “invite evasion” of the decision, the motion passed by a vote of 764 to 457. The Student Board set a deadline of 1956 which it referred to the administration for binding action. The University, in the words of *Spectator*, “hemmed and hawed ... and did nothing.”[22] 1953 proved to be a crucial year, as the Student Board came out strongly for a deadline and a petition circulated by the Columbia chapter of Students for Democratic Action secured a referendum on the bias issue for the second time in three years. The student body rejected the 1958 deadline but overwhelmingly supported the idea of a deadline to be set by the Committee on Student Organizations (which was, in contrast to the Student Board, an administrative body that held the power to shut down fraternity chapters). Four days after the conclusion of the referendum, CSO set 1960 as the deadline for removal of bias clauses. The storm over the issue subsided for a while as attention was concentrated on the efforts of Sigma Chi, Sigma Nu, Zeta Beta Tau, and Alpha Sigma Phi to effect a change in their national constitutions or rituals. ZBT, after failing by a few votes in 1953, finally succeeded in the summer of 1954. Sigma Nu first raised the restrictive clause at a convention in 1952 and got only Dartmouth to side with it. By 1954, they had achieved a vote of 81, and in 1956 they barely missed success. In 1956, CSO reconsidered its decision and changed the deadline to 1964 for Sigma Nu and Sigma Chi. For Alpha Sigma Phi, the deadline remained 1960 because CSO was unsatisfied with their lack of progress.[23] After this extension, Sigma Nu sent a panicked update to other Sigma Nu chapters throughout the nation, writing, “our chapter is threatened with expulsion from the Columbia campus unless the ‘white clause’ in our Constitution [...] is removed by 1960” and urgently advocating “immediate action to prevent the loss of any more chapters” and to ensure that “the future of our Fraternity [is] secure”. [24] Nowhere in the document is any mention of morals, values, or principles; Sigma Nu’s sole concern was with their own survival. Additionally, a new problem had arisen when an editorial in *Spectator* in November 1955 questioned whether a number of fraternities other than the controversial three were just as guilty of “real” discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or ethnic origin. Phi Delta Gamma’s

Columbia chapter admitted to being bound to discriminate and several charges as to other fraternities' internal situations were publicized. Pamphratria, however, refused to ask each of its member groups to sign a declaration of freedom from discrimination. Finally, the Student Board recommended to CSO that each fraternity individually be obligated to sign such a statement – a recommendation that CSO carried out.[25] The formal removal of white clauses from the constitutions of Columbia fraternity chapters came about not out of an interest in disrupting the status quo or increasing equity in fraternities but rather out of an interest in solvency and survival.

In some instances, the fraternities also functioned as an informal extension of various policing forces in New York City, and when they did not fulfill this function, they continued to sympathize with the goal of law and order. This sympathy originates (at least in terms of documents) in Phi Beta Kappa's 1892 resolutions, forwarded to the Society for the Prevention of Crime:

Whereas the purpose of the Society of Phi Beta Kappa is to encourage friendship, morality and literature, and; Whereas, vigorous efforts have been recently made in the City of New York on the part of many good citizens having in view the better enforcement of the laws for the suppression of vice, Therefore, Resolved, that the New York Delta of Phi Beta Kappa of Columbia College expresses its sympathy with all wise and efficient movements which may be inaugurated and prosecuted by the good people of the City of New York for the enforcement of righteous laws and the abatement of iniquity.[26]

The Society for the Prevention of Crime was part of a wave of efforts at vice reform in late 19th and early 20th century New York City. The Society was chartered by the New York State Legislature. They were given the power of search, seizure, and arrest, and they were allowed to keep 50% of any fines that were levied as a result of arrests made by the society. They were not paid officials acting in a government capacity – they were merely a society of private citizens bringing to bear the authority of the government.[27] In these resolutions, Phi Beta Kappa endorses an institution of legitimized extrajudicial surveillance, policing, and assault. Given the lack of accountability in the Society's proceedings, their proceedings could target people of

color with little to no consequences. This situation was not so different from how the New York Police Department functioned at the time, but it was even less official and documented.

Other fraternities followed through on Phi Beta Kappa's resolutions later in the 20th century. Syrett writes:

“Some national fraternities issued resolutions attesting to their dedication to principles of law and order during times of protest in the late 1960s; they often advocated, as did the Pi Kappa Phi Fraternity's 1968 resolution, ‘that student controversies may be presented within the bounds of established school procedures and with due regard for the rights of fellow students.’ It was not just the nationals that felt this way; on some campuses, fraternity members were conspicuous for their counter protests. At Columbia, Beta Theta Pi played an active part in the opposition to the 1968 strikes, leading the conservative students on campus.”[28]

The respect for “established school procedures” from which Beta Theta Pi's strike suppression stems is intriguing in light of the fact that fraternity members broke rules with abandon. For the most part, they would defend these rules publicly, never actually advocating that they should be changed (there were some exceptions to this, and they usually had to do with rushing regulations and drinking), and certainly never protesting them in any organized defiance of administrative fraternity. However, after night fell over campus, fraternity members ignored almost all of the rules that administrators and student judiciary committees (of which they were often members) attempted to enforce. Their role as strikebreakers is largely performative, indicating that to be a fraternity brother and simultaneously criticize the status quo of white male hegemony was an unthinkable identity to hold.

In other examples, Columbia fraternities actively supported and worked with the NYPD in the project of criminalizing and incarcerating black and brown residents of Harlem. In a December 1971 article, the New York Times reports on Columbia fraternities' request for an increased police presence in their area following a string of 18 burglaries in fraternity buildings within the first two weeks of November.[29]

According to the college Safety Office, “all but four of these thefts were ‘the direct result of doors being left open or unlocked.’” The police officials of the 26th Precinct responded to the fraternities’ request by “[urging] students to become auxiliary policemen. As explained to the fraternity members, auxiliary policemen take a 10-week training course, and are then issued uniforms and walkie-talkies so they can patrol in groups of two”.

The question of whether the fraternity members ever took the 26th Precinct officers up on the auxiliary policeman offer lacks formal documentation, but in September 1998, members of the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity did so informally when they “foiled an attempted larceny [...] when an unidentified man was caught inside their house trying to steal a member’s clothing and money”. They described the man as homeless and Hispanic; Rich Ciancimino, the fraternity brother whose possessions were being taken, said that he screamed at the man, hit him in the chest, and ran downstairs to alert the other members in the house. Columbia Daily Spectator describes the end of the interaction:

“The perpetrator tried to run by with a backpack containing clothing and money, but fell into the hallway. The four students grabbed the suspect and threw him into the street, Ciancimino said. They then followed him up West 115th Street toward campus. ‘We had him so outnumbered that there was nothing [the suspect] could do [to escape],’ Ciancimino said. The scuffle culminated on the campus side of West 115th Street.”[30]

A useful framing device for this event is a quote from Barnard American Studies professor Christina Heatherton: “Show me the boundary between a school and a local community, and I will tell you what the students there are being taught about themselves and their place in the world”.^[31] There are several moments in this narrative in which the fraternity members could have de-escalated the conflict but in fact escalated it further: Ciancimino’s screaming and assaulting the man (in place of a different method of confrontation), the students throwing him into the street when he had already fallen, and chasing him down as if he were prey instead of communicating with words. They had already evaluated him – Hispanic, homeless – and deemed him

more of a threat than he necessarily was. After all, the items he was stealing were basic living essentials – this was no mastermind heist. The members' immediate resort to violence and lack of empathy for a more vulnerable member of their community reveals the inherently competitive, less communal approach toward justice embodied by Columbia students and epitomized by white Columbia fraternity brothers.

However, the construction of a dichotomy between fraternity brothers as white and ignorant and Harlem community members as victimized people of color is an oversimplification. To sketch an alternative vision of fraternal masculinity in order to better understand that of Columbia fraternities, I turn to the fraternal order of Sigma Pi Phi. Sigma Pi Phi, an organization with an all-black membership unaffiliated with any particular university or college, had several chapters in different major cities throughout the United States. One of their most prominent chapters, Zeta Boulé, was active in Harlem beginning in the early 20th century. One of the forerunners of Zeta Boulé was famed intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois. Fred Harris writes:

“Du Bois’s highly acclaimed book *The Souls of Black Folks*, published in 1903, reflected the character of what has been described as ‘the era of the New Negro.’ In contrast to a period of compromise that characterized the leadership of Booker T. Washington in the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, the era of the New Negro represented a growing assertiveness among black elites who were raising their voices and demanding full civil and human rights for the black community. Thus it is not by accident that the origins of Zeta Boulé are linked to this new assertiveness. [...] Sigma Pi Phi, founded in 1904 in Philadelphia and composed of leading men in the city’s black community, was organized by men with similar tastes and interests who wanted to get to ‘know the best of one another.’”[32]

Zeta Boulé’s version of fraternal masculinity differed from that of Columbia’s historically white fraternities in that its members rooted their understanding of masculinity in fighting for the rights of both themselves and other members of their communities. The white fraternities had constructed their brand of masculinity around the avoidance of the Other; any contact they had with even the slightest amount of critical thinking about race (e.g., the bias clauses) was strained, reluctant, and brief. Further, they would only

engage when a direct threat to their organization's existence was posed. Zeta Boulé did not avoid defining their masculinity relationally because it could not afford to, as their historical moment was enmeshed in collaborative organizing and community leadership. An example of this leadership emerges in 1920 in Du Bois and Augustus Granville Dill's co-publishing of *The Brownies' Book*, a magazine for black youth, the purpose of which was "to make colored children realize that being 'colored' is a normal, beautiful thing" and "to make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race". That is not to say, however, that Zeta Boulé represents liberatory fraternal masculinity while Columbia's white fraternities represent repressed fraternal masculinity. Zeta Boulé's ideals were grounded in their members' identities as elites. The description of their first meeting is virtually indistinguishable from that of a white elite fraternal order; the commonality is largely based in taste and each other's good qualities. In *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, a book that came out of Du Bois's research, he describes the "amusements" of the city's black elite: "There are always to be found parties and small receptions, and gatherings at the invitation of musical or social clubs... One large ball each year is usually given, which is strictly private. Guests from out of town are given much social attention". The class-based exclusivity of the Zeta Boulé membership eventually contributed to Du Bois's resignation from the organization. Fred Harris describes the progression:

"Several weeks [before Du Bois's eighty-third birthday] he had been indicted by the U.S. Justice Department for his involvement with the Peace Information Center, an organization that the Justice Department had identified as an unregistered agent of a foreign power. The antinuclear peace organization was believed to be a front organization for communism. During those early years of the Cold War, Du Bois, along with other peace activists such as Paul Robeson, were abandoned by friends and allies. For Du Bois, the February dinner had become not only a celebration of his birthday, but an opportunity to rally support for his impending trial. He did not receive the expected support for his birthday celebration from Zeta Boulé, nor from many other organizations he had been affiliated with, such as NAACP. [...] The trial produced little evidence that Du Bois was working in the interest of foreign agents, and he was exonerated".

Du Bois was disillusioned by the failure of loyalty of his friends and allies in the face of potential association with a potential communist. Political connections with a person who was interested in disrupting the class structure of the United States had the potential to destroy reputations. Therefore, even as Zeta Boulé's fraternal masculinity was rooted in community ties, the social scaffolding of the Cold War was too prohibitive for even the most assertive fraternities.

The question of fraternities as potentially politically radical and universally uplifting merits unpacking. Were Columbia fraternities and Sigma Pi Phi all doomed to fall short due to their innate organizational structure? Mary Ann Clawson argues that fraternal association provided the ritualized means by which members could define one another as brothers; biologically unrelated individuals thus used kinship to construct the solidarity necessary to accomplish a variety of tasks. The larger ideal of kinship was "the idiom of social interaction" and "the model of all effective social relations".[33] From there, the assumptions that underlay kin relations extended into the activities structured by fraternal association and permeated the fabric of everyday life. The model of society as family envisions people not as isolated individuals, but as occupants of specific social roles defined by their inherent relationships to one another. It envisions society not as a collection of individuals but as a corporate entity that has meaning prior to and greater than the life and interest of any single person. This utilitarian model can manifest positively or negatively depending on the group who employs it. First and foremost, fraternal organizations are organizations, and thus social resources. The question then arises: to whom does the resource of fraternal organization belong and to what uses can it be put? That is, what social categories were being validated, and what denied? Clawson writes:

Typically, fraternal forms of association have reached across boundaries, tending to unite men from a relatively wide social, economic, or religious spectrum. At the same time, fraternalism bases itself on a principle of exclusion, from which it derives much of its power. This seeming contradiction highlights the fact that the fraternal order cannot be understood as simply a random assemblage of people. Rather, it was a cultural and associational form with an implicit content, a guiding logic.

Therefore, if the fraternal order was a potential resource for social action, it was by no means a neutral resource. The inherent exclusivity of fraternities means that they pose particular risks of racism and elitism unless strong affirmative measures are taken by the university and the fraternities to promote inclusion and solidarity in their membership and activities. An understanding of the symbolic weight and power of white fraternal masculinity should inform the practices of any fraternity seeking social consciousness and community today, so that they might use their organizational resource as a tool to dismantle the Columbian ivory tower instead of supporting it.

Endnotes

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