

RUNNING HEAD: BLACK LIKE ME

BLACK LIKE ME: UNDERSTANDING RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH  
THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE SORORITIES AT  
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIs)

By

Joy L. Smith

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Approved by

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**Dr. Beth C. Rubin, Chair**

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**Dr. James Giarelli**

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**Dr. Fred J. Bonner II**

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### **Abstract of the Dissertation**

Du Bois (1902) argues that “being Black” is a consistent identity struggle for people of African descent in the United States because Black identity is often seen as incongruent with the cultural and social values of mainstream America. Tinto (1993) offers that this incongruence is apparent at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and suggests that participating in racially-centered student organizations allows Black students to “fit in” at PWIs and, in turn, promotes their success in college. Carter (1994) contends that Black identity is not a uniformed experience; socioeconomic status, educational level/attainment and ethnicity/nationality diversify it. This dissertation explored this versatility through the stories of Black women who joined White sororities at PWIs. The goal was to shed light on their experiences, to understand how race is perceived and understood in the lives of those who do not perform race in traditional or stereotypical ways. Secondly, the research delved into the intersected relationship between race, class/socioeconomics and ethnicity/nationality—and the role that it plays in defining Black identity at PWIs.

The study employed a phenomenological approach and focused on the participants’ experiences as pre-college and undergraduate students. Individual interviews, a focus group and ethnographic observations were used to collect the data. It also examined the role that race played in their decision to join a White sorority, as well as their experiences with their racial peers on campus—as first-year students and, later, as members of their sororities. The findings revealed that socioeconomic status and ethnicity/nationality played critical roles in their understandings of Black identity; most of the participants were ridiculed for “acting White” by both, their Black and White peers. Secondly, the participants felt that the authenticity of their “Blackness” was questioned by their racial peers because they did not engage with the Black

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community on campus on a regular basis. Third, their interactions with the Black/African American students on campus largely impacted their decisions to join traditional (White) sororities; their experiences with their racial peers on campus were nearly identical. Finally, the participants were celebrated their identity as Black women; they simply did not participate in their campus' "racially authenticating" activities.

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to those who believe that they aren't "enough" or "authentic" because they do not perform race according to the predetermined rules for their respective groups. Being Black (or Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, etc.) is not a uniformed identity. Your experience is unique and beautiful—you are enough.

This dissertation is also dedicated to memory of my uncle (**Lloyd Hopson**), my cousins (**Al-Therik Oliver, Lloyd Oliver** and **Jameel Williams**), my paternal grandparents (**Orsola & Robert Gilmore**) and my pastor (**Rev. Ronald B. Christian**).

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*“Write the vision and make it plain....for the vision is yet for an appointed time...it shall speak and not lie; though it will tarry, wait for it; because it will come...” (Habakkuk 2:2-3).*

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, more than 20.5 million people were enrolled as undergraduate students at four-year institutions across the United States in Fall 2016. Of those students, 2.25 million identify as “Black” or “African American”. Most of the United States’ colleges and universities are identified as predominantly White institutions (PWIs); based on this data, most Black/African American students are attending college in environments where they are in the racial “minority”.

Du Bois (1902/1994) notes that Black identity in American is one of “double consciousness”, where one maintains two identities... “[as] an American, [as] a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” and that Black/African Americans are “..always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 3). While Black/African Americans have to negotiate their identities in most social arenas, this struggle is particularly salient in higher education—specifically in PWI contexts. Tinto (1993) contends that this culture of “identity negotiation” is attributed to the incongruence between the cultural and social values of the Black/African American community and PWIs. He argues that participation in racially-centered student organizations is necessary for Black students, allowing them to merge their two identities and it affirms their racial identity.

While there is a plethora of student organizations from which to choose--including race or ethnicity-centered clubs, local chapters of race-centered national organizations, etc.), many African American students at PWIs opt to join Historically Black Greek-lettered organizations (HBGLOs). Kimbrough (2001) argues that the principles of BGLOs are congruent with those of

the communities from which their members originate and, consequently, allow them to maintain their racial identity while attending PWIs. Tinto (2005) further offers that membership in racially-centered organizations allows Black students to “fit into” PWI environments; it serves as a means of affirming and maintaining one’s racial identity.

Although there is a need for these cultural spaces, Phillips (2005) notes that “...assimilation [has continued] to be an important goal for many African American students—and that...African American college women have opted to join predominantly White sororities...” Arguably, most Black students view cross-racial membership as a statement of dissatisfaction with being Black. Consequently, students who engage in cross-racial membership are viewed as “objects of tokenism” or “sellouts” (Hughey, 2007).

Racial identity and racial identity development are key aspects of college social life; their importance is both, extremely visible and controversial in Greek life. This study will examine the phenomenon of “the Blackness” at PWIs, specifically through the lives of Black/African American women who are members of historically White sororities. The goal is to understand the role that racial identity plays in the lives of Black/African American students who do not actively participate in the “traditional” reifications of “Blackness” in predominantly White educational environments. Further, it will contribute to a more complex understanding of Black identity in these educational environments.

I will refer to the two types of sororities as “historically Black” and “traditionally White”. Each group is identified in this manner, because of its predominantly “Black” or “White” population; however, all races are represented in both types of sororities. I will also use the term “Black/African American” to refer to those who descend from any of the countries within the African Diaspora. Prior to the 1980s, the term “Black” was used as an alternative to the word,

“Negro”—which “...carried an offensive message of Jim Crow subservience”—specifically for Blacks whose ancestors were brought to the present-day United States during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. In 1988, the term “African American” was introduced by Rev. Jesse Jackson and other political officers, as a means of “[providing] cultural integrity and...placing [Black Americans] in our proper historical context” (JBHE, 1997). Although “Black” refers to one’s race and “African American” is used to identify those whose ancestry descends from the continent of Africa, the terms are used interchangeably in American culture. I will also use them synonymously for this research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black/African American women who chose to join traditionally White sororities at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). My interest in this topic stemmed from my encounters with race as a Black female undergraduate student at a PWI. Within my first two weeks of the semester, I learned that there were social codes, or rules, to “being Black” on our campus. Most of the “community” lived in specific residence halls, ate in particular dining areas, attended the Black Student Organization meetings and went to the parties in the Student Center, as they were sponsored by the Black Greek-Lettered Organizations (BGLOs) or the ethnicity-centered student clubs (i.e., West Indian Student Club, African Student Organization, etc.) on campus. Additionally, a considerable number of the Black/African American students participated in a federally-sponsored support program, which provided the participants with a “jump start” into college life. The students established strong relationships with their peers in the program; most of them remained friends throughout their undergraduate careers. Black/African American students who met the criteria were deemed as “authentically Black” and part of the community on campus; those who did not were ridiculed.

Admittedly, I did not have access to the Black community on campus at the beginning of my freshman year. I did not live in the “right” residence hall, nor did I attend BSO meetings or participate in the Summer Program. My friendship circle also included three White students, who graduated from the same high school from which I also did. My connection was established through a conversation with another Black/African American student in my Introductory Biology class. From this relationship, I became a member of the Gospel Choir; I also declared a major in Africana Studies and became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. Founded

in 1908 at Howard University, it is the first historically Black Greek-lettered organization (BGLO) for college-trained women. Despite my various cultural affiliations and attendance at several forums, parties and other events within the Black community, there were still students who said that I was “less than Black” because I did not meet all the criteria for “authentic” racial identity on campus. I was not a part of the pre-freshman summer program that my racial peers participated in nor did I regularly attend our Black Student Union meetings. I was also one of four Black/African American students in my residence hall; the majority of the Black first-year students lived across in another dormitory. As an undergraduate, I was offended by their comments—because I was confident in my identity as a Black woman. As a scholar, I realized how narrowly we defined what it meant to “be Black”. The reality is that racial identity is not homogenous; it is understood and shaped, based on one’s familial background, demographic location and other social identities—including gender, socioeconomic status and educational levels. Black identity in higher education has been largely constructed through the experiences of first-generation, working or lower middle class, U.S. born African Americans who matriculated after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. First, Black students have matriculated at PWIs since the early 1800s; Amherst College and Bowdoin College were the first institutions to grant a degree to Edward Jones and John Brown Russwurm respectively in 1826 (Franklin & Moss, 1985; as cited in Washington, 2005). Secondly, Black students represent the socioeconomic, educational and cultural diversity of the larger college population. Their experiences are often overshadowed by our need to address the various inequalities in education.

This research illuminates the myriad ways that there is no formula or model for “being Black”. Like other identities, Black identity is constructed through one’s familial, educational, socioeconomic and social experiences; gender, sexual orientation and societal notions also play

critical roles in its construction. This research examines the breadth of Black racial identity and the experiences of women who do not participate in the stereotypical reifications of being Black at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Their stories include frustration and isolation; they identify as Black women and want to be accepted but their racial community that calls them “unauthentic”. Simultaneously, their stories are courageous and empowering; they provide a voice for those whose experiences are often ignored—or, in some cases, unknown. Through their experiences, we learn that Black identity cannot be confined to any specific social behaviors or practices; instead, it is uniquely constructed through individuals’ lived experiences. By telling their stories, the existing definition of “being Black” in educative spaces is further broadened. The heightened understanding of the “Black experience” challenges higher education professionals to be more sensitive to intra-racial diversity; it affects our ability to service our students and to promote a positive experience for them.

### **Researcher’s Relationship to the Problem**

During my first year of college, my roommate (who was White) and I were good friends. In the latter part of the year, she was initiated into a National Panhellenic Council (NPC), or traditionally White, sorority. As she became more involved with her sorority, our interactions became less frequent. She only socialized with her sorority sisters and only attended events that were sponsored by her organizations or the other sororities and fraternities that were on “Greek Row”.

A year later, I became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha. While the goal of sisterhood and bonding seemed similar, I noticed that culture of the BGLOs was different from the National Panhellenic (NPC) sororities and Inter-Fraternal Council (IFC) fraternities. Instead of

participating in social events and activities at the various organizations' houses, we were hosting sociopolitical forums and community service projects as a means of addressing the social issues within the global community. Moreover, the BGLOs were primarily focused on the improvement of the racial and social climates on campus and the community at large. We did not have houses on Greek Row nor did we regularly socialize with the members of the traditional organizations. At the same time, our peers in the historically White sororities and fraternities did not attend our forums, service projects or parties in the Student Union Center. In short, the respective Greek communities were polarized by race.

Our segregation was particularly obvious at our all-Greek community functions. In these instances, we sat in our "us" and "them" enclaves. In one instance, I watched two Black women as they stood uncomfortably in the back of a University-wide Greek council meeting. A Black woman (who was a member of a BGLO) called them "Oreos" because they were both members of a White sorority. It seemed as if these women had two choices: 1) sit with the Black students—as a means of establishing their allegiance to their racial group or 2) sit with their sorority sisters and endure the ridicule of their racial community. In this context, these women were seen as racial "outsiders" because they chose to pursue membership in a traditional organization. Instead of making this decision, both young women left the meeting. Seeing their reactions made me realize how critical one's racial identity is to their experience as a college student—especially for Black students on PWI campuses. Essentially, the Black community decided that those who did not follow the rules for "being Black" on our campus were called "Oreos", "sellouts", or simply "not 'really' Black". More specifically, the community decided that those who joined traditionally White fraternal organizations would not be accepted at all; their sentiment was that those students wanted to be White. Either decision would have had

major consequences. Sitting with the other Black sorority and fraternity members would have shown their White counterparts that they had some connection to their racial community.

However, the Black students would not have embraced or accepted them because they were not a part of the community on a daily basis. One's organizational memberships, social circles and even living arrangements were a testament to their "Blackness". The two young women did not participate in the traditional reifications of race on our campus. Choosing to sit with the Black students at the Greek Council meeting would not have changed their status within the Black community on campus at all; they still would have been considered as "outsiders".

The aim of this project is to examine the role of racial identity in the social experiences of Black women who choose to join historically White sororities at PWIs. Through hearing the participants' pre-college and undergraduate experiences, I aim to understand how race is conceptualized and performed by those who chose to participate in traditional organizations—as opposed to racially-centered ones. I also want to highlight the diversity within Black identity. This research will contribute to the existing (albeit small) body of literature around race, cross-racial membership in sororities and its significance for exploring racial identity development within PWI contexts.

The following chapters focus on the experiences of seven Black/African American undergraduate women who are in traditionally White sororities. The Literature Review (Chapter Two) will explore the history of Black/African Americans in higher education, as well as the exclusionary culture that catalyzed the founding of sororities in general and historically Black-Greek lettered organizations (HBGLOs) in particular. The Literature Review will also examine the development of Black racial identity and the experiences of Black students at Predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The Methods (Chapter Three) will highlight the research methods and

the framework that were used to ground the project. The Findings (Chapter Four) will delve into the participants' pre-college experiences of the participants, their respective relationships with the Black community on campus and how they negotiated their racial identity development in predominantly White and historically Black contexts. The concluding chapter, Recommendations and Conclusion, will review the role that racial marginalization and stereotyping play in identity development; it will also highlight how higher education professionals can address issues of Black identity development in their campus programming, policy, and practice initiatives. The goal of this research is to highlight the diversity within Black racial identity through the participants' experiences and to reinforce the notion that there is "being Black" is not a unifacted identity. Through the research, I also aim to offer ways that higher educational professionals, student organization leaders and faculty members can address the diversity in racial identity in manners that expands Black identity on their respective campuses.

### **Research Questions**

This research will answer the following questions:

- How is racial identity understood and performed by Black women in traditional sororities at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)?
- Does membership in a traditional Greek organization shape Black women's experiences with the Black community on campus?
- What are the lived experiences of Black women who choose to join predominantly sororities in these environments?

### **Limitations**

One of the most critical limitation lies in the demographics of the participant group. The interviewees all attended the same institution, which means that the data only reflects the culture

and experiences of one campus. Additionally, the study examines the Black identity and its reifications solely from the perspective of Black women who are members of traditionally White sororities; it does not highlight those who are members of other non-Greek traditional student organizations at a PWI. Further studies on Black racial identity at PWIs should focus on the students' lived experiences from other perspectives (residence life, specific academic disciplines, etc.) to further broaden the definition of Black racial identity in America in general and on college and university campuses, in particular.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

There are a number of factors that are situated in "the gap" between Black racial identity development and cross-racial membership in fraternal organizations—including the role of student organizational involvement for Black students at PWIs (Tinto, 1994; Guiffrida, 2003), the history of Black students in higher education (Higginbotham, 1997; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007), the exclusion within traditional sororities and fraternities (Torbenon, 2005; McKenzie, 2005) and the intra-racial diversity of the Black community in the United States. This literature review will examine the extant research in each one of these areas. The intent is to establish a trajectory for this research and to substantiate the need for this study.

### **Black Students in Higher Education**

Despite small numbers, African Americans have been present in the structure of American higher education since the early-1800s. By 1865, almost 40 Black students had graduated from college in the United States; all the institutions were in the North ([www.jbhe.org](http://www.jbhe.org)). The Reconstruction Period, however, brought an influx of Black students to colleges and universities—as higher education was essential to the improvement and development of African Americans as a group (Higginbotham, 1997). College-trained Black women were a part of the “Talented Tenth”—or the 10% of the African American population whose responsibility was to uplift and improve the social conditions within the Black community (Du Bois, 1903). Their mission was to “...disseminate middle-class morals and values among the [racial] masses and to generate financial support for the church and its educational and numerous social service programs” (Higginbotham, 1997; p. 20)—as several the colleges that admitted women in the South during this time were founded by the American Baptist Home Mission

Society (ABHMS). The ABHMS supported the presence of African American women in all colleges & universities, in an effort to make the Talented Tenth "...thoroughly homogenous with the White middle-class culture" by "...strengthening the Black woman's analytical skills, refining her tastes and sensibilities and cultivating within her an appreciation for art and music" (29). Similar to today, African American female students attended both, historically Black colleges and universities and PWIs during this era. In 1896, the Plessy v. Ferguson verdict enacted legal segregation in American society. Federal court cases, including Brown v. Board of Education (1954), Holmes v. Danner (1961) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made these institutions legally accessible to Black students.

While Black students had legal access to higher education for nearly 50 years, the percentage of Black Americans who have attained bachelor's degrees remains considerably low. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, only 10 percent of the Spring 2016 graduates were identified as "African American" or "Black"; 88% of them attended PWIs—and 65% of the students were women. Black students only earned 10% of the bachelor's degrees that were awarded in 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics ([https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_ree.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_ree.asp), retrieved March 7, 2017). Davis (2004) argues that while PWIs have devoted various resources in an effort to recruit minority students, their subsequent retention is a "significant problem". Other research offers that academic ability is not the primary contributor to the attrition rate for Black students at PWIs. Given this, attention must be given to the non-academic factors that influence attrition (p. 421).

Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas and Thompson (2004) examined the effects of these non-academic factors through the lived experiences of seven male and four female Black undergraduates at a PWI in southeastern Louisiana, all of which were

preparing to graduate from the institution. The results of the research indicated that social and cultural adjustment played a pivotal role in the participants' satisfaction with their academic experience. Three themes emerged—1) covert racism, isolation or a lack of connection with their White counterparts; 2) the notion of “standing out” because of their racial differences; and 3) the need to prove their worthiness and the notion of hypervisibility/invisibility because of their race. One participant noted that he was “...the only fly in the buttermilk [because you see all White faces]... which took a lot of getting used to (434).

Davis et al. also concluded that cultural identity (Sue & Sue, 1999) for both, Blacks and White students, plays a significant role in the experiences of Black students at PWIs. While the participants were at various stages in the identity development process, their White peers and professors were also at varying points or stages. Further, the “fly in the buttermilk” notion signifies that Black student experiences are often “...superimposed on the backdrop of a White dominated world” (437). Either the feeling of being “superimposed” or the notion of being isolated can affect a student's ability to succeed in a new educational environment. Student organizations are social spaces where the participants can build relationships with others with whom s/he shared commonalities with. The desire to avoid these feelings is, arguably, why students choose to join sororities and fraternities.

### **Black Women in Higher Education**

Robertson, Mitra and Van Delinder (2005) examined the social adjustment of African American female students at PWIs. Their study suggested that African American female students adjust better than their male counterparts, because their academic performance is stronger, and their graduation rate is significantly higher. It also indicated that Black female students who attended parochial and/or private schools and are from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend

to perform extremely well at PWIs. While this is, arguably, attributed to the college-preparatory curriculum at these schools, Fleming (1984, as cited by Robinson, Mitra and Del Velinder, 2005) contends that African American women are seen as less threatening than their male counterparts in a traditional collegiate environment—which leads to their ease with social navigation & adjustment.

Despite their academic success, the respondents still expressed feelings of isolation in these bi-racial environments. They felt that they were constantly “reminded” of their Blackness—because of the small percentage of African American students on campus or because of the institution’s lack of culturally conscious programmatic endeavors. Additionally, they reported that their interaction with the faculty members had an impact on their sentiments about the University. Those who encountered professors who encouraged them felt more connected with the overall institution; those who did not felt that they were outsiders on campus. The “outsider” feeling may cause some students to retreat to the African American campus community, specifically those whose pre-college experiences did not include significant interactions with those who are outside of their racial group.

This study sheds light on the juxtaposition between Black and White cultural identity development and the role that racial/cultural hegemony plays in the undergraduate experience. It also confirms that social and cultural factors play a key role in Black student success at PWIs. Race and/or culturally centered spaces (i.e... Black student organizations, HBGLOs), as well as relationships with Black or African American professors provide Black students with a sense of belonging, or connectedness, to the institutions. Arguably, Black students who do not have these relationships will not “fit in” or feel connected at a PWI.

Tinto (1993) suggested that "college students who perceived their norms, values and ideas as congruent with those at the center of the institution are more likely to become academically and socially integrated into the college (Tinto, as cited in Guiffrida, 2005). Arguably, Black students do not fall into this category and, therefore, have greater difficulty in adjusting to the campus culture at PWIs. He also proposed that student involvement promotes a sense of connectedness or belonging for Black students. Rooted in Tinto's theory of Student Departure, Guiffrida (2005) examined the role that student organizational involvement plays in the retention of African American students at PWIs.

Through his research with the 88 African American students who participated in the project, Guiffrida (2005) determined that student involvement contributes positively to Black students' adjustment in the following ways: 1) professional connections; students were able to establish "out of class connections with African American faculty who were actively involved in the organizations, 2) giving back; events like "cultural fairs" and "panel discussions" allowed the students to help others and to "facilitate meaningful connections with other African Americans, therefore facilitating their social integration"; 3) comfort; being the "only Black person" in the class/lab or dorms fed the desire of many of the participants to seek the comfort/connection of other Black students. Guiffrida noted that the students felt "as if the spotlight of being 'the only one' was removed and they could blend in" and that they were "allowed opportunities to socialize in ways that are comfortable and familiar"; 4) exposure and connection to Black culture: Black organizations give students the opportunity to connect with peers "who they perceive are like them", Guiffrida also found that African American student organizations help to ease the cultural transition for Black students who were raised in predominantly White communities as well as the

"creation of cultural space" (Tatum, 1998, as cited in Guiffrida, 2005). Black students from predominantly White home communities were able to "bridge the gap" between their two worlds.

Involvement plays a critical role in a student's success in a college environment. His work affirms the importance of African American student organizations as social adjustment initiatives for Black students from predominantly Black home communities at PWIs. Arguably, fraternal involvement establishes a feeling of importance for students, as one must be selected by the existing members within the house or chapter to pursue membership in sorority. Exclusive membership implies that a student's presence is desired--and, perhaps, necessary for the perpetuity of the chapter. This sentiment could warrant a heightened feeling of belonging--specifically for Black students and/or students of color, collectively.

While it does support the importance of student involvement for those who are from predominantly Black communities, the research does not specifically address those who do not view race as a critical identity component or have no desire to make these cultural/racial connections. The existing research leaves a void in the experiences of Black, middle/upper-middle class and/or continuing-generation students --further supporting the need for this research.

## **Origin of Fraternities and Sororities**

### *Fraternities*

Fraternities were established as a means of "...maintain[ing] close associations with like-minded individuals and providing activities and brotherhood for their group: (Torbenon, as cited in Phillips, 2005). The elements of high scholastic standards, the development of leadership qualities and community involvement, as well as "rushing" and hazing, were added—to create a sense of exclusive membership and to differentiate between the academic nature of the literary societies and the social focus of a sorority or fraternity. The first collegiate fraternity, Phi Beta

Kappa, was established in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Its initial structure was similar to a literary society (orations, essay writing competitions and debates) (Torbenon, 2005). Between 1780 and 1840, twenty-one chapters of Phi Beta Kappa were chartered at various southern universities. Additionally, Phi Beta Gamma (1923), Kappa Alpha Society (1825), Sigma Phi (1827), Delta Phi (1827), Psi Upsilon (1833), Chi Psi (1841) and Theta Delta Chi (1847) were founded at Union College in Schenectady, NY. This fraternal "boom" paved the way for the founding of women's fraternities (sororities) across the United States. Black males and all female students, however, were excluded from membership. *Sororities*

The first collegiate sorority was founded because women were not able to achieve full membership status in the existing organizations, due to their gender identity. As a result, Pi Beta Phi was founded under the name I.C. Sorosis in 1867 at Monmouth College (Illinois); it was the first women's fraternity. Kappa Alpha Theta (1870) was established at DePauw University and was the first women's organization to use Greek letters. Gamma Phi Beta was established at Syracuse University in 1874, where a Latin professor suggested the use of the word sorority--"as a means of distinguishing the male and female organizations". The organizations sought to promote sisterhood, philanthropy and community involvement through their activities and projects. Although sororities were founded because of female students' exclusion from the pre-existing fraternities, Black women were still prohibited from pursuing membership in these organizations.

### **Historically Black Greek Lettered Organizations (HBGLOs)**

Due to the pronounced racial segregation that was characteristic of the period, Black students were regularly overlooked in the bid for fraternity or sorority membership (McKenzie,

2005). Because of this discrimination, several Black students at various colleges within the United States sought to "...address the racial inequities and social isolation that they faced as students at the predominantly White institutions" (McKenzie, 2005). This need catalyzed the founding of four historically Black Greek-lettered sororities and fraternities, respectively, between 1906 and 1922. While five of them were founded at Howard University, which is a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), three of the HGBLOs were originally established at three PWIs: Cornell University, Indiana University and Butler University. The organizations sought students who "...excelled academically and were involved in extracurricular activities as a way to enhance the prestige...on a campus and national level (Parks & Brown, 2005). Not only did the HGBLOs provide its members with social and academic support as undergraduate students, they also allowed them to provide service to the Black community--as a means of "uplifting the race" (Dickinson, 2004).

The original four historically Black sororities: Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908), Delta Sigma Theta (1913), Zeta Phi Beta (1920) and Sigma Gamma Rho (1922), were founded on American college campuses because of the existing racial and gender discrimination. "Higher education for women at the turn of the century was frowned upon by American society...and [for] African American women, the odds could be overwhelmingly against...finishing high school, no less college (Ross, 2001). Additionally, five historically Black fraternities (Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma and Iota Phi Theta) were founded to address "...the struggles against discrimination, prejudice, mistreatment and "...to satisfy some of those yearnings that come from common sufferings and common understanding" (Torbenson, 2005; pg. 60). Essentially, BGLOs served as "support groups" for Black students, as the population was incredibly small and limited in resources.

### **Differences between Predominantly White Organizations & HBGLOs**

Phillips (2005) argues that both, racial stratification and the historical importance of African American cultural traditions within the structure of Black sororities accounts for the major differences between them and their White counterparts. Although many cultural practices were lost via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the family societal codes (respect, responsibility and reciprocity) were brought to the Americas and transmitted to their descendants who were born outside of Africa. More specifically, these codes were a standard for operation amidst the segregation and institutional racism that blatantly existed in the early-1900s. Even today, these notions are pivotal components of the BGLOs' culture.

The exclusionary practices that existed prohibited African Americans from the educational and economic opportunities within the United States—as well as the social freedoms that offered to White Americans. Black sororities originated to “...transcend gendered racism, forge individual identities and create meaningful change within African American communities” (347). While traditional sororities were founded to combat gender discrimination, Black sororities were organized as a support network to withstand the racial, educational and economic inequities at the turn of the century and, even today. More importantly, BGLOs helped their members to maintain a sense of racial pride and identity at PWIs.

Billingsley (2003, as cited in Phillips) offers that the concept of “extended family” or “fictive kin” marks another difference between BGLOs and their traditional counterparts. Whitney (2016) defines “fictive kin” as “the relationship by which extended family and community relationships can grant an individual social capital beyond those defined by socioeconomic status” (p. 1). He offers that particularly in Black/African American

communities, fictive kin relationships provide students with “like family” members, who are not biologically related (p. 9).

Greek-lettered organizations offer similar relationships, as their members considered to be sisters or brothers of their organizations. While both, historically Black and traditionally White, organizations call their members “sisters” or “sorors”, a woman in an African American sorority is called a sister because she is a part of the lives and “families” of those whom she is initiated with, as well as her fellow chapter members. This family relationships also extend to other sorority members both, internationally and nationally. African American women who join Black sororities are adopted into a family unit; their membership is lifelong. Although traditional organizations have alumnae chapters, their participation is limited and, in many cases, not expected. In contrast, members of BGLOs are expected to join graduate chapters, to maintain the bonds of sisterhood and to contribute to the perpetual existence of the “family” (Phillips, 2005). Further, their members are challenged to “...identify and address the concerns of African American college women” (351), to work against the systems of oppression that are placed on Black women because of their social identities.

In their research, Berkowitz and Padavic (1999) also determined that sororities vary dramatically by race. White sororities are structured to ignore the career message and concentrate on...pairing (“getting a man”), [while] Black sororities are organized to facilitate economic self-sufficiency and to contribute to the betterment of the Black community (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999). Black women viewed their sorority membership as a lifelong commitment to ‘service’ and the uplifting of their racial community while White sorority members regarded sisterhood as a part of the college experience, not their lifelong identities (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999).

The research does not address the similarities between Black and White sororities, including their community service/philanthropic activities and the existence of alumni chapters within the structures of both types of organizations. It does, however, highlight the differences in the purpose of their founding. White sororities were largely founded as social organizations for women at undergraduate institutions, while Black sororities were built on "...the past traditions [of the African American women's experience] of self-help, racial solidarity and racial uplift" (Phillips, 2005; p. 341). Arguably, the purpose of HBGLOs addresses Tinto's (1995) notion of incongruence between Black identity and higher education environments. Black women who seek to engage in are likely to pursue membership in BGLOs. Those whose goals are not racially centered would, arguably, be interested in traditional sorority membership. It does, however, highlight the structural differences between the sororities--which are tied to their origination/purpose and a woman's decision to pursue membership in either organization.

### **Racial Diversity in Greek Lettered Organizations**

Despite the eradication of legal exclusionary practices, Greek organizations are still segregated according to race. While the racial homogeneity of these organizations can be partially attributed to the legacy of "constitutional stipulations and covenants [that] prohibited membership of non-Whites (Johnson, 2002, as cited in Chang & DeAngelo), the fact that "...members tend to share a common set of beliefs, values, behaviors and attitudes, which are often developed before college" (810) further supports their lack of diversity. In addition, their research indicated that geographic location influenced their participants' decisions to pursue membership. Students who attended more racially diverse institutions were less likely to join a Greek-lettered organization. Chang and DeAngelo cite the reduction in the students' chance to meet people of diverse races, religions and ethnicities (811) as the reason.

Traditional fraternal organizations, because of their history, membership practices and their culture, encourage the notion of racial exclusivity and homogeneity—and a lack of interaction across differences (Laird, 2005). Additionally, Chen (1998) offers that “...when a WGLO does accept non-White members, such actions often create a stir within the “Greek-Letter” population, generally resulting in subtle forms of stigmatization from other WGLOs.

Park (2008) examined the factors that contributed to the homogenous dynamics of historically White sororities through the experiences of Asian-American women at a PWI. Through the lenses of critical race theory and cultural capital, she addressed the phenomenon—based on the responses of 18 Asian American students at mid-western, medium-sized university. She proposed that race intersects with other social identifiers (i.e., immigrant status, socioeconomics, religious affiliation, etc.) and creates “race-neutral” explanations for the lack of diversity within traditional sororities. The lack of diversity discourages women of color from joining these organizations—which perpetuates the racial homogeneity that exists.

The participants offered that the notion of legacy status and the lack of “insider knowledge” and the cultural disconnect from “sorority life” also played a role in their decision to refrain from joining a traditional organization. White women are more likely to have mothers and/or other relatives who are members of sororities, their understanding of Greek life, its culture and the desire to pursue membership is fostered prior to coming to college (p. 7). Further, because most Asian American women come to the recruitment process without knowing how the game is played, many of them may be discouraged from pursuing membership (Park, 2008). Finally, most of the participants viewed traditionally White sorority life as a “rich White girl thing” (p. 13). Their parents contended that the membership fees were exorbitant and that the

money could be used for educational or other family expenses. This sentiment was consistent—regardless of the participants’ families’ socioeconomic status.

Park’s (2008) research does not include the experiences of African American women in predominantly White sororities. However, it does shed light on the role that “insider knowledge”, stereotypes and pre-college experiences play in one’s decision to join a Greek-lettered organization, specifically for students of color and first-generation college attendees. The participants in this research may have chosen to join traditional sororities, based on their knowledge or stereotypes of BGLOs. Their pre-college racial experiences within their communities may have also influenced their decision.

Edwards (2009) conducted a study with six undergraduate women who were members of historically Black or traditionally White sororities at a mid-sized university in the Southern region of the United States. The study draws upon Critical Race Theory (CRT), which contends that race and racism are embedded in American society—specifically in the structure and policies of higher education institutions and organizations (Taylor, 1999, as cited in Edwards, 2009). Their goal was to examine the participants’ and their organizations’ openness to members of other races. Each of the interviewees identified as Black or White and had participated in at least one multicultural initiative on campus; both NPHC and NPC sororities were equally represented. Arguably, the contemporary racial homogeneity within the traditional sororities is a result of the historically discriminatory practices—not the beliefs of their current members. Consequently, Black women may pursue membership in historically Black sororities due to the perceived racism within traditional organizations; White sororities may remain racially homogeneous for this purpose.

Through the structured interviews, Edwards (2009) found that the participants seemed equally receptive to the notion of diversifying their sorority's membership. However, the members of the historically Black sororities were more confident in their organization's openness than their counterparts in the traditionally White organizations. One of the participants was the second Black member of a traditionally White sorority on her campus. She stated that an African American woman would have to be "absolutely gorgeous or a supermodel" to join one of the other traditionally White sororities on her campus and that it would take "...a very long time [for women of different races] to join [her] sorority". (Edwards, 2009). While the participants in the BGLOs believed that diversity would enhance their sororities' growth, the members of the traditionally White sororities believed that their alumnae members would be more resistant to racial integration.

This research is important to the development of this study, as it addresses the concept of racial homogeneity in both, Black and White sororities. It also highlights the historical culture of racial discrimination within traditionally White sororities; one of the participants was only the second Black member of her chapter. It supports the notion that while Black women have joined traditional organizations, it is not a common practice. Moreover, the idea that this privilege is only extended to Black women who are "gorgeous" or "supermodels" not only implies that racial exclusivity exists—but that there is an acceptable standard of beauty that overshadows race and makes one eligible for membership.

In his work, Hughey (2008) contends that students of color that join traditional organizations do so to make friends, to get involved in campus life, and because they succumbed to substantial "peer pressure" from their friends who were already members or who planned to join. Ultimately, non-White students that join traditional organizations see them as a greater

opportunity for social and financial gain. The current research does not examine the factors that lead non-White students to any assumptions about Black sororities and fraternities.

Hughey (2010) examined the experiences of non-White undergraduate students who are members of traditional Greek-lettered organizations. He offers that cross-racial membership reifies the purpose and/or importance of higher education for non-White students, as it levels the “playing field” by granting access to the social and cultural capital of the dominant group—despite their ethnocentric, prejudiced and exclusionary history.

His qualitative study focused on the experiences of non-White members at three different campuses on the East Coast. 31 students participated in the study; 18 (women), 13 (men). 48.45% of the participants were Black/African American and their socioeconomic status varied from working class to upper-middle class. For the participants, their challenge was two-fold: to manage the racial stereotypes and assumptions from their “sisters” or “brothers” and to establish their identity within their racial communities. Non-White members were often thought of as a “good fit” for the community service activities. One participant offered that her sorority sisters said that she had “insight” into poverty because of her racial background, which would make her better at the community service involvement. A male respondent indicated that his race (and the stereotypes that are ascribed to it) gave him leverage with his fraternity brothers. Being “Black” or “African American” meant that he was “tough” or “from the ‘hood”; in this case, it warranted a level of reverence or respect. Others stated that their involvement with the philanthropic endeavors of their fraternal organizations helped them to establish a level of commonality with their racial counterparts in BGLOs. For the participants, race superseded any other identifier (gender, sexual orientation, etc.); it also “...forced [many of] them to navigate a dual position of [being] a WGLO member and a known Black person on their campus” (p. 24). Either they are

“not really Black” because of their affiliation—or they are “too Black” “...and should have joined BGLOs.

Hughey’s research highlighted the stereotypes of the Black experience at a PWI. The participants’ sorority sisters or fraternity brothers still viewed them as poor, working-class, aggressive students because of their race. Further, race played a critical role in their identity within their organization; their White counterparts viewed them as “too Black” or “not Black enough”. Despite the racial/ethnic stereotyping and discrimination that (historically) existed within traditionally White fraternal organizations, Black students have been members of (and continue to pursue membership in) these fraternal enclaves.

Essentially, African Americans maintain a paradoxical racial identity as members of traditionally White sororities and fraternities. They are often categorized as either “stereotypically Black”, or ideal for the community service and/or servitude roles in the sorority--or “atypically Black” (not ascribing to the preconceived notions about their racial group). In both cases, race is a critical component of their identity. Their desire to “fit in” with their organizational peers is juxtaposed with their minority status within the sorority/fraternity. “In that vein, when non-Whites do join WGLOs, it is a striking occurrence that is worthy of investigation”. (p. 380). This identity challenge is the impetus for research within cross-racial membership.

### **Identity**

Lee and Anderson (2009) argue that there is no definition of the term identity. It has, however, been conceptualized as "a set of discursive domains that are evoked and constructed, based on shared or negotiated assumptions, categories and knowledge in classroom spaces (Brown, 2004). Gee (2000) perceives identity as “being recognized as a certain type of person in

a given context". Identity is defined as "...how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how the person understands the possibilities for the future (Norton, 2000). It is also defined as "...a product of symbolic systems arising from local and political relations of difference and legitimacy and as a tool for understanding local power relations and processes" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). While there is variance in the definition, it is clear that developing and/or establishing identity is "shaped by self-perceptions, desires, hopes and expectations, as well as salient aspects of the social context, such as sociopolitical ideologies, histories and structures that are often beyond the control of an individual (Sadowski, 2003). Sociopolitical structures often include the constructs of race, class, and gender, whose relationship is described as "intersectional" (Crenshaw, 1991)--that is, these identities are interrelated and do not exist separately.

### *Black Racial Identity Development*

Cross (1971) and Helms (1995) developed two models to describe the process of racial identity development for Black adolescents and young adults. Cross (1971) divides the realization of racial identity for Black youth into five stages: 1) Pre-Encounter/Encounter--or the "White is Right", "Black is Wrong" philosophy. The acceptance of Whites is important to him/her; s/he also wants to disassociate from "Black" behavior, 2) Encounter: S/he usually experiences an event that 'forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism in one's life'. As a result, s/he begins to negotiate their membership in an oppressed group--specifically after realizing that s/he cannot be White. 3) Immersion/Emersion: The person chooses to surround him/herself with all visible markers of Black racial identity (i.e., clothing, hairstyles, language, syntax, etc.) and to eliminate all association with Whiteness. White-centered anger tends to dissipate during this time because so much of the person's energy is geared towards his or her

own group or self-exploration. (Borunda, 2008), 4) Internalization: The person begins to rebuild relationships with White people that respect their self-identity. S/he also begins to develop relationships with members/peers of other marginalized or oppressed groups. 5) Internalization-Commitment: At this point, the student has "translated their Blackness into an internal sense of commitment to the Black community".

Helms (1995) proposed five ego statuses which are used by individuals of color to develop a healthy racial identity (Alvarez, et al, 2001). They are: 1) Conformity: which is categorized by a 'trivialization of race' and an idealization of Whiteness or White culture, 2) Dissonance, or a nonchalant attitude toward race (or racial matters), 3) Immersion-Emersion: S/he becomes consumed with his/her own culture and trivializes White culture, 4) Internalization: The student/person reevaluates his understanding of the various ethnicities within their own race as well as those within White culture and 5) Integration: s/he begins to understand their racial identity in the context of class, gender and sexual orientation.

#### *Skin Color and Black Racial Identity*

Coard, Breland and Raskin (2001) contend that there is a strong correlation between skin color and Cross' Theory of Nigrescence within the Black community. Graham (2004) offers that skin color and class have been "inexorably tied together" for generations of Black people in America (4). "It is evident that the fixation on skin color...derives from the fact that the light-skinned Blacks were given a favored status by White slave owners from their very early interactions during the slavery period" (Alexander, 1991; as cited in Graham, 2004). Because of the privileges and the social acceptance of lighter skin, many African Americans prefer this complexion. Some view darker-skin as a "mark of oppression", while others view lighter-skin as a sign of not being "Black enough" (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; as cited in Coard, Breland and

Raskin, 2001). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between one's skin color preference and his/her racial identity development. The authors hypothesized that racial identity would be highly-correlated with skin-color preferences and self-esteem—and that family members and peers influence one's skin color preference (2260). Using Cross' Racial Identity Development Model, Coard, Breland and Raskin offered that those who preferred lighter-skin complexions were in the pre-encounter stage—while those who preferred darker skin were in the immersion-emersion stages.

There were 113 students participated in this study; they ranged from 17 to 41 years of age. A Personal Data Sheet (PDS) was used to ascertain specific data about their socioeconomic background—including their parents' educational level and occupational status. The Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Parham & Helms, 1981) and the Skin Color Questionnaire were used to determine the participants' preferences for the following complexion categories: Black or almost Black, dark, brown-skinned, light and White or almost White; they were also asked to identify their own complexion, using these categories. Using the nine skin-color blots (1 = "very light, cream colored" to 9= "very dark or ebony"), the participants were asked to identify their skin color-- the one that they preferred and the one that their opposite-gender peers would prefer.

The data offered that: 1) there was a significant positive relationship between skin-color preference and racial identity for the lighter-skinned participants; 2) lighter skin was positively related to the immersion-emersion identity stage and 3) preferring darker skin was related only to the women who were in the advanced (immersion-emersion, internalization or internalization-commitment) stages of racial identity development. The darker-skinned participants felt "satisfied" with their complexions but felt that society perceived them in a way that negatively affected their global sense of self (2269).

Coard et al. concluded that racial identity...reflects one's personal reaction to his/her psychosocial experiences and appear to be associated with various behavioral, affective and cultural predispositions. Skin color can, potentially, play a key role in one's decision to pursue membership in a traditionally White sorority—specifically given its correlation with racial identity development and positive social status. This study may reveal the implications of the social perceptions of darker skin for Black women. This relationship may, potentially, influence one's decision to pursue membership in an organization that is not associated with the negative connotation of being “Black”.

### **Identity**

McEwen, Roper, Bryant & Langa (1990) argue that students from underrepresented groups experience an intense identity development process, specifically when the process involves “...negotiating the multiple dimensions of their identity in an environment that is neither inclusive nor welcoming”. Stewart (2008) offers that neither a student's “old self” (prior to his/her freshman year of college) nor “the self who is becoming” should be eliminated from his/her identity. Instead, each of these canons of experience equally contribute to a new identity—that is inclusive of the students' understanding of him/herself, from a racial, class-conscious and/or gendered perspective.

### *Multiple Identities*

In her research around the negotiation of multiple identities, Stewart (2008) shares the lived experiences of five African American college students at a mid-sized PWI in the mid-western United States. The participants' backgrounds were drastically varied, based on class, educational attainment and family structure—in an effort to represent the diversity within the Black experience. While their familial backgrounds were different, the participants' responses to

identity negotiation were similar. 60% of the participants felt that they could only associate with certain aspects of their identity, if they wanted to be accepted on their college campus. 80% agreed that race and, then, gender were the most important identifiers in their social communities. All the participants noted that their attendance at a PWI brought direct attention to their race and that it became a primary identifier for them because of their “minority” status. The female participants stated that they felt “more Black and [then] female” after being students at the research site.

Mead’s (1934) definition of self argues that a woman “...can only experience herself indirectly through the lenses of other people...how she perceives herself will vary depending on who she is interacting with in a given situation (Jackson, 1998). Pyant and Yanico (1991) contend that racism affects African American women more significantly than sexism, therefore psychological well-being will be more associated with a woman’s racial identity attitudes. Parks et al. (1996) contend “...African American women begin their racial identity development before their gender identity development. Neither study “...adequately considers the social situation of identity—the possibility that a woman’s identity may vary depending on the context that she is in (e.g., the identity of the people in the context with her).

Johnson (1998) examined this theory through the intersected relationship between race and gender in the self-definitions of Black women at PWIs. Drawing from Oyserman & Markus’s Theory of the Sociocultural Self (1993) & Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman”, Johnson offers that one’s perception of him/herself is derived from several schema that organize/define how one sees and identifies herself. Usually, the schema are related to race, gender, religion, work or school. The schema form coordinates which, then, form a person’s self-identity. The more permanent self-conceptions are called self-schema...”...cognitive

generalizations about the self, derived from past experiences, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual's social experiences (Markus, 1977). Moreover, one schema may be more important than the other—based on the context. The participants in the study stated that "...if I am a Black woman in a group of White women, I tend to think of myself as "Black"; if I move to a group of Black men, then my Blackness loses salience (at the time) and I become more conscious of being a woman". Essentially, race may be more salient an experience for African American women than sexism.

### **Intraracial Identity**

Drawing from Giroux's (1992) Theory of Cultural Border Crossing, Prudence Carter (1994) argues that there is just as much differentiation within racial groups as there is in between them. Her research contends that racial identity is important to Black students but that ideology (individual's beliefs, opinions and attitudes about how they feel their racial counterparts should act or "perform" race) is critical to understanding their experiences.

Ideology is broken into three types: 1) cultural mainstreamers: those who choose to "fit in" with the dominant group; 2) noncompliant believers: those who "while understanding what cultural behaviors lead to academic, social and economic success, favor their own cultural presentations and exert very little effort to adapt to the cultural prescriptions of the school and/or White society and 3) cultural straddlers who "bridge the gap between the cultural mainstreamers and noncompliant believers; ranging in from students who 'play the game' and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community, to students who vocally criticize the schools' ideology while still achieving well academically" (30). While Carter's ideological structure does not explain one's decision to join a White sorority, it does help us to understand each participant's perspective on

racial identity and how it should be performed in college environments.

Smith and Moore (2000) also offer that most of the existing research on racial identity focuses on inequity and discrimination and ignores the intragroup dynamics. Specifically, much of it assumes that Blacks represent cultural, social and economic homogeneity and that intra-racial relations are close and without conflict (2). Within Black identity, there are several other social identities that further diversify the group—including ethnicity, culture and socioeconomic status. Smith and Moore (2000) argue that the student's own socioeconomic status (SES), the SES of their reference group and the extent to which they perceive this status as different from their own affects their relationship with Black students (6). Additionally, Smith and Moore (2000) hypothesized that pre-college interracial contact has a negative effect on one's closeness to other Blacks (Tatum, 1987; Thornton et al, 1990; Demo and Hughes, 1991; Harris, 1995 as cited in Smith and Moore, 2000) and that ethnic identification often supersedes racial identity for many foreign-born Blacks (7). The interrelation of these identities affects one's perception of his/her racial identity.

The research, which included questionnaires, survey and in-depth interview responses from 134 undergraduate students at Big City University, divided the participants into four groups: 1) those who identified as biracial, multiracial, foreign-born or according to their ethnic/cultural group, 2) those who stated that most of their friends were Black, 3) those who offered that half or some of their friends were Black or 4) those who had few or no Black friends. The research determined that the strength of intra-racial relationships was significantly correlated with "...race and ethnic identification and [the] racial composition of their friendship networks on campus (10). It also indicated that the SES, ethnic identification and pre-college interracial

experiences of the participants was also diverse. 21% of the participants were “socially distant” from the Black population; 58% were close and 21% were “extremely close” to their racial peers on campus. The participants who identified as “close” or “extremely close” were involved in more Black-specified activities (i.e., sitting at the “Black Table” in the dining hall, attending events and meetings of the Black student organizations) on campus; their “socially distant” counterparts participated, on average, in 1.5 events. Those who were socially distant did not participate in Black-specified activities on campus because they felt like “outsiders” of the community. 60% of the biracial participants did not feel connected to the Black community on campus; 40% of them had negative experiences with Blacks prior to coming to Big City University.

Further, their desire to also identify with their non-Black identity decreased their participation in the Black-specific events on campus. The biracial participants were socially distant from the core Black community on campus because they chose to identify with both of their racial groups (25). Consequently, they felt like outsiders because of their limited interactions (26). For the foreign-born participants, their ethnic and cultural identities were more important than their race. One student stated that he would identify as “Cuban and Bahamian... [rather than] just Black...because there’s more to it than just that”. (25)

Additionally, there was a direct correlation between the participants’ parents’ education levels, their socioeconomic status and their perception of racial identity. Those who were considered as low SES had parents who had not received a college degree and made less \$25,000; high SES students had at least one parent who had a bachelor’s degree and the family income was \$75,000 or above. The low SES students had very few interracial experiences prior to college and, consequently, felt more connected to low SES Black students on campus. The

high SES students had several integrative experiences and felt more connected to those who shared those experiences—regardless of race.

Davis (2004) also argues that all students come to college with preconceived notions about people who are different than themselves—after absorbing years of indoctrination from their families, peers and mass media. Further, “...students from homogenous pre-college environments may feel anxious about interracial relationships and may, consequently, avoid them...and seek relationships with in-group members only (Levin et al. 2003; Plant 2004; Plant and Devine 2003, as cited in Bowman and Denson 2012).

In their study, Bowman and Denson (2012) researched the relationship between the participants’ precollege exposure to racial/ethnic diversity and their college interracial interactions. Their hypothesis offers that students who have had interracial interactions in diverse settings are more likely to engage in them in collegiate environments because of their familiarity and comfort with the experience (p. 419).

Their research consisted of a four-year longitudinal study with 3,098 students at 28 selective colleges and universities across the United States. Of the participants, 26% were White, 26% were Black, 25% were Asian, and 25% were Hispanic. Through interviews and quantitative surveys, the participants’ offered information about the racial/ethnic diversity in their high schools, neighborhoods and among their 10 closest friends. The frequency of their interactions with students of other races/ethnic groups was also surveyed.

While the study did not examine the quality of the interactions, the findings did support the notion that the students’ interracial relationships, college satisfaction, emotional well-being and race-related perceptions were stronger among those who had greater pre-college exposure to racial and ethnic diversity than those who did not. More specifically, the study found that

students who came from racially diverse precollege backgrounds were more satisfied with the college experience than those who were not.

### **Pilot Study Results**

A pilot study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black women who chose to join traditional sororities. My research participants included two Black undergraduate students—both who were active members of predominantly White sororities at large-sized PWIs in the northeastern region of the United States. Both women were transfer students; one pledged at a medium-sized northeastern college while the other became a member of her sorority at the research site. Although there are several commonalities in the family backgrounds and adolescent experiences, there are several stark differences in their understanding (as well as the importance) of race and ethnicity in their lives—as well as their purpose for pursuing membership.

Using a case study method and interviews, the two participants provided insight on their personal experiences as African American women within these organizations. Through their stories, the following observations were made: 1) ethnic (not racial) identity was important to them. Each of them immediately identified as “Nigerian” or “African American & Native American”, for example; being identified as “Black” was secondary for them; 2) Being outside of the Black community was noteworthy; both participants noted that while they had individual friends who identified as African American or Black, they were still “outsiders” of the entire Black experience on campus. Participant #1 stated that it did not bother her; Participant #2 was troubled by it; 3) the connection between race-centered sororities and social “drama”: both women expressed their disgust with the “drama queen”, “gang” and “skater” mentalities that stemmed from the African American sororities and 4) neither participant felt that race was the

basis for connection with their sisters; both women positively connected with another Black member during the pledge process—but not as full-fledged members.

Their experiences shed light on the narrowed definition that society (as individuals and as a collective) has on what it means to “be Black”, and more specifically, to be a “Black woman”. Moreover, both participants recalled a specific pre-college experience that contributed to desire to join a traditional organization. Undoubtedly, there are social, historical and political components that influences these preconceived notions; the women in the pilot study both reinforce and contradict them. The goal of the continued research is to highlight the ways that their membership in predominantly White sororities expands the definition and challenges the larger conversation around racial identity, specifically as it intersects with other social identities—including class, socioeconomic status and the creation of racial identity for Black students in PWI environments.

### **Literature Summary**

The existing literature addresses the origination of sororities (out of gender discrimination) and the historically Black fraternal organizations (out of racial and gender biases). Most of the research focuses on substance abuse, sexual misconduct and hazing, rather than the maintenance of segregated campuses and communities. When the research does account for race, much of the literature reflects a concern for how contact with ‘diversity’ influences cognitive, educational and co-curricular outcomes of White WGLO members” (Hughey, 2010). The contemporary research examines the social differences between "White" and "Black" sororities and the need for historically Black organizations--as a means of creating a community of students who share a socially constructed bond (race), so that these students can successfully graduate from college. While these factors are important, the concept of intra-racial diversity is

ignored. Moreover, the existing literature does not address the role that socioeconomics, ethnicity and/or socialization play in shaping one's understanding of "race" or his/her racial identity.

The current literature offers historical and/or theoretical insight into the "Black" experience for college students; it does not, however, provide a qualitative look into the lives of those who either a) do not fit the preconceived notions of racial identity for Black students at PWIs or b) whose student involvement specifically includes non-Black organizations. Race is a part of everyone's identity—but it is particularly significant for racial minorities at PWIs. The titles "historically Black" and "traditionally White" indicates that race is a prescribed social identity that carries certain characteristics and expectations with it. Each person is expected to "perform" their race in a certain way. Their membership contradicts the macro-expectation of "being Black". It reifies the notion that "being/acting White" warrants greater opportunities, resources and social mobility. Hughey offers that Black/African American membership in traditional organizations provides the opportunity for change in their social positioning—because it grants access to the cultural resources that White students have, specifically because of their racial privilege. The question is how does membership in a traditional Greek organization shape the collegiate experience for Black students at PWIs?

Hughey (2008) challenges researchers to examine the dynamics of traditional Greek-lettered organizations from an anthropological perspective with "...an in-depth focus on the intersection of race, class, gender and culture". This research seeks to contribute to the existing body of literature that addresses the intersectional relationship between race, ethnicity, class and gender—specifically as it pertains to racial identity and the social experiences of Black students at PWIs. An increased level of understanding can improve areas like student retention and

student satisfaction and leadership development for Black students—as well as well as the material that focuses on student engagement/involvement, exclusive membership and class.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology**

#### **Why Qualitative Research?**

The purpose of qualitative research is to “study the research problems that inquire into the meaning individuals or groups that ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative researchers...transform the world; they study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 2007). Research problems that involve assumptions, human thought and/or lived experiences cannot be quantified or shared through numerical assessments. Thus, a qualitative research design was used for this project—so that its results can contribute to the understanding and interpretation of racial identity for Black women in educational environments.

#### **Research Design**

The study explored the dynamics of racial identity for Black women who are members of predominantly White sororities, using a phenomenological design (Creswell, 2007). This approach seeks to “...describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenon is the experience of “being Black” in the organization; the research seeks to “...reduce [the] individual experiences...to a description of the universal essence for all of the individuals (van Manen, 1990, as quoted by Creswell). The goal is to explain “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas further divides phenomenological research into two categories: hermeneutical and transcendental. Hermeneutical research involves the identification of a phenomenon, where the researcher develops a reflection on essential themes and “...makes an interpretation of the lived experiences” (van Manen, 1990). In this case, the researcher has an empathetic relationship to

the phenomenon. In contrast, transcendental phenomenology focuses less on the researcher and more on the experiences of the participants. Here, the researcher has not experienced the phenomenon; however, s/he may have preconceived notions about it. Moustakas offers that, in these cases, the investigator must “set aside their prejudgments [and] biases and...invalidate, inhibit and disqualify all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience [about the research]” (p. 85). This project employed a transcendental approach, as this phenomenon is not the complete experience of the researcher. While I am a Black woman who matriculated at a PWI, I am not a member of a traditional organization—which diversifies our experiences. However, because I am a Black woman who graduated from a PWI, I am challenged to compartmentalize own my experiences and delve into the role of Black identity in the context of membership in a predominantly White sorority.

Moustakas (1994) also offers that phenomenological research should answer the following questions: 1) what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? and 2) what contexts of situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? In this case, the phenomenon is being Black in a traditional sorority. The goal is to understand what life experiences (family background, demographics, racialized experiences, friends, etc.) led to the participants’ decisions—and how their membership in the organization has impacted their interactions with the Black community on campus.

### **Guiding Questions**

This research focused on the following questions:

- How is racial identity understood and performed by Black women in traditional sororities at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)?
- Does membership in a traditional Greek organization shape their experiences with the Black community on campus?
- What are the lived experiences of Black women who choose to join traditional sororities in these environments?

The data were collected during the Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 semesters.

### **Selection Criteria**

To participate in this research, each person had to identify as “female” and as “Black”, African-American and/or as a member of an ethnic group (e.g., Haitian, Jamaican, Ghanaian) within the African Diaspora. Additionally, full-time enrollment as undergraduate students at the research site and active member of a predominantly White sorority were also required selection criteria. For this research, active is defined as a “fully initiated member of a sorority chapter” ([www.afa1976.org](http://www.afa1976.org); retrieved March 31, 2016). I interviewed seven women, in an effort to increase the validity of the data and to gain a greater understanding of this phenomenon.

“There is no homogenous Black woman’s experience that exists (Collins, 2000; p. 6). Everyone develops a unique perspective—despite the macrosocial commonalities that may exist in the “Black woman’s experience”. This study focused specifically on the Black woman’s perspective, as most of the current literature focuses on the “male” or the “Black” experience—not the intersected relationship between gender/sex and race. This research drew upon the notion that “...each individual stands at a unique matrix of cross-cutting interests”. Each human’s decision/perspective is motivated through “...such social position as race, class, gender, sexual identity, religion, nationality, and so on” (Collins, 2000; pg. 4).

### **Site Selection**

The research was conducted at Mission University (a pseudonym for the research site). The institution was chosen because of its large, active Greek population, racial diversity and the interest in the research area. While there are several comparable institutions in the immediate

geographic area, two were eliminated because their Greek population did not include a sizeable number of Black/African American women who were in traditional organizations and/or were willing to participate in the study. Another university was eliminated, due to a lack of interest in the research topic. After corresponding with the Director of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs at the research site, it was determined that there was an interest in the subject and that the Greek population had a sufficient number of members who fit the criteria.

### **Site Demographics**

Mission University is a selective, large-sized institution that is in the northeastern region of the United States; it is the social nucleus of the town. For the Fall 2015-Spring 2016 academic year, the campus's undergraduate enrollment exceeded 30,000 students. The population is comprised of students from all 50 states, the U.S. territories and more than 20 international countries. 49% of the undergraduates are women; 51% are men.

For the same academic year, 56% of the undergraduate students self-identified as members of racial minority groups; nearly 8% of the population is African American or Black. Mission also has a thriving campus environment, with hundreds of student organizations (including honor societies, professional organizations, etc.) on campus. Of those student groups, nearly 70 of them are Greek-lettered; 30 of them are sororities. 8.5% of the undergraduate population is involved in a fraternal organization; 5.2% of the female students are in a sorority. 48% of Mission University's students complete their degree requirements within four years and 27.5% of the population lives in on-campus and/or University-supported housing. According to the University's statistics, nearly 46% of the African American students who were admitted in Fall 2010 completed their undergraduate degrees within four years; almost 74% received their bachelor's degrees within six years.

## **Gaining Entry**

I established a rapport with the Coordinator for the Office of Greek Life at Mission after a consistent period of correspondence. Afterwards, we met in person on three occasions, to converse about the research and culture of Greek life on campus. This relationship granted me access to the potential participants in this study. A synopsis of the project was sent to the senior levels of administration at the institution. Once the approval was received, then the letter was sent through the Director of Fraternity & Sorority Affairs (Appendix B) to each of the Panhellenic organizations' members who fit the selection criteria.

## **Sample Selection**

### *Purposeful Sampling*

The participants were identified via purposeful sampling; the goal was to conduct “in-depth evaluation in a quality assurance manner” (Patton, 385). The purposeful sampling strategy was employed so that I could “select individuals and sites for the study... [that could] purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study” (Creswell, 2007); it focuses on selecting information-rich cases that will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002). The Director of the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs received correspondence (via telephone and via email), which detailed the criteria for the participants. A one-page document, which included the research topic and criteria, were presented at an in-person meeting. We also spoke about the purpose and goal of the research. The potential interviewees were intentionally identified through the Director. Each person who met the criteria received a letter (through the Office of Greek Life) that detailed the purpose of the research, the time commitment and the structure of the interview process. If the student

remained interested, then we communicated via email and/or telephone to schedule the interview dates, times, etc.

### *Snowball Sampling*

Snowball sampling allows the researcher to "identify cases of interest from people who know others who know what cases/stories are 'information-rich' (Creswell, 2007). Patton (2002) argues that these persons/participants become integral to the collection process, as their accounts help to shape information-rich data. Due to the small percentage of students who participate in cross-racial membership and because of the sensitive nature of "race", snowball sampling was employed as a means of locating information-rich key informants (Patton, 2002).

For this research, seven women shared their experiences as African American/Black women who are members of traditional organizations; six of them participated in the focus group session. The first participant found out about it by reading the introductory letter that I sent to the Office of Greek Life and the presidents of the councils & Pan-Hellenic chapters on campus. The other six young women were identified via snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if they knew of anyone that would be interested in sharing their stories with me. In every case, the participant had engaged in conversation with another woman (who I had not interviewed yet) who met the criteria prior to meeting with me.

### **Data Collection**

Lincoln and Guba (1986) offer that "...there is no single reality on which inquiry can converge, but rather...multiple identities that are socially constructed [that] cannot be studied in pieces". Because this study looks at racial identity development from an intersectional perspective, it is critical that the data is collected from multiple sources; this enhances the validity and accuracy of the research.

For this project, photo-journaling, ethnographic observations and a focus group session (in addition to the one-on-one interviews) to collect the data.

Kaplowitz (as cited in Patton, 2002) states that individual interviews are...more likely to address socially sensitive topics than focus groups. Tillman (2002) offers that culturally sensitive research utilizes interviews (individual, group, life history) should be used to capture the African-American/Black experience--specifically in educational settings. To gather information about the participants' experiences in their sororities, 14 semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with seven participants; each session lasted approximately 60-75 minutes. At the beginning of the initial interview, each woman received a preliminary questionnaire which asked for demographic data (name, sorority affiliation, major, etc.). The interviews addressed several subjects, including the participants' childhood experiences, their lives as students before joining their sororities on campus as well as their social experiences as members of their organizations. An interview guide/protocol (Appendix C) was used to guide the data collection process. Each participant was also asked to provide me with a desired pseudonym, as a means of maintaining anonymity. Additionally, their friends' and family members' names, hometowns, etc. and the name of their sororities were eliminated to maintain confidentiality.

While the interviews produced a significant amount of data, Patton (2002) contends that studies that only use one method of data collection are "...vulnerable to errors that are linked to that particular method than studies that use multiple methods in which different data provides cross-data consistency checks" (p. 557).

First, individual interviews were used to obtain data for the research. Additionally, the collection process included a focus group session and a photo-elicitation project. The intended outcome was twofold: 1) to provide the participants with an opportunity to share their

experiences from multiple perspectives; each plays a pivotal role in the construction of their racial identity and 2) to understand the construction and performance of race within the Black community at the research site.

Harper (2000; as cited in Patton, 2002) states that photo elicitation is ideal for phenomenological research, as it "expresses the artistic, emotional and experiential intent of the photographer" (482). For this research, the participants took pictures (using their personal mobile devices) during a seven-day period that described their experiences as a student on campus. The participants' submissions helped to further illustrate their stories.

The focus group interview was the final collection component. It provided a "...permissive, non-threatening environment" where the participants can "...hear other people's responses and make additional comments beyond their original responses" (Krueger, as cited in Patton, 2002). Each session was audio-recorded--with the prior approval of the participants. The handwritten notes allowed me to detail the participants' non-verbal reactions during the interviews. All data (recordings, notes, etc.) was stored in a secured location in my home. Each participant selected a desired location for the interview, to increase her comfort level and convenience.

Additionally, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) contend that ethnographic approach is essential to the study of ethnicity, gender and class; it allows the researcher to see "...the direct influence of social structures, rather than to assume their importance and relevance at the onset" (134). In this case, ethnographic observation allows me to see how Black racial identity is understood and performed within the undergraduate student community on campus. With the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of the Black and Greek cultures at Mission University, I

attended events —specifically a “Meet the Greeks “(a step exhibition for historically Black and Latino Greek lettered organizations), the Involvement Fair and Black Student Union meetings.

### **Data Analysis**

Each of the in-person interviews and the focus group session were transcribed after each recorded session. The responses from the photo elicitation component were sent via email, in conjunction with the individual interviews. The transcription process "...offers another point of transition between data collection and analysis as part of data management and preparation (Patton, 2002). From the transcribed interviews, the data will be interpreted through categorical aggregation ("...a collection of instances from the data"--that will produce research-relevant meaning), direct interpretation (a single instance review "...that draws meaning from it without looking at multiple instances") and naturalistic generalizations ("...lessons that can be learned from the case itself...or can be applied to a population of cases"(Stake, as cited in Creswell, 2007). The goal is to "...identify issues within each case and then look for themes that transcend the cases" (Yin, as cited in Creswell, 2007).

The field notes from the observations provided, the responses from the photo elicitation and the interviews will be combined, to form a substantial body of analyzed data. This process will, theoretically, produce certain commonalities; the findings will be organized via an analysis of themes and, lastly, the development of assertions---or the opportunity "...to make sense of the data and [to] provide an interpretation couched in terms of personal views...or theories and/or constructs in the literature". (Creswell, 2007).

### **Assured Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1986) further states that it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure the trustworthiness of the data is reliable and that it accurately reflects the experiences of

the participants. Arguably, trustworthiness is established via the following criteria: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability and 4) confirmability. These criteria are filled by using one or more of the following methods: prolonged engagement/persistent observation, triangulation of sources, methods, and researchers, regular on-site team interaction, negative case analysis, peer debriefing, member checks, seeking limiting exceptions, purposive sampling, reflexive journals or an independent audit.

This study used triangulation of sources to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the data.

### **Participants**

The seven women who participated in this study:

**Skylar** was a senior, majoring in Psychology at Mission. She was from an upper-middle class town that is approximately 30 minutes away from campus. She was the younger of two children, but she was the first one to graduate from a four-year institution. Skylar identified as “Black”, although she more strongly identified with her ethnic culture. She was very active with her Sorority and the Greek community at large since her initiation two years prior.

**Amanda** was a junior, majoring in Health Sciences. She was also from an upper-middle class neighborhood that is less than 45 minutes away from Mission. She spent her early childhood in Europe; her family moved to the United States before she was ten. Amanda was the older of two children and was a second-generation college student; both her mom and dad were college graduates with terminal degrees. She had been a member of her Sorority for one year.

**Jennifer** was also a senior, who majored in Psychology at the institution. Her goal was to become a practicing attorney within the next four years. She hailed from a working/middle class town near Mission University. She was the younger of two children and was a first-generation college student. She argued that her sibling went to “college...sort of...but it wasn’t a real college and she didn’t graduate [from the school]”. She had been a member of her Sorority for nearly three years.

**Natasha** was a junior, majoring in Education. She is a third-generation college student (her grandparents were all graduates) who grew up in an upper middle-class neighborhood in two different states. She lived approximately two hours away from Mission. Natasha was an only child who is a part of a blended family, who she described as “our kind of people”. Both of her parents were college graduates with advanced degrees. She noted that her grandfather was a wealthy man who raised his family in an affluent, all-White neighborhood. As a result, her mom was bullied (because of her race) throughout her childhood. While her Mom supported her membership in her Sorority, she feels that Natasha should engage with the Black community at Mission on a more regular basis. She had been a member of her Sorority for three semesters.

**Katie** was a senior, majoring in Psychology at Mission. She was the older of two children; she identifies her sister as the “blacker” of the two. Her parents migrated to the United States from the Caribbean over 20 years ago. Katie’s family lives on the “suburban side” of a middle-class neighborhood, although she noted that she has relatives that live in the “hood”. She had been an active member of her Sorority for two years.

**Charlie** was a junior, majoring in History. She was the second born of three children. While Charlie's parents were from different racial backgrounds (making her biracial), she adamantly identified as a Black woman. She was raised in a diverse middle-class town, not far from Mission's campus. Additionally, Charlie identified as a "bisexual, homo-romantic"—meaning that she was attracted to both men and women, but she chose to have relationships with women solely. She had been an active member of her sorority for two years and had held two major executive board positions since her initiation.

**McKenzie** was a senior, majoring in Accounting at Mission. She, too, was the elder of two children. Unlike the other participants, McKenzie was raised in the southeastern part of the United States. She is from an upper middle-class neighborhood in her town. One of her parents had a bachelor's degree; the other was an active supporter of college education. She had been a member of her organization for 2.5 years.

Each one was given the opportunity to provide me with a pseudonym, to maintain anonymity.

The participants in this study share several similarities (i.e., campus affiliation, sorority membership), in addition to their matriculation at Mission University, their sorority affiliation and their racial/ethnic identity which made them eligible for the study. However, there are many marked differences among the group—including their ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. None of them are freshmen, as Mission does not allow students to become members of Greek-lettered organizations during their first semester. The participants are at varying points in their undergraduate careers. Additionally, the pool is representative of several sororities on campus,

which establishes another level of diversity within the group. These factors shape the participants' experiences at Mission.

Despite these major differences, their experiences at Mission are very similar—specifically as it relates to their reasons for pursuing membership in traditional organizations. Their relationships with the Black/African American community on campus vary greatly, ranging from “extremely close” to “extremely distant”.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

As the researcher for this project, I must acknowledge my position—in terms of my intersected identity and my first-hand experience with PWIs. I am a Black woman from an urban community who attended a private, northeastern boarding school; I am also a graduate of a predominantly White institution. As an undergraduate student, I was actively involved in my campus's Gospel Choir, Black Student Union and other retention initiatives that focused on the experiences of Black students at the institution. Additionally, I became a member of a historically Black sorority during my sophomore year. Despite my sorority affiliation, hometown and involvement in several race-centered organizations on campus, I was still considered to be “whitewashed” or an “Oreo” on many occasions because of the diversity of my friends' circle, educational background and other social dynamics. My membership in these organizations played a critical role in my social experiences as a student, as well as in my connection to the university. During my experiences in both, boarding school and college, race became my primary identifier in most social settings—even though I, clearly, identified in other ways. It is in these spaces that I began to understand the fluidity of my racial, social, cultural and educational identities. While the participants and I share many separate identities, my membership in a

historically Black sorority and other cultural organizations establishes a major difference in our experiences. Additionally, our worldviews are unique, which means that each participant will provide an exclusive account of Black identity in these educational environments.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Howard-Hamilton (2003) offers that "selecting appropriate theories for understanding the needs of African American women should be based on their cultural, personal and social contexts, which clearly differ significantly from those of men and women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression". This study is guided by theories that help to ascertain the factors that contribute to the participants' decision to join traditionally White sororities—and how their membership expands the definition of "being Black" at a PWI. In addition to Cross and Helms' Racial Identity Development Models, the following works are used to support the research that foregrounds their experiences within traditionally White sororities: Cultural Capital, Social Capital, Intersectionality Theory, Critical Race Theory and Multiple Identity Theory.

#### *Cultural Capital*

Cultural capital is defined as the proverbial credit that one acquires by learning the skills, intelligences and tastes that emulates the behaviors of the dominant cultural/social group (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Salomone (2005) argues that educational institutions are primarily responsible for the transmission of these skills and values, as they will warrant professional success post-graduation.

Cultural capital is divided into three types: embodied (i.e., mastery of the formal language, dress/attire, social behaviors, preferences in art, literature, music), objectified (e.g., paintings, vehicles) or institutionalized (i.e., academic attainment/degrees, employment, membership in elite organizations, etc.). Bourdieu further argues that the acquisition of dominant cultural capital increases the likelihood of economic and social success—which is reified through the attainment of advanced academic credentials, homes/property and other visible signs of wealth and "high culture".

Membership in an elite and/or exclusive organization whose membership is only extended to college students is a form of cultural capital itself. Although the attainment of cultural capital is not the sole reason that an African American/Black woman may choose to join a traditional sorority, it may serve as a contributing factor to her decision to do so.

### *Social Capital*

Social capital is defined as the aggregate of the resources that one gains because of his/her membership in a group, i.e. "...voluntary associations, trade unions, political parties or secret societies (Bourdieu, as cited in Siisänen, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) contends that the amount of social capital that one has is contingent upon "...the size of the network of connections that s/he can effectively mobilize". Arguably, it is produced in two forms: 1) via membership in a group and 2) through one's involvement in the social networks within the larger group—i.e., leadership positions or intergroup relationships. Moreover, voluntary

Fraternal organizations are a prime example of voluntary associations that garner social capital for its members. First, membership is offered on an exclusive basis at the discretion of the current members of the chapter. Secondly, Greek life has an established presence on American college campuses. Being a member of a Greek lettered organization signifies one's college

attendance and his/her ability to navigate in a worldwide social network. Additionally, s/he can connect with member of other Greek-lettered organizations—which increases their economic and social resources. Essentially, membership augments one's social capital.

While historically Black Greek sorority life is over a century old, its traditional counterpart has existed for nearly 150 years. Some will argue that historically Black sorority life cannot produce the same social capital as its traditionally White counterpart—because of its ethnocentric roots. Simply put, it can only open opportunities within the Black community. If education is viewed as an opportunity for Black students to “level the playing field” with their White counterparts, then pursuing membership in a traditional sorority would be more profitable and would give them greater opportunities upon graduation. The accumulation of mainstream social capital may contribute to the reasons why Black women choose to join predominantly White sororities.

### *Intersectionality Theory*

“Intersectionality” was initially “coined” by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw through her research around Black women and violence in the United States. In her work, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color*, Crenshaw (1989) posits that “...many of the experiences that Black women face are not subsumed with the traditional boundaries of race and gender...as these boundaries are understood” and that the “...intersection of race and gender factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race and gender dimensions of those experiences separately. Patricia Hill Collins further contributed to this notion and defined intersectionality as “an analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women (Collins, 2000). Essentially, these systems

are inextricably intertwined--specifically for those whose identities are situated in these social constructs.

Crenshaw examines the relationship between society and these intertwined identities through three subcategories: 1) structural intersectionality, or "the ways in which the intersection of race and gender informs our experiences" (1251) 2) political intersectionality, which highlights that Black women are always situated in "within at least two subordinate groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (1252) and 3) representational intersectionality, or how popular culture's representation of women in society omits/ignores the experiences of Black women. While her work is focused on issues of invisibility or the silencing of the Black woman's voice around domestic violence issues, the framework can be applied to this research. It established a structure for examining how the intersection of race and class is embedded in the culture of sororities and the Black woman's experience in them. Further, it highlights how these intersectional identities influence their larger identity in their sororities and within their racial communities on campus.

### *Critical Race Theory*

In congruence with Intersectionality Theory, Critical Race Theory offers that race intersects with other social identities (i.e., class, gender, socioeconomic status), which fosters racial stratification (Solorzano, 1998). It is built on the following tenants: 1) race is socially constructed and is a central component within U.S. society; 2) race and racism intersect with other forms of oppression to perpetuate marginalization; the goal is to address these discriminating factors (i.e., racism, classism, sexism or any other inequities) through the experiences of the individuals and 3) the voices and experiences of people of color play an

essential role in explaining racial dynamics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

This theory addresses the history of exclusionary practices within traditional organizations.

Undeniably, the historical dynamics of race relations within the United States plays a pivotal role in the lack of racial diversity within historically White sororities. The exclusionary practices within traditional Greek organizations during the first half of the 20th century prohibited Black students from pursuing membership in them; there were also other factors (i.e., legacy status, class, etc.) that prevented others from joining. Because social identities are inextricably intersected, Critical Race Theory promotes the understanding of this experience from a holistic perspective. Moreover, it supports the need for the narrative explanation of this experience from the perspective of a Black woman—as a means of understanding the role of race in the culture of traditional sororities and to understand their experiences as members of a marginalized group within this context.

### *Multiple Identity Theory*

In her research on Black lesbian women, Bowleg (2008) offers that identity is often addressed from an additive perspective (i.e., Black + Lesbian + woman), as opposed to an intersectional view (i.e., Black Lesbian Woman). Lee (2004) contends that identity is not segregated, but rather fluid and intersectional. Both assertions are grounded in the theory that identity is a multifaceted relationship that is defined internally by self and externally by others—which helps us to understand multiple identities (Deaux, 1993, as cited in Bowleg).

Developed by Jones and McEwen (1996), Multiple Identity Theory contends that “...most developmental models and related research only address a single dimension of identity...but do not address how an individual may simultaneously develop and/or embrace multiple minority statuses (1996). Moreover, “...in addition to racial, ethnic and gender identities, college students

may have other identity orientations—i.e., social class, religious, geographical or regional, and professional identities. While each of these identities may not be equally as important in every social context, each one does contribute to his/her worldview and their personal interpretation of identity. From this perspective, Jones & McEwen offer that college students, in particular, interpret multiple identities in one of the following four contexts:

- Identifying with only one aspect of self (e.g., gender or sexual orientation or race) in a passive manner; this is assigned by society, their peers or their families.
- Identifying with only one aspect of self that is determined by the individual (i.e., sexual orientation, ethnicity/nationality or gender), without including other identities, particularly those that are oppressions;
- Identifying with multiple aspects of self but choosing to do so in a “segmented fashion” (Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 179), frequently only one at a time and determined more passively by the context rather than by the individual’s own wishes. For example, in one setting the individual identifies as Black, yet in another setting as gay;
- The individual chooses to identify with the multiple aspects of self, especially multiple oppressions, and has both consciously chosen them and integrated them into one’s sense of self. (406)

Arguably, the participants in this study do not have the option of choosing to “be” Black; the identity is ascribed to them on a macrosocial level, prior to their matriculation at the institution. These options of identity, however, will help us to understand how they perceive race, in relationship with their other social identities—specifically in the context of membership within their sororities and within their racial community on campus.

This framework provides a theoretical lens to examine the intersection of social identities (race, gender, student, sorority member) in the context of their sororities and the Black community at a PWI. Bourdieu & Passeron (1997) argue that educational institutions serve as primary portals of cultural capital. Arguably, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are more apt to transmit traditional forms of cultural and social capital. Moreover, Black students may matriculate at PWIs to attain mainstream cultural and social capital. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw), Critical Race Theory and Multiple Identity Theory (Jones & McEwen) collectively argue that one's social identities are intertwined and should be discussed collectively—from the firsthand/lived experienced perspective. The purpose of this research is to understand how the participants' racial identity, as well their roles as “students” and “sorority members” work in tandem in their educational environments. This framework supports the notion that each of these identities are elements of the participants' self-identity and are equally important in understanding their experiences at a PWI—and in a traditional organization.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study is to understand how racial identity is constructed for Black/African American women who are in White sororities at PWIs. Using an intersectional approach, the goal is to shed light on the experiences of these women, in all areas of their identity so that we can understand how race is perceived and understood in the lives of those who do not perform race in traditional or stereotypical ways. The research tells the stories of women who have lived on the proverbial outskirts of their racial communities in educational environments, simply because they did not follow the protocol for “being Black” in these spaces. To be Black/African American in their high schools and at Mission University meant that they had to maintain memberships in certain student organizations, attend specific events on campus, live in predetermined dormitories and sit with the Black/African American students during meals and/or larger campus events. Those who did not were called “sellouts”, “Oreos” or were told that they were not “authentically Black”. While there were differences between the participants’ social circles and activities and the social protocol on their schooling environments, the commonality was that they were very aware and proud of their racial identity. For them, their pre-college and their Mission experiences included stories about them wanting to be a part of the Black/African American communities in school. Their interactions with their racial peers made them feel like they did not have a place in the Black communities at their schools and, later, in college. This “outsider” identity permeated their social interactions with their racial peers and affected their relationship with both, Black and White students at Mission.

The sections of this chapter further explain the experiences of the participants. The first section, “Self-Identity and Pre-College Experience”, focuses on how the participants constructed

their personal identifying terms of race. For these women, ethnicity played the most critical role in their understanding of racial identity, both in their pre-college lives and in their Mission experience. Two of the participants were “involuntary minorities”; their parents and grandparents were born in the United States. The remaining five were children of first-generation immigrants. All of them welcomed an opportunity to establish a relationship with the Black community on their campus. For the second-generation Americans, “being Black” included a connection with “Black Mission”, as well as the members of their ethnic groups on campus and the student organizations that focused on them.

It also includes stories about the women’s interactions with their racial peers at school, in sports and other social arenas. Many of the participants’ pre-college frustrations stemmed from an inability to “act Black” or to identify with the Black community. This notion of racial performance is often fueled by society’s perception of a racial groups; in most cases, these views are created from sociopolitical ideologies and historical contexts outside of an individual’s control (Sadowski, 2003). Identity is also defined by how a person understands his or her relationship to a group through time and space and “...its possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000). In our society, to “be Black” is to be rhythmic, athletic, to speak in urban slang, dress in urban styles and listen to hip-hop music (Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Carter, 2006; Delpit, 1995). Particularly in educational settings, those who do not participate in these behaviors are labeled “Oreos” or ridiculed by other Black/African American students for “acting White”. The challenge is that stereotypical images and characteristics of Black identity have been adopted by mainstream America and are used by “Black/African American” people as the proverbial barometer for “authentic Blackness”. Overwhelmingly, the participants drew parallels between “being Black” and listening to hip-hop/rap music, using slang or colloquial language, living in urban communities and being able to “step” or dance. Most of them believed that they lived on the outskirts of the Black community because they did not like Kanye

or J. Cole, used “proper” English, were from upper-middle class families and could not dance.

The next section, “Black at Mission”, examines into how Black identity is understood and performed on the participants’ campus. Their stories revealed that there are unspoken rules that govern one’s acceptance into the Black community on campus. Racial identity, or more specifically, being a part of “Black Mission”, played a role in the women’s ability to interact with other Black students on campus. Being on the outskirts affected their social practices (i.e., dating, attending parties, meetings and other events) both within their sororities and with the Black/African American students on campus. First, there were many shared experiences, including negative interactions with their racial peers in middle and high school and at Mission, a relationship between racial and ethnic identity, and the challenge of not fitting in with “Black Mission” because of their sorority affiliation and other social dynamics. This investigation revealed that while the participants did not interact largely with overall Black community, they were quite cognizant (and proud) of their racial/ethnic identity. Secondly, each of the participants grew up in an environment in which their interactions with other Black/African American families and students were limited, and when they did interact it was often a negative experience. Third, while they were adamant that “being Black” could not be defined or characterized in a uniformed way, each participant measured her “Blackness” through existing notions about Black identity in America. In many instances, the participants felt that they were not “Black enough” to engage with their racial peers because they did not listen to hip-hop music, use slang or like attend certain events on campus. This feeling stemmed from their experiences with other Blacks/African Americans in their pre-Mission lives, as well as their initial interactions with

Black Mission—and it played a critical role in their decisions to join traditional sororities. Finally, there was a social protocol for “being Black” at Mission University. There were specific activities, student groups and traditions within the Black/African American community on campus; those who did not regularly participate in these activities were ostracized from Black Mission—or, at the very least, were viewed as “in-betweeners” or “outsiders” among the Black/African American students.

This section also delves into the interactions that the participants had—specifically in terms of interracial dating and partying within their Greek life circles and within Black Mission. Most of them felt “unsafe” at Black Mission events because they were not familiar with the venues or the attendees; they felt more comfortable at “regular” Mission events because they shared more in common with the students in those spaces. Several of the participants also spoke candidly about the role that race and racial identity plays in the dating selection process. Some of them made the decision to solely date outside of their race, while others chose to date within; in all instances, the intersected relationship between race and class played a vital role in their decision-making.

The racial divide within the Greek community is also addressed in the Findings chapter. In their individual sessions, the women spoke candidly about their reasons for joining their respective organizations. Again, their stories were similar; the seriousness of the BGLO sororities deterred them from seeking membership in those chapters. They felt that their formal nature stemmed from the organizations’ founding, which was rooted in racial discrimination, collectivism and sisterhood among Black/African American women. The participants understood the need for historically Black sororities but felt that their structure and culture perpetuated racial isolation. Because racial diversity played a key role in their decision to join their sororities, they felt that a predominantly Black organization would not offer their desired versatility; consequently, BGLOs were not appealing to

them. They also felt unwelcomed by the BGLO sorority members on campus, which dissuaded them from pursuing membership. At the time of the research, there was only one historically Black sorority on campus. However, all the participants had nearly identical experiences with the chapter's members—specifically at the campus's Organizational Fair. The “outsider” phenomenon was a continual theme throughout the chapter.

The last section, “Black Like Me”, focuses on how the participants conceptualized and performed race in their everyday lives. While they proudly identified as African American, Black, Haitian, etc., they did not believe that they needed to belong to a larger racially-centered group to affirm their Blackness. Instead, they felt that it was more important to diversify predominantly White environments, to defy stereotypes and to engage in dialogues around racial identity in those spaces. In this chapter, the participants respond to some of the assumptions that have been made about them (and other African Americans/Blacks) who do not perform race in traditional, or stereotypical ways.

This research supports the notion that racial identity is fluid; it is conceptualized and performed, based on one's life experiences, self-perception and how others perceive you. This analysis reinforces the theory that race is inextricably intersected with class/socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation; each of these social identities plays an important and interwoven role in shaping one's sense of self. Each of the seven participants had a significant interaction with other Black/African American peers and had story that deeply impacted her worldview. These women's stories revealed that their understandings and constructions of individual racial identity were strongly influenced by ethnicity and socioeconomic status as well

as, and in connection with, their pre-college social and educational experiences. Some of the participants had been called names, made fun of or otherwise ridiculed because they did not perform race in the same manner as their racial counterparts. These women had not abandoned or “lost” their identities. Instead, they diversified the notion of what it meant to be “Black/African American” in the United States and, specifically, in higher education. The reality is that there is an overarching formula for race performance in America; in many cases, it involves the internalization of the stereotypes that are ascribed to the group.

## **Identity & Pre-Mission Experiences**

This chapter focuses on the role that race plays in one's identity. The participants were asked, "When someone asks you to identify racially, how do you answer them?" Each of the participants identified in her own unique manner. For some, race was a primary identifier; for others, it was secondary to ethnic identity. The latter part of the chapter explores the participants' most memorable experiences with their racial peers prior to their arrival at Mission University. Their stories were sensitive and included negative interactions with their Black/African American classmates, which made them apprehensive about connecting with the Black Mission community as college students. While their negative experiences stemmed from the notion that they did not "act Black" (because of their music and language preferences), other factors (including skin color and academic/athletic prowess) played a role in their racial peers' perception of them. All these women identified with being Black or African American, but their interactions with their peers made them question if they were "Black enough".

### *Black versus African American, Haitian or "Other"*

Race is a social construct that has, for centuries, been a key element of the exercise of power and the establishment of cultural and socio-economic hierarchies in the United States. James Baldwin (1985) articulated that the conceptualization of "Blackness" varies based on geographic location. In the U.S., being "Black" is an all-encompassing term for people whose ancestry traces back to Africa. In most cases, the conversation and research around Black identity does not acknowledge the diversity within the group. It is often discussed in a generic manner—and it often ignores the experiences of those whose ancestry is linked to other countries outside of the United States. Stereotypes about the differences between U.S. born Blacks, or involuntary minorities and

those who were born in other countries within the African Diaspora also impact this identification. Ogbu (1986) offers that African Americans (i.e., those whose ancestors were brought to the US via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade) are perceived as lazy, privileged and ungrateful by Black people who were born in other countries. As a result, many immigrants do not want to identify as Black/African American; instead, they celebrate their ethnic or national heritage—as a means of differentiating from their U.S. born counterparts. The criteria for the study stated that each participant must identify as “Black” or “African American” because the terms are often used interchangeably.

The seven participants in this research represented the diversity within the African Diaspora; they were from the Caribbean, Central America, Africa and the United States. When asked how they identified racially, all of the women identified themselves as Black, but for whose parents voluntarily immigrated to the United States their national and ethnic identities were more important. Jennifer, who identified as Haitian, reflected on this differentiation when she responded to the question:

**Jennifer:** Now, to say that I’m Black...what are you saying? People were categorized as Black because they were slaves.

**Me:** What does it mean to you?

**Jennifer:** To be Black?

**Me:** Yeah...

**Jennifer:** It’s the color of your skin. I mean, you don’t have to be a certain way or act a certain way or hang with certain people.

**Me:** So how do you identify—if someone says, “what are you?”

**Jennifer:** So, I’m not Black; I’m Haitian-American. I’m Americanized, in comparison with my parents. My grandma speaks no English. My parents speak fluent Creole. They

didn't press it with us [her and her siblings] so I don't know it. I feel like I should know it, or I should learn it later on in life.

**Me:** What does being Haitian American mean to you?

**Jennifer:** Being a part of the culture, speaking Creole, liking the food...yeah. Like immersing yourself in Haitian culture—not immersing yourself, maybe, just knowing it intimately, I guess.

**Me:** Do you feel like you know it intimately?

**Jennifer:** Noooo...nooo.

**Me:** Do you feel like you're on the outside of it? Is there a way to be Haitian?

**Jennifer:** Like I just contradicted myself. But the only way I'd feel like an outsider [was] if someone made me feel outside of the culture and no one has made me feel that way. My family doesn't do that...yeah, so....

Jennifer offered that her Black identity only referred to her skin tone; she was a Haitian-American. While she did not participate fully in the cultural practices of “being Haitian”, she noted that this was her strongest identity because her family originated from Haiti.

Katie, whose family was Jamaican, shared Jennifer's sentiment. She identified as Jamaican, even though her family viewed her as “Americanized”:

**Katie:** I identify as Jamaican but I'm not Jamaican to my family [outside of the United States]. My family has assimilated [into American culture]... but not in terms of food. My family, outside of the immediate ones, still cooks and eats it; we don't. My parents came to the United States at 21/22, so they had time to adapt to American culture. They were in the United States longer than they were in Jamaica. I'm jealous of my cousins' accents; my family don't speak Patois at all so when I'm around them, I sound like the American. When I'm in Jamaica, I feel out of place.

Katie's Jamaican heritage was most salient for her. Because she did not engage the obvious cultural practices—i.e., cooking traditional foods, speaking Patois, etc., her extended family saw her as “Americanized” or as an “unauthentic Jamaican”. Despite this, she still proudly connected her ethnic identity to Jamaica. For her, ethnicity and race were intertwined.

The term “African American” is controversial because it does not clearly represent neither nationality nor ethnicity. The word was originally created as a politically-correct alternative to the terms “Black” or “Negro”. Today, it is used to identify people whose ancestors were brought to the Americas during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and who cannot directly trace their lineage to a country in the African Diaspora. Katie and Jennifer identified as “Haitian” and “Jamaican”, respectively. Based on the definition, Natasha and McKenzie would both identify as African Americans. However, their responses to the “Black, African-American or other” question revealed another complexity; African-American was not even an all-encompassing term for those whose ancestors were involuntarily brought to the United States. Natasha used the terms interchangeably. However, McKenzie did not prefer the term “African American”:

**McKenzie:** “I prefer to be called Black, rather than African American”.

**Joy:** Why?

**McKenzie:** Because I feel like that term should be used for people who can trace their heritage, like, I have friends who are legit Nigerian. A person from China, you call them Chinese American. I can’t say what country my grandparents or ancestors came from. I am an American who has Black skin. So, I’m Black. That’s how I identify.

She felt that it was inaccurate for her to use the term “African American” because she did not know from which African country her ancestors originated. For her, racial identity, or being “Black”, connected her to others who shared particular experiences because of her skin color. However, she was certain of her national identity as an American. In McKenzie’s case, race and nationality were equally as important.

As biracial women, Charlie and Amanda shared a unique perspective on Black identity. Charlie was raised by her mother, a Filipino woman, in single-parent household. Her father, who identified as Jamaican, also played an active role in her life. While she was immersed in Filipino

culture on a daily basis, Charlie identified as a Black woman. Mead (1934) offered that identity is created, based on the world's view of a person. Charlie identified as a Jamaican woman because of her heritage; her Black identity stemmed from other people's understanding of her, based on her physical appearance.

**Charlie:** "I'm biracial; I'm first generation...I specifically identify as Jamaican but if anyone asks me, I just tell them that I am Black...all day. I have more of the Filipino influence on a day to day [basis] but I am a Black woman..."

**Joy:** And you seem very strong in your "I'm Black" identity...

**Charlie:** [It] comes from that fact that people will always see me as Black. It's like that one drop rule. And so...it's one of those things where people are going to identify me as Black, the world is going to treat me this way. And since they are going to do it, then I'm gonna find pride in that and I'm going to make that my identity.

For Charlie, the fact that people saw her as Black woman played a critical role in the development of her identity. She was aware of the discrimination and other inequities that she could, potentially, face because of the culture of race in America. However, she embraced the Black identity, including its political, social and cultural underpinnings and also took pride in her ethnic identity as a Jamaican woman.

Amanda's response to the question, "How do you identify, in terms of race or ethnicity?" was very different than those of the other participants. Born and raised outside of the United States, Amanda's perspective was diversified by exposure to a variety of national cultures and geographic locations. With her father coming from Uganda and her mother from a European country, her biracial and immigrant identities both played a critical role in her perception of race. She saw a clear difference between being "Black," "African" and "African American". She identified with her Ugandan heritage. However, she described "being Black" through an

outsider's perspective because she did not attend events or engage in stereotypically Black practices. When asked what it meant to "be Black," Amanda responded,

I think it means growing up or identifying with Black culture...and that could mean a lot of things. For example, my friend, Brandi—she's Black. We grew up in similar neighborhoods. She goes to church in [name of town] so she has a lot of Black friends from her church. Her parents are Black so when they have a family party is definitely different than when my Mom throws an event. So, I would say, I don't know how to say what identifying [as] Black is...but that's the closest that I can get to it. It's very different than the way I grew up.

Because identity is shaped by one's appearance or social practices, "being Black" was ascribed to Amanda by society because of her physical attributes (i.e., skin complexion, hair texture and facial features)—despite the fact that she did not regularly engage with Black/African Americans. In the United States, biracial identity is often subject to the "one-drop rule", which indicates that any person who has at least one ancestor of African descent is considered Black/African American. According to this definition, Amanda is Black. Her personal interpretation was slightly different. For her, "being Black" involved an immersion in Black culture and "being African American" was an identity for those who were unfamiliar with their ancestry. Amanda's national/ethnic identity as the daughter of a Ugandan man was more salient than "being Black".

While Amanda identified with her father's Ugandan ancestry, she equally identified with her mother's culture and family history. She was raised in a household where both cultures were celebrated, which shaped her identity as a biracial woman. When asked how she identified racially, she responded,

I think I definitely identify as biracial. That's actually something that I thought was interesting when Natasha was telling me about it [the study]. I had to really think about...what I identify as. I don't think I identify as Black, or African American, so much. My dad is from Uganda and, like, especially a lot of people who are African American don't know much about Africa or where they are from. I've been to Uganda, like, my dad is very close with his family. I know a lot about the culture, whereas I feel like a lot of African Americans are not sure where their ancestors are from. So African American culture is different from African culture and a lot of people don't understand

that. Um, I definitely do identify, I don't want to say I identify more as being White; I definitely identify as being biracial....

Essentially, Amanda crafted her own biracial, bicultural and binational identity. She was proud of her Ugandan roots and she felt that Black identity in America lacked a connection to Africa. She was equally proud of her mother's European ancestry and felt that it played a pivotal role in her daily social practices. For her, being "Black" meant that she was knowledgeable and had a direct relationship with her family and with an African country. Defining her Blackness through her relationships with other Black or African American people was not important, because her identity was connected to her family and their heritage--not the traditional typifications of race in predominantly White spaces.

Each of these women offered a different perspective on racial identity. McKenzie and Charlie understood being "Black" as an identifier for those whose descendants were from the African Diaspora; for Natasha, "Black" and "African American" were interchangeable. Katie and Jennifer also shared this sentiment and chose to identify as Jamaican and Haitian, respectively, for this reason. For Skylar, whose parents were both from Guyana (South America), it was important to mention that she was biracial. Her mother was Indo-Guyanese (East Indian) and her father was Afro-Guyanese. Because she was a darker-skinned woman, she identified as Black, and felt that her mother's heritage and identity would be overlooked because she "looked more like a Black woman".

These varying perspectives on racial, ethnic and national identities demonstrate the great diversity of what it means "to be Black". These varied understandings of Black identity shaped the participants' interactions and experiences within the Black community at Mission

University—known as “Black Mission”. In congruence with Ogbu (1986), those whose parents were born outside of the United States chose to identify with their ethnic/national heritage, while those with deeper roots in the United States identified according to race. However, they all understood that these identities were intertwined. For the women for whom ethnic identity was more important, their connection to the Haitian, Jamaican or African communities within Black Mission was also more critical. For the other participants, an overall connection to Black Mission was most important.

### *Comin’ From Where I’m From: Pre-College Experiences*

Smith and Moore (2000) claim that the presence of pre-college interracial relationships has a negative effect on a person’s ability to connect with other Black students in a college setting. Tajfel (2001) argued that students will connect with others who share similar backgrounds (socioeconomic, cultural). Guiffrida (2005) also argues that those who have interacted in a more diverse arena are less inclined to join racially/ethnically centered organizations. The participants in this project had multiple interactions with people from different racial backgrounds; most, if not all, of their friends were White. In most cases, the friendships were established because of their similar interests in athletics or academics. According to the existing research, these participants would have difficulty with developing relationships with their racial peers—which they did. This section explores the interactions that these women had with their Black peers before college and how these instances impacted their racial identity. For all of them, these experiences left them feeling apprehensive about establishing relationships with other Black students in college.

All seven of the participants grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods—ranging (socioeconomically) from middle class to wealthy. Each one was highly active at her local high school in athletics and student organizations, including honor societies, the 4-H club and, interestingly, diversity and multicultural clubs. They were all also academically inclined; all of them were in Honors and AP courses in high school. In many cases, their family members were the only people that identified as Black or African American in their immediate area. Within their familial environments, the interactions were positive. Surrounded by non-Black peers, their understanding and performance of race was accepted and validated; the authenticity of their Blackness was not judged in these spaces.

Except for their relatives and family friends, most of the participants' friends were White. They played the same sports, participated in the same student clubs and organizations, and had similar familial structures and socioeconomic backgrounds as their White peers. Essentially, they shared their lives together. These commonalities largely fueled the participants' decisions to pledge to traditional sororities. However, their interactions with African American peers also played a role in their decisions to shy away from the Black community overall. Many of their pre-college experiences were negative and had a major impact on them. They were teased and ridiculed for their style of clothing, taste in music, extracurricular involvement, use of the English language and the diversity of their friendship groups. In other words, their peers teased them for "talking" and "acting" White.

All of these women had "less than positive" experiences with their African American peers outside of their immediate circles. However, they were targeted for different reasons. Jennifer and McKenzie grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods; Black/African American

students ridiculed them for the diversity within their friendship circles. Natasha, Katie and Skylar had different experiences; their peers ridiculed them for “acting White” and for thinking that they were “better than” the other Black students at their schools. Factors, including socioeconomic status, parents’ educational level and their manner of speech played critical roles in these assumptions.

For Katie, the experiences were far more complex. Her negative experiences began in elementary school, when her peers ridiculed her because of her lighter skin complexion. Historically, skin color has played a divisive role within the Black community. During the Enslavement Period, those who were lighter-skinned were called “house slaves” and had more domesticated responsibilities while their darker-skinned counterparts were called “field slaves”; their responsibilities were more physical in nature. The differentiation further solidified the notion that lighter skin and European facial features and hair textures were considered more attractive than darker skin and African features. During the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, Black/African Americans celebrated darker skin; it became synonymous with “authentic Blackness”. This sentiment still exists today. Katie went to an elementary school in a predominantly Black community, where darker skin was celebrated. She was a lighter-skinned child in this environment and her peers ridiculed her because of her complexion. As Katie explained,

**Katie:** I got made fun of too...[because of my skin color]. I would get called Wonder Bread that hadn't been in the toaster for too long and my dad had to, like, go to school because I would cry. When I was younger, when I was in daycare, I went to my mom and said, “Why am I White like Ms. Mary? I want to be Black like you and Daddy”. My parents are darker than me, well, browner. I get my color from my grandma; she's half-Chinese”. My mom's dad is half-White so I can't help the color that I am. So, I feel like that's where it stemmed from.

Katie's peers also teased her because she did not speak in the same manner as they did; she used

proper English while many of them used slang or other English dialects. She attributed her use of formal English to living in the suburbs, being educated in private school and her father's employment as a police officer. She told the interviewer,

**Katie:** When I was growing up in elementary school, I would always get teased. Like my mom lived in Cedarside at my Grandma's house, my dad lived in Center City. Their first house was in Center City, then the second house (or the apartment) was on the border of [a suburban city] and Cedarside and then we moved to the suburbs in [their current area]. My parents had me in private school, so I wasn't raised in an environment like my cousins in the 'hood were. And my dad is a police officer, so he deals with criminals and people who don't have respect so being that he's in that position, you have to act in an orderly way in a sense. So, growing up, I would talk eloquently—or how shall I say it, like I am now, and they would say that I was talking “white” and I would say, “that's not my fault”. I told everybody [that] my parents didn't raise me to talk like “yo, yo” or whatever—you know what I mean?

Katie's definition of “being Black” included several of the stereotypes that are ascribed to Black identity—i.e., using informal English/slang, attending urban public schools and being unorderly.

Her account also referenced the notion that these characteristics were “criminal” or “disrespectful”. Katie's experiences demonstrate the intersection of race and class within Black identity. Attending private school and living in the suburbs made her “less Black” in the eyes of her peers. While she was comfortable and proud of her identity, she told her cousins that her parents did not raise her to speak like them. The implicit lesson was that using slang and attending public school were “wrong”.

Natasha also had strained interactions with her Black peers while in high school. Her neighborhood was predominantly White, but the school population included African American and Hispanic students from the other parts of her city. All her friends were White—except for her best friend, Nikki. This was her first opportunity to connect with her racial peers daily—

outside of Nikki and her immediate family. Her interaction was less than positive, and it played a significant role in how she interacted with Black women in particular. She explained,

There was this one time, junior or senior year, there was this one girl who I had never talked to but for some reason, she just hated me. We had class together and she just hated me. I never knew why. One day I had class with her and she was talking to one of our classmates about how she hated me. One of my friends was like, “Natasha’s never talked to you”. I didn’t even think I knew her name. So, we get to the lunch room and she and her friends were staring at me and I didn’t know what was up. But Nikki was somewhat friendly with her and her friends. So, I’m like “Nikki, what’s up and she’s like, “she hates you because you hang out with White people”. That was kind of... weird to me that she felt like that. One day, she approached me, and I don’t remember what all of her words were but she said, “You just think you’re better than us, hanging out with your White friends”. And that was something I never grew up thinking. We never really talked about it.

Similar to Katie, Natasha’s negative experience stemmed from the notion that she thought was “better than” the other Black students—because of her all-White friends’ circle. For Natasha, race was not her primary identity; for her Black peers, it was. Consequently, they interpreted the composition of her friends’ circle as an intentional decision to disassociate herself from the Black community.

Skylar identified as biracial because her father was Black Guyanese and her mother was Indian-Guyanese. Like Katie and Natasha, Skylar was ridiculed in high school for “acting White”. Her peers (both Black and White) called her an “Oreo,” which is a term used to describe a person who racially identifies as “Black” but “acts White”) because of her involvement in extracurricular activities and her relationships with her teachers; she was called the “teacher’s pet”. The implicit message was that community/school involvement and positive relationships with teachers were not associated with Black identity. Skylar explained,

**Skylar:** In high school, there was a small group of Black people, who were all friends but everyone else was White. And, then there was like, random, mixes and I mean, me I got

called an Oreo all of the time...but it wasn't in a bad way, in their sense. No one was saying it to be rude. They would just be like, oh, you're such an Oreo....

**Me:** Wait, who would say it to you—Black people or White people?

**Skylar:** both.... [the] Black students more so, they would be the ones to do it. They called me an Oreo. It wasn't like they hated me but they just kinda, it was a given. Also, I was the teacher's pet (laughs).

**Me:** Really?

**Skylar:** ...it was also because I was really involved. I did all sorts of leadership things. I was, like, the one student who did like Student Council and all these other things...wait, there was like, one more girl who did who is also African American and I was friends with. She played sports and everything and was really involved. But she didn't necessarily get called an Oreo as much because she had other friends; all of my best friends were all White. So, she hung out with more Black people.

While Skylar initially seemed unbothered by being called an “Oreo”, she became annoyed with its use towards the end of her high school career; she asked her friends and other non-Black students to stop using the term. She also became vocal when her non-Black peers spoke negatively about other Black/African American people. For Skylar, positive Black identity was important, and it was her responsibility to advocate for it as a Black woman. This developed as she got older. She described,

...The thing is people would forget that I was Black. You can't make fun of other Black students in front of me and think [that] it's okay. When I say something, people say 'Oh, you're different'; it doesn't matter. It makes me more annoyed, the older I get. When I was younger, I ignored it. Well, it kinda bothered me but I didn't say as much. As I got older, I became more vocal about it and also realized that it was, you know, wrong...” Like don't call me that, don't say that. I would say it and then people would stop.

Initially, Skylar allowed her peers to make comments about Black or African American people around her. However, she later began to take these comments personally, and found them offensive to members of the racial group to which she belonged. Drawing from Cross' Nigrescence Model (1991), Black or African American identity is developed through five stages:

Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization and Internalization-Commitment. In the Encounter stage, an event happens that shapes how a person views race. S/he, then, personalizes and takes action as a result of the impact that the event had on his/her life. (Cross, as cited in Ritchie, 2004). The ongoing experiences of being called an “Oreo” played an integral role in Skylar’s identity development; neither her racial peers nor her friends viewed her as “authentically Black”. She had to affirm her racial identity with both groups. Skylar carried this sentiment to Mission and it affected her desire to establish a relationship with the students in Black Mission; she did not want to prove that she was Black, simply because she did not perform race in the same ways that the other Black/African American students did.

Essentially, all of the participants had interactions with their African American peers prior to coming to college that impacted them negatively. These experiences led the women to assume that that all Black/African American students would treat them because they did not listen to the same music, speak in the same manner or identify with the same social experiences as their peers raised in urban, working class communities. They made the decision to stick with their diverse or White friendship circles, rather than trying to connect with their racial community again. As Tajfel (2001) stated, they built relationships with their non-Black peers from their neighborhoods—i.e., those who shared their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Each of these women carried the impact of these experiences with them to Mission University, affecting their ability to establish relationships with their racial peers on campus and impacting their decision to join traditionally White sororities.

### **Black Identity at Mission University**

This section focuses on what it means to “be Black” at Mission University, through the perspectives of the participants. Each of them had specific reasons for matriculating at Mission. However, the overarching commonality was the campus’s diversity. Some of the participants noted that it resembled their hometowns—which were predominately White but included Latino, Asian, Native American and/or multiracial families as well. Others, like, Skylar, came to Mission because their towns were not diverse at all. The consensus was that they did not want to be in an all-Black environment—but they did not want to be in an all-White one either.

The first subsection examines the participants’ definitions of diversity. In higher education, the term is often referring to racial, socioeconomic and cultural variance within a predominantly White educational setting. Most of the participants came to Mission, in search of racial diversity. However, academic, social and ethnic diversity was equally important for them; three transferred to Mission University in search of it.

The second subsection, “Mission versus Black Mission,” examines the culture of “Black Mission,” or the Black/African American student community on campus, and the participants’ interactions within it. Essentially, they felt uncomfortable in Black Mission’s predominantly Black environment. The participants did not share the same pre-college experiences, music tastes or the desire to socialize in nearly all-Black groups that the majority of the Black Mission community shared. Despite their level of discomfort, most of them wanted a relationship with Black Mission. The challenge is that they wanted the ability to navigate between “regular” Mission and the Black Mission, which was almost impossible because of their relationships outside of the Black community. As a result, none of them were able to establish full “membership” within Black Mission.

The final subsection, “Full-Fledged, In-Between and Outsiders”, includes each of the participants’ sentiments about their relationship, or lack thereof, with Black Mission. Several recurring themes emerged in their stories—including the fear of not being “Black enough” (i.e., not having the social capital to navigate within Black Mission), not having access (because they were neither athletes nor participants in the opportunity programs of which many of the Black/African American students were a part of) and the notion that authentic Black identity was synonymous with adversity, poverty and other stereotypes that are associated with Black/African Americans in the media.

The data revealed that both the participants and members of “Black Mission” constructed their identities through stereotypes and ill-informed preconceived notions about the other group. The women in the study assumed that all of the students within Black Mission were unreceptive to them, based on their pre-college and early Mission experiences, as well as their differences in music taste, use of formal language and their predominantly White friend circles.

Simultaneously, the social rules within Black Mission did not encourage participation in “mainstream” Mission’s culture. As a result, the women felt that none of the Black Mission students shared any commonalities with them, leaving them feeling awkward and unwelcome in social situations. As a consequence of these assumptions and fears, none of the participants attempted to forge in-depth relationships within Black Mission.

#### *Why I Came to Mission University*

During the individual interview sessions, the participants share the factors that influenced their decision to attend Mission. Each of them had specific reasons for matriculating at the institution. However, the overarching commonality was the campus’s diversity. Some of them

noted that it resembled their hometowns—which were predominately White but included Latino, Asian, Native American and/or multiracial families as well. Others, like, Skylar, came to Mission because their towns were not diverse at all. The consensus was that they did not want to be in an all-Black environment—but they did not want to be in an all-White one either.

The term “diversity” had complex meanings for the participants in this study. While they enjoyed Mission’s racial and ethnic diversity, its academic, social and cultural diversity was equally important and had also influenced their decisions to attend Mission University. Skylar appreciated the intellectual diversity at the institution; there were strong researchers in multiple disciplines on campus—which was a testament to Mission’s prestige. Natasha chose Mission because she came from a predominantly White neighborhood and wanted the opportunity to engage in a more racially diverse environment. Amanda and Katie transferred to Mission University because in their previous institutions, the student populations were predominantly White and shared the same socioeconomic background, personal interests and other identities that made the campus less diverse. For Amanda, the need for a more diverse environment was so important that she transferred to Mission after one semester at her previous institution. She explained,

So, I originally got accepted to [another university]. A few weeks before I was supposed to leave, I said, “No, I don’t wanna do this”. I got scared and didn’t want to leave. I’m not going. So, I ended calling the schools that I had gotten accepted to; I hadn’t originally applied to Mission. [Another college] was the only one that hadn’t started yet, so I went there for a semester. It wasn’t the school for me. There were a lot of rich, White people who were a lot alike. So, I applied to Mission...in time to transfer. I wanted the big school environment and I liked being closer to home. So, I just went with Mission. I like...Mission’s diversity, as cliché as that sounds. Not just ethnicity or race, just that there are so many people from so many backgrounds here.

Katie spent one year at her previous college and transferred to Mission because of its diversity:

**Katie:** I like how it’s really diverse and there’s a lot going on, it’s a research institution, there’s always opportunities so that’s why I say I love Mission. I’m always involved. I

would say that when I first came to Mission, I honestly felt like I did less partying...but now I do more because of my sorority and like, obviously, the students are more level headed so I just stay in and watch a movie or something. So, I feel like Mission, even though it has that party connotation, there's not much I would change.

Both, Amanda and Katie, felt that their previous colleges did not offer the diversity that they desired. For Amanda, Mission's racial and socioeconomic diversity was appealing while Katie felt that Mission offered a variety of social and cultural opportunities.

The participants' definition of diversity was the ability to see representation of all races, ethnicities, academic majors, extracurricular, socioeconomic and other forms of variance within the student population at any given time. Mission, while it is a predominately White institution, gave them that option. Although they viewed Mission as a diverse campus, they did not believe that Black Mission reflected the same diversity. When asked about the Black/African American community and its contribution to the campus's diversity, most of them offered that there was little variance within the group, which was one of the reasons why they did not connect with them. Jennifer shared her sentiment, as the lack of diversity within Black Mission fueled her decision to join a traditional sorority:

**Jennifer:** ...when I see a group of Black sorority girls out, I only see them with other Black people. If you see me walking down College Avenue, I'll be with Indian Priya, White Sarah, Asian Hyun-Sun... I can't only just hang out with just Black people. I mean, there's nothing wrong with Black people (laughs). I mean, my family is, like, ratchet on one side and even more ratchet on the other (laughs) but I want a nice mixture. I go to Mission, I don't only want to be submerged in just one culture....

It also fueled Skylar's decision to join a traditional sorority:

**Skylar:** that's the thing: in our organizations, there are mostly White people but you have people from all different backgrounds. ...and then also when you go to these [Black Mission] parties, it's all Black people. It's not like I have a problem with Black people but it's just—I don't feel the need to *only* be with all Black people. I don't feel the need to have to do that. I like the diversity. I don't choose it because of that. I go because I

want to get drunk! (laughs) ...But they are more like, “we are a community and we do everything altogether”. That’s the feel that I get.

Both, Jennifer and Skylar, felt that identifying with Black Mission was important; however, they did not feel the need to solely identify with them. They did not feel that their Blackness was authenticated by their relationships within Black Mission. For them, their sororities and their friend circles offered the diversity that they desired--because of the variance in their sisters’ ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as within their academic majors.

Despite the diversity within their Blackness, the participants still viewed Black Mission’s racial identity in a uniform way; they felt that race was reified and performed similarly within the group. They identify their social circles as “diverse” because of the various ethnicities, religions and nationalities that are represented among their White counterparts. The same diversity exists within the participant group and the larger Black community on campus. Although the participants saw themselves as a diverse group of Black women (because of their varied interests, majors, ethnic and/or national backgrounds), they did not believe that the same variance existed in Black Mission. They ascribed the stereotypical reifications of Black identity on their campus—specifically the exclusion of non-Black students, listening solely to R&B and rap music, only attending black-centered events and participating in specialty program or athletics) to all of Black Mission. Their generalizations played a critical role in their decisions to shy away from their racial peers and, in some ways, halted their desires to engage with the Black Mission community.

*Mission versus Black Mission*

In her work “Why Are All of the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria”, Tatum (1997) offered that students socialize in racial/ethnic enclaves for several reasons—including the desire/need to connect with peers who can identify with and/or share similar experiences. In contrast, Smith & Moore (2004) contended that students who have lived in racially-diverse environments were more likely to seek these same relationships in educational spaces. For them, geographic and socioeconomic identity are equally, if not more important, than race.

Through my observations and through the stories of the participants, though Mission University was one institution, there were two distinct communities: “Mission” and “Black Mission”. Black Mission was largely comprised of Black/African American (regardless of ethnicity or nationality) undergraduate students. In the community, race was constructed and reified through one’s living arrangements, organizational affiliations and by which social functions that s/he attended on the weekends. Most of the Black students lived in specific dormitories, ate in specific dining halls and largely belonged to the organizations that are under the Black Student Union’s “umbrella”. Their connection to Black Mission was also established in other ways, including their attendance and participation in major social events—the Caribbean Student Weekend, the “Black” Graduation, the Martin Luther King celebration, among others.

Overall, the Black Mission community did not interact with its White counterparts, outside of academic settings. Those who followed the social codes were considered as “outsiders”. In contrast, White students were rarely seen at Black Student Union meetings, at campus center parties or other predominantly Black social spaces at Mission.

Fordham & Ogbu (1986) offered that fictive kinship—or, notion of collective identity often manifests itself among Black students in educational environments. At PWIs, Black students are often thought to share the same racial, socioeconomic and pre-college social experiences—which substantiates the notion that all Black students would be a part of Black Mission. However, one’s Black physical features or their national/ethnic identity within the African Diaspora does not guarantee their membership within the Black community nor does it mean that the Black experience is identical for all students. Further, a student can “...be Black in color, but choose not to seek membership in the fictive kinship system, or can be denied membership...because their behavior, activities and lack of manifest loyalty are at variance with those thought to be appropriate or group-specific”. (184). The participants in this study all identified as Black women. However, their other identities—i.e., socioeconomic status, honor students, athletes were equally important in their pre-college lives; they did not live in environments where race was their most important identity. As a result, they sought similar relationships and social experiences on campus. These circles, again, did not include other Black students; they were not interested in the familial relationships that were fostered in Black Mission. On their campus, they were not granted membership in the Black community on campus because their decisions to maintain relationships that were similar to those in their pre-college lives was deemed as unacceptable behavior; it was viewed by the Black students in a disloyal manner.

For many of the participants, being an outsider to Black Mission exacerbated their feelings of isolation from an experience of which they, in some ways, wanted to be a part of. Some of the participants shared examples of how they were ridiculed as elementary and high school students for not being “Black enough” to fit in with their racial peers. Others discussed

their reluctance and apprehension about trying to enter the group, specifically because of their pre-college interactions or their first-year experiences with Black Mission. The common theme was the inability to be themselves. In high school, in their sororities and their non-fraternal spaces, each of the participants identified herself as outgoing, talkative and confident. When they attempted to interact with the Black Mission community, they felt less confident because they did not “perform” race in the same ways that their counterparts did. For many of them, they drew upon their pre-Mission experiences and chose not to venture into a community where they did not feel comfortable being themselves.

*Black Mission: ‘Full-Fledged’, ‘In-Between’ and ‘Outsiders’*

During their interviews, the participants were asked to talk about students gained “membership” in Black Mission. According to their responses, Black Mission students became a part of the community through their participation in the opportunity or support programs, by living in multicultural learning communities/residence halls or by attending Black Mission’s social activities during the first week on campus. Their attendance at the parties, forums and Black Student Union’s events during the course of their first semester determined the student’s “status” within the Black community; it was categorized in three ways: “full”, “in-between” and “outsider”. Full members participated largely (or solely) in the organizations, events, etc. within Black Mission; “in-betweeners” were connected to the community and attend certain events. The “outsiders”, which is the group that most of the participants identified with, had very little interaction with Black Mission. Some of them did not pursue active participation in “Black Mission” because of their fear of not being “Black enough” to be a part of the group. Others tried to be a part of Black Mission but were met with resistance because of their music and clothing tastes, socioeconomic backgrounds or their circle of friends.

There were several reasons why most of the participants did not have a relationship with Black Mission community. The underlying notion was the lack of familiarity with the “traditional” Black experience; each woman interpreted that relationship in a unique way. Some placed the onus on themselves—i.e., they did not attempt to establish a relationship with or attend events within the Black Mission community; others thought that the members of Black Mission should have reached out to them. Their relationship to Mission largely stemmed from their pre-college experiences with their racial peers. Those interactions taught them that “authentic Blackness” is reified in specific ways. For them, “being Black” had less to do with skin color and more to do with behavior, participation in Black Mission events—essentially the same characteristics that are ascribed to Black people in general. In several cases, their peers who were a part of Black Mission were not Black/African American; they simply engaged in the proper performance of race on campus—and in society. Because they did not fit in with the Black community in their pre-college lives, the assumption was that they would not fit in with the students at Black Mission.

None of the participants were “full-fledged” members of Black Mission. They did not desire that relationship, as they came to Mission because of the ability to interact with people of all races. For them, Black Mission was all-Black, which was not a community that they wanted to be a part of—despite the intra-racial diversity that existed within the Black community. Charlie, Natasha, Katie and Skylar were self-proclaimed “outsiders”, while McKenzie & Jennifer identified as “in-betweeners”. Amanda shared a unique perspective, as she did not want any interaction with the Black community because it was “African American—not African or Black.

The participants spoke about Black Mission and their experiences with the Black community on campus. Their words shed light on their interactions with their racial peers on

campus, and their decisions to pursue membership in traditional sororities. Their responses ranged from a lack of interest in being a part of Black Mission to wanting to interact with their racial peers but not doing so—because of their fear of being rejected or ridiculed for not being “Black enough”. Consequently, most of the participants chose to remain as “outsiders”.

*“I Didn’t Know How to Connect”*

Charlie was the second person in her family to attend Mission University; her sibling enrolled at the institution two years before her. As a first-year student, Charlie was assigned to a residence hall based on her academic major, and she was the only Black student in the living community. This, coupled with her lack of connection with Black Mission, alienated her from her racial peers on campus. Consequently, Charlie developed relationships with her sister and her sister’s friends, who were also all White, and eventually pursued membership in their sorority:

**Joy:** So, you felt like you were on the outside of the group? And, then what is the "inside" thing?

**Charlie:** I think it had to do with where I was and who I knew. I lived in [name of campus location] so all of my friends were new, and they were White. Um, White and Asian. Like, there were no Black people in my dorm. I didn't have interactions with Black people, I didn't live in [name of campus location]. At the time I was thinking about doing this, I didn't know anyone in the cultural organizations. I didn't know how to get in touch with them...nothing. All we knew about was Pan Hellenic and IFC and I didn't feel comfortable enough to say oh, there's a Black Student Union Meeting? Let me go to that.

**Joy:** Why didn't you feel comfortable?

**Charlie:** Because you always want a buddy (laughs). I just wasn't comfortable enough to be by myself in those situations. ...it's a culture that I don't know how to interact with. Because I've grown up with every other race, I know how to interact with [them]. I know what to say, I know what jokes are going to be funny; I've never been around large groups of Black people before. You don't feel comfortable when you're not being

yourself and you don't know how to handle what's going on so that you can get the responses that you want".

Because Charlie did not feel comfortable attending Black Mission's events alone, she did not participate in any of their cultural shows, parties or forums. As a result, she maintained her 'outsider identity within the group. She, later, became more closely connected to Black Mission through the friends that she made through her involvement with the Multicultural Greek Council during her junior year. Through those experiences, she learned more about Black identity and how it was reified at Mission; Charlie also felt like she had "...excluded herself from an amazing experience and had secluded [herself] from people who knew exactly what she was going through". Students who were a part of Black Mission were often admitted via non-traditional means—i.e., athletics, opportunity programs or other initiatives that were created to increase the number of Black/African American students on campus. From her perspective, she missed out on the "Black experience" at Mission. She shared her sentiment when she was asked to define Black identity at Mission:

**Joy:** In your opinion, what does it mean to be Black at Mission?

**Charlie:** I think it's just being aware...I dunno, being Black at Mission. I think it's being able to walk around and know that most of the Black people are athletes. Or people that came in through ACE (a pseudonym for an initiative that is designed to assist first-generation students) ... that most people didn't just get into Mission. That's another thing...I felt like so many people that I met in the cultural organizations met through ACE, which I wasn't a part of. So, I missed out on another opportunity to get to know people! I think it's knowing that you have so much more riding on your being here than the average student.

**Joy:** Do you feel like you're a part of Black Mission?

**Charlie:** No, I don't really do anything to help the causes that I see. Like...I sit here in my sorority house and I get to ignore everything. Like for example, last year when they protested across campus, and I don't know why I didn't go...I was at work, and I was

thinking “Wow, I should really be there!” but I went home to my sorority house and hung out with my White friends and that was it. And I didn’t give that movement a second thought. But for those people, it wasn’t a choice; it was something that they had to do. They didn’t have another community, or another place to go to that would’ve allowed them to avoid it...but it’s something that I’m working on. My being Black shouldn’t stop when I walk into my sorority house.

Charlie identified “being Black” with being admitted to Mission through an alternative means (i.e., athletics, an opportunity program or some initiative designed for students who were not prepared to enter Mission without assistance). She also saw it as participation in Black organizations/events and through supporting the social causes within the Black community.

Charlie also mentioned that her Black identity comes from the notion that society identifies her as a Black woman but that her membership in Black Mission is compromised because she does not participate in the functions within that community.

*“I Just Feel Weird”*

Natasha’s mother was raised as a member of the only Black family in a predominantly White, affluent community during the 1970s. She recounted stories of isolation and racism to Natasha and encouraged her to establish and maintain relationships with her racial peers in both, high school and college, so that Natasha could avoid the social challenges that she faced as a teenager. Natasha’s neighborhood and pre-college experiences largely mimicked her mother’s; she grew up in an affluent community, as well. As a result, she had not interacted with a large group of Black people—outside of her familial setting. However, she did establish friendships with several Black/African American students in high school—through athletics and through her Black friends that she met through her mother’s connections. She also established relationships with some of the members of Gamma Gamma Gamma, which is a historically Black sorority that was present on her campus. Natasha felt comfortable with her Black friends from home and with

those whom she had individual relationships with in Black Mission; the difficulty lied in her ability to connect with a group of Black/African American students. Her lack of familiarity, coupled with her high school experiences with her racial peers, created a level of apprehension for Natasha. Essentially, she wanted to connect with Black Mission but did not know how to approach the members of the community because she did not understand the racial culture—or the ethnic and national culture that further nuanced Black identity on campus. Her Black friends from high school successfully navigated through Black Mission; Natasha did not. She talked about her fear of being judged and unaccepted by the Black Mission community:

I'm normally a person who puts herself out there and tries new things but in that situation, I would feel weird if I'm not going with, like, Samantha. I'd go to everything with her...but she's so involved. When she comes, it's like, "Sam"!!! (simulates a hug and a genuine exchange) and...yeah, I'm her friend. I'm always trying to do these things and I want to put myself out there and then, I get afraid of them disliking me. I just don't want to be judged. And I wholeheartedly want to dive in and go to things but it's hard when I'm so nervous about where I stand within it. And I want to make a goal out of it. If you're not with them, you don't know what's going on in the Black community here. Maybe I should've been more optimistic about it...

Natasha also recounted her initial experience with one of her high school friends and the Black Mission students:

I have [another] friend and we went to high school together; (she's Black) and she came here...and all of her friends are Black. Their parents came from the islands and they all hang out together. I'm not familiar with that. I wouldn't be able---like I wouldn't be able to do that. So, the first week of school, I hung out with her because we played soccer together, we went to high school together...all that. But she and her friends have been together since day one. They lived together and everything...I hung out with them for the first two days and they were really sweet, but it was just different. I know that she's involved in a lot of stuff. I know they have a lot of events.

These two experiences created additional apprehension for Natasha. She felt out like an outsider within the larger Black Mission community because she did not engage in the same social practices as the other Black students. Natasha also felt like she did not belong with her high

school friend and her new Black Mission friends because she did not share their ethnic identity; they were of West Indian, or Caribbean American, descent. She kept in communication with her high school friends that were in Black Mission, but she did not feel comfortable enough to attend events on her own—despite her desire to do so. As a result, she remained on the outskirts of the community. In the following exchange, she explained why she felt like an “outsider”:

**Joy:** You have friends in Black Mission. Do you see yourself as a part of the community?

**Natasha:** No, because I don't, like, go to the things that they go to [in order] to be a part of it. Or I don't hang around enough to be a part of it. Not that [my friend] is with them all the time but she eats with them, lives with them; that part makes you a part of the group. I don't do that. Not that I think you have to be very involved in it to be in it, but for me, like, I don't know. I felt like I'd would be uncomfortable. If they knew I was there and knew I wasn't a part of a multicultural sorority. You know what I mean? I think that would make me uncomfortable. Maybe when those girls walked in. Not that I have [my sorority's name] on my forehead but they would also know that...they would know that I'm not there all the time, I don't always come to these things.

In congruence with Bourdieu's Cultural Capital theory (1977), Natasha also shared that she was also apprehensive about engaging with Black Mission because she did not know how to communicate with Black/African Americans who were outside of her immediate circles:

**Natasha:** ... I feel more comfortable in a group of White people than I would in a room of Black people... When I'm put in a situation with White people—not with Black people is when I feel like I'm outspoken. I'll speak to anyone, I'm loud, I'm obnoxious but when I'm in that space [with Black people], I'm just waiting for someone to be like, “Hey! What's your name?” and I'm not ever like that so I think it's hard and weird. What makes me feel uncomfortable is that I'm not usually like that but in that situation, I become that way.

**Joy:** But what about that situation makes you feel that way?

**Natasha:** I think it's because it's something that I'm not used to. I've never been a part of a group of, I've never been in a large space of...Black people. I mean, outside of a family thing. All my mom's friends are Black, like, we hang out with the same people all of the time; I feel comfortable in that setting but I just feel so, just, weird in any other space. But I think it's the way that they communicate with one another...Like, I think if someone was to walk in a room and I was there, I'd be like, “Hey! What's your name? How are you? What's going on? But anytime, even when you go with someone, it's still

like “who’s your friend?” It’s not like “Hey! What’s your name?” It’s more like “who brought you? Do you know what I mean? It’s just different.

Natasha’s experiences as an outsider reflected a difference in the social interaction styles between the Black/African American community and their White counterparts. She offered that she felt comfortable with the Black people that are family friends, not those who are on campus. She also intricately detailed her level of discomfort in these spaces because her lived experiences do not involve interaction with large groups of Black/African American people.

*“I’m Welcomed in the Black Community; I’m Just Not Welcomed Here”*

Katie identified as a Jamaican woman; her racial identity was secondary. She, like Natasha and Charlie had friends in Black Mission. She felt comfortable at West Indian cultural celebrations and other events outside of Mission. However, she did not experience the same comfort level on campus. She identified as an outsider because the Black Mission community did not greet her with the same respect that she received at West Indian events in other places:

**Katie:** I’ve gone to those events like the West Indian Day parade, I’m West Indian, I grew up with it; I love stuff like that but it’s, like, it feels uncomfortable. Like, I’m accustomed to talking to people and saying “Hi” and stuff but when you go to these events, you have to go with someone you know. Like, when I was a sophomore, my friend Ana, she knew all of Black Mission. So, if I had to go to an event, I would call her and be like, “Yo, Ana are you going to this event? Because I’m trying to roll through with you”. And like, everyone would come up to her and talk to her and you’re kinda standing in the back like “HEY” and they would be like, um...

**Katie:** even at [another Black student organization], I try to speak up in their conversations, but you can feel that, like...unspoken uncomfortableness

Katie did not receive the same congenial sentiments and exchanges that her Black Mission

friends received at events—arguably, because she was not a part of the community. While she wanted a stronger relationship with Black Mission, she did not allow her “outsider” identity to affect her attendance at the events that highlighted West Indian/Caribbean American culture:

*“I Don’t Want to Be Judged”*

Jennifer had an “in-between” relationship with Black Mission. She had friends who operate within its social codes; they lived in the “right” residence halls, were members of racially-centered organizations and attend Black Mission’s events. At the same time, her lack of familiarity with the community and her strong connections to Mission made her apprehensive about interacting with Black Mission students. The larger part of Jennifer’s apprehension stemmed from her membership in a traditional sorority. She felt that she did not know many students within the Black Mission community, with the exception of her friends, and that they would “...see her and know that she’s not a part of one of those organizations”. She also felt that they would judge her because of her membership in a traditional sorority, specifically because of the difference between the membership process and her counterparts who are in Black Greek-Lettered Organizations (BGLOs). Historically, membership in BGLOs is, arguably, attained through a rigorous and intense process that teaches its prospective members about the Black experience and prepares them to combat the inequality and injustice that exists in America. The traditional organizations’ pledge process is, generally, thought to be more social in nature. Jennifer felt that her sorority membership was another opportunity for her to be judged; her racial peers would think that she did not have the endurance or persistence that was needed to complete the BGLO initiation process and she took the “easy way”. In her first interview session, Jennifer

spoke candidly about how her interactions with the Black Greeks on campus affected her emotionally:

**Joy:** Can you remember a time when you felt like an outsider—or like people were specifically judging you?

**Jennifer:** Hmm... , when I went to my friend's probate, I think that's what it's called, you could tell that everyone else knew each other. So, you had me, Dana and one other friend who's in another sorority. We were keepin' to ourselves. It's just like another instance when you knew you didn't belong there. You feel like people are staring at you—like I would never wear [my sorority] letters around them. It's like you did “this” (widens hands to signify the length and rigor of the BGLO initiation process) to get your letters and I did this (closes hands to demonstrate the shorter length of the traditional organization process). I just feel like they would judge me. (shrugs). It just felt so weird to be there.

**Joy:** But you're both in Greek lettered organizations. Why do you feel like they would judge you?

**Jennifer:** It's different.

**Joy:** What do you mean?

**Jennifer:** We're like two different kinds of organizations...It's just so different. I've gone to four probates in my whole Mission career—and if I go, I'm not going alone. Not in sorority letters, I'm not doing it. Uhhh, gosh...I don't know how to elaborate on this and I know you want me to elaborate and I don't know how to say it!

**Joy:** Why??

**Jennifer:** (*fidgets nervously*) we already covered this, and I told you—I just feel judged.

**Joy:** They are judging you and saying what?

**Jennifer:** Why are you here? (*pauses*) See? It all goes back to not being a part of Black Mission.

**Joy:** So, you feel like they are looking at you, like “why are you here”?

**Jennifer:** YES! I mean, you're a product of your environment really, so there's that. And, then we had another girl on our floor during freshman year, Kira. She's a part of Black Mission. She never hung out with us. She didn't go out with us. We would invite her; she just wouldn't come out. We tried. ...

Jennifer's fear of being judged by Black Mission had a substantial impact on her college experience. It prevented her from fully engaging with other students in the community—and from enjoying the events that she did attend. She believed that environmental factors (i.e., pre-college experiences, freshman dorm location and accessibility to Black Mission) played a critical role in one's "membership" in the Black/African American community on campus. Although, Jennifer had the social capital to navigate through Mission she did not have the resources to establish relationships within Black Mission. Despite her discomfort and her fear of being judged, Jennifer still identified as an "in-between" in Black Mission.

While she maintained friendships in both arenas, Jennifer did not connect with the Haitian students on campus—even though her ethnic identity was more important than identifying as "Black" or "African American". She felt that identifying with the Haitian community could, potentially, lead to the racial exclusion; it would contradict her reasoning for attending Mission University—which was its diversity. She explained her sentiments:

**Joy:** So, do you connect with the Haitian students on campus?

**Jennifer:** I don't even know where they are. Is there a club for them? Where are they? Are they hiding?

**Joy:** Do you feel like you want to be connected to them or Black Mission as a whole?

**Jennifer:** I'm very content where I am now. I like my friends. I like having Asian, Indian, Black and White friends. I like the diversity.

**Joy:** You don't want....

**Jennifer:** (interrupts) ...the seclusion? No, I think it's so close-minded. [But I also] don't want to open myself up to a whole big group of people; Mission is big enough already.

Jennifer's desire to remain in her small multicultural group was motivated by her affinity for diversity; she felt that her friends' circle reflected the element that initially attracted her to

Mission. However, it was equally fueled by her fear of interacting in a large group of Black or African American students who could, potentially, judge her for her multiracial friends' group or her decision to join a White sorority. Similar to Natasha, her fear prevented her from interacting with her racial peers—simply because she did not perform race in the ways that were traditional in Black Mission.

*“I Can Be in Both (Mission and Black Mission)”*

Most of the participants described themselves as outsiders; they had very few, in any Black/African American friends on campus and they seldom participated in Black Mission's activities. When they did, they did not know anyone and felt as if their racial peers were judging them for their lack of involvement. McKenzie, like Jennifer, did not have the same relationship with Black Mission that the other participants did. While some of her pre-college experiences were similar to the other participants (i.e., living in a predominately White, upper middle-class neighborhood, having a diverse friends' circle), McKenzie also had frequent interactions with other Black/African American families before coming to Mission. Her parents' friends were members of historically Black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs) and she attended a predominantly Black church. She continued to maintain contact with her church friends and worked as a counselor for the church's summer camp while she was at Mission. She maintained membership in the Black Student Union, was actively engaged in their social media community and participated in the various events and causes within Black Mission. Yet, she maintained equally strong relationships with the “regular” Mission community.

At Mission, one of the areas where the campus' racial stratification is most apparent is the Greek Life system. The largest discrepancy lies in the perceived difference between the purpose of BGLOs and the traditional (White) organizations. Membership in a BGLO,

historically, signifies one's ability to persevere, endure hardship and a lifelong commitment to the improvement of the Black community while the traditional organizations are known to be more social in nature and were associated with drinking and partying. Because of this notion, Jennifer felt uncomfortable wearing any sorority paraphernalia (i.e., "wearing letters") around the Black Mission community—specifically at BGLO probate shows. Most of the Black/African American students attended these events, as they serve as an opportunity for the new initiates to be presented to the campus community. Here, their friends, sorority/fraternity members from other chapters and the larger Black student population come to support and celebrate those who have endured the membership process to become members of BGLOs. Jennifer thought that her peers would judge her or view her as "less Black" because she was a member of a traditional sorority. However, McKenzie felt confident "wearing her letters" in Black Mission—because of the relationships that she established as, what Carter (1994) defines as a "cultural straddler"—or as McKenzie calls an "in-betweener". She felt equally as comfortable with her Mission friends as she did with her Black Mission peers; she shared other commonalities with the members in each group.

**Joy:** So, some people say, "I feel out of place" or "I'm on the outside of it". What is this whole "Black Mission" thing?

**McKenzie:** Oh, okay...I'm in both! I can be in both (laughs). I can't really explain it. It's just, like, a community that some people are oblivious to. They hang out in the "circle" (referring to an open area on campus), they play music, etc. We [also] have Black Mission Twitter. So, someone will just bring up a topic, like "y'all aren't gonna talk about XYZ thing that happened today. Or, like Caribbean Day; you're not gonna see everybody at Caribbean Day. I'm not even Caribbean and I go. It's Caribbean Day, Meet the Greeks, the probates...."

So, I'll just sit there when it's hot out when the...or I'll see a tweet from people [that are] not in Black Mission like "what's happening on the Quad?" I remember getting a message, I think the Iotas were having a probate, maybe it was the Alphas...yeah, these kids were going by the Quad, going back to their dorms. So, they asked me [what was

going on]. Are you asking me because I have on my sorority jacket? Like you could've asked anyone! (laughs). I'm like it's a probate; it's where they reveal the new members of their chapter. It's really entertaining because they do a show. If you wanna stick around, you could. I don't know if he did. I'm just informing him of what they were doing because he really didn't know. But I thought it was funny because I had on my [sorority's name] raincoat.

**Joy:** So—you wear your letters to probates, Meet the Greeks events and stuff like that...

**McKenzie:** Yeah! I'm wearing my letters; I'm Greek. It is what it is....

McKenzie was successful at leveraging her relationships within both groups. She established her virtual presence in Black Mission by subscribing to their social media pages. She created her relationships with the general Mission community through her involvement in her sorority and through the other commonalities that she shared with her non-Black Mission peers. McKenzie often noted that she did not like the music the Black Mission students listened to; she enjoyed punk rock and heavy metal music and enjoyed raves. However, she equally enjoyed socializing with Black Mission students and being around Black culture on campus:

**Joy:** So, you're like legit in Black Mission.

**McKenzie:** Yeah, I'm in both! 'Cuz I'm rage face (referring to heavy metal and electronica music) with all the White kids on Main Campus but I'm definitely still with everything in Black Mission; I'm just at Mission.

**Joy:** Do you ever feel like people want you to choose one side or the other?

**McKenzie:** I hope not! I don't think so. [Two of my friends] know that I like to go to frat parties. I've gone to a student center party ONE time; they know that. I went before, and I'll never spend my money on it again. It was just too much for me. I don't have to choose; I know how to escape [the sorority] if I need to but I never feel like I have to choose because I feel like it's enough time in the day. At the end of the day, I'm gonna go to what I want to go to. If I know that this frat boy toga party is gonna be hot, then I'm going. If I know that the Iota party on campus is gonna be "lit", then I'm going! I just go wherever I'm gonna go. I say "hey, this is what's happening. Come with...or not".

McKenzie's pre-college experiences provided her with social capital in both communities. While she did not share the same music taste or attend all of the Black Mission events on campus, she

was aware of the current events and social conversations in each group. Her attendance at the probate shows, barbecues and other major Black Mission events reified her racial “authenticity”. At Black Mission, “authenticity” was proven through one’s engagement with the community. Although she identified as an “in-betweeners”, McKenzie still noted that there were times when she feels like an outsider within Black Mission because she did not engage with the members of the community on a regular basis (i.e., in the residence halls, in class or at Black Mission’s organizations’ meetings). Those relationships were lacking from her experience. She chose to pursue membership in a traditional sorority because she felt that had more in common with the members of those chapters—and because of her fear of not being “Black enough” to fit in with the women in the BGLO chapters on campus.

*Amanda: “I’m More White than Black”— (The Outsider)*

Amanda’s perspective was very different than the other participants’. She identified as a biracial woman with very closely ties to her father’s Ugandan heritage and family. However, there was a disconnect between her, Black Mission and the African American community. Amanda offered that Black identity is created, based where one lives, the composition of their friends’ circle and their other social affiliations. For her, the students who were a part of Black Mission were from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, first generation students and/or identified as African American. She felt that she could not identify with the “Black experience” because her “culture” was different than the Black Mission students’. Further, she argued that she more closely identified as White, because she does not have anything in common with the Black students—plus, her friends are White and only one of her parents is Black. Because she did not share these commonalities with them, she felt that she could not reflect on Black racial identity—

or what it means “to be Black” from personal experience. Instead, Amanda addressed it from an outsider’s perspective:

**Joy:** So, switching gears for a second, I keep hearing about this Black Mission thing.

**Amanda:** I wouldn’t say that I’m the right person to ask; I wouldn’t really know. Like I know definitely that there is some segregation, but I don’t think that it’s for the wrong reasons. I think you’re going to be most comfortable with people who were raised like you and have similar cultures and values. [It’s the] same with Black people; it depends on where a person comes from. You may be Black from an upper middle-class town. You have probably interacted with a number of White people versus someone from [an urban city] who has probably only interacted with Black and Hispanic people. I think the way you grew up is different; you come from a different culture so you’re less likely to interact with people of another culture. You are going to feel more comfortable around people who had a similar experience growing up as you did...

**Joy:** Do you think that this is a factor for you, because of your socioeconomic background?

**Amanda:** I think it does play a factor. Like, I think if someone from [an urban city] background [were to interact with me], they wouldn’t think that they had anything in common with me and vice versa. There wouldn’t be a connection there that would lead to a friendship. But the other part is about me not being exposed to it...

**Joy:** So...have you ever interacted with the larger Black community on campus?

**Amanda:** Um, I don’t really think I have. No... I never really cross paths with them like that. I think it’s very segregated; I don’t think there’s much interaction at all...

**Joy:** Why?

**Amanda:** I think it’s because I don’t know much about them at all.

**Joy:** Have you ever thought about going to the Black Student events on campus?

**Amanda:** No. I would consider going, just to check it out especially talking about the events... but I realize now that I see myself more as being White.

**Joy:** What does that mean to you?

**Amanda:** I would feel uncomfortable going to one of those events. I can’t put my finger on why I would, maybe because I’m so different than those other people.

**Joy:** Do you think that there would be people who identify like you there?

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

From Amanda's perspective, Black racial identity was intertwined with socioeconomic status, educational attainment, through one's interaction with the Black/African American community and through his/her ability to "perform" race in a stereotypical manner. Similar to the other participants, she did not believe that diversity existed within the Black community. She thought that she would be the "outsider" and that she would not share commonalities with any of the students within Black Mission because of her affluent background. She expressed her discomfort with being around U.S. born Blacks but noted that she would more comfortable around those who identified as "African".

Another complexity of identity is that it is mutually created both from one's perspective and life experiences and in relation to how one is perceived by others. Again, Amanda's Ugandan, or national, identity superseded her racial identity. However, being "Black" was ascribed to her because of her physical features and her national heritage; simply put, Ugandans are assumed to be Black. At Mission, the terms Black and African American were used interchangeably to describe person who physically appeared to be of African descent—regardless of their national or ethnic origin. For Amanda, there was a major difference between the two terms. In the following exchange, she explained her sentiments between the terms and how the differences affected her interactions with Black people:

**Joy:** I know that you mentioned earlier that you identify more as White. Do you identify with Black/African American students in any way?

**Amanda:** I think it's more about the way that people identify me.

**Joy:** Would you feel uncomfortable in an African Student Union meeting?

**Amanda:** NO...well, would it be African American students or African students? If it would be largely first or second generation African students, then, no, I would be fine.

**Joy:** Okay, now let's say you were going to a Black Student Union meeting—with African American students, how would you feel?

**Amanda:** Umm, I think it would depend on the type of event. So...for example, if it were like maybe like a rush event for a Black sorority, I don't think I'd feel uncomfortable.

**Joy:** Would you be more inclined to intermingle if you knew that there were more people like you there?

**Amanda:** Yeah, I would.... (*trails off*)

Here, Amanda made a clear definition between her identity as an upper-middle class, biracial woman of Ugandan heritage and her counterparts in Black Mission. Her understanding of Black identity definition of “being Black” was synonymous with being a first-generation college student from an urban area and, more specifically, African American identity. More importantly, she cannot identify with the Black students because their families do not share similar educational or socioeconomic backgrounds. For her, relationships are based on commonalities. Her assumption was that Black Mission was comprised of U.S. born Blacks, as opposed to those who were born on the African continent. In many ways, she shared the preconceived notions about voluntary versus involuntary minorities. Based on her beliefs, being a first-generation American (from an African country) did not allow her to identify with the African American students on campus; being from an upper-middle class family and a second-generation college student made her unable—and in many ways, unwilling, to identify with the other students in Black Mission.

*“Bringing Home a ‘Billy’”: Interracial Dating at Mission*

Until *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), interracial dating and/or marriage was unconstitutional in the United States. While the practice is legal now, it is still seen as “taboo” in many communities. Because the participants were raised in predominantly White neighborhoods and maintained similar social circles at Mission, interracial dating was a tangible practice for them; most of their male counterparts were White. Despite the participants’ sense of comfort with the racial dynamics of their social spaces, there were times when they were deeply aware of the differences—specifically as it pertained to dating and romantic relationships. Some of them experienced being “fetishized” because of their “Blackness”. Others were ridiculed by their family members and members of Black Mission for “selling out”. Whether the participants chose to date interracially or within the Black/African American community, race played a key role in their dating practices—even if it was not the most important social identity for them.

During the focus group session, the participants talked about their dating experiences at Mission. Katie and Jennifer only dated White men, while Natasha and Skylar preferred to date Black or African American men. However, all of the participants were interested in being in a relationship, or finding a long-term mate, while at Mission. At the time of the research, Skylar was the only one who was involved in a long-term relationship with a Mission student; the rest of the participants had dated or “hooked up” with men in the fraternities but the relationships were short-lived. They all agreed that dating was challenging, at times, because of race. For those who wanted to date Black or African American men, their choices were limited for two reasons: 1) because they did not interact with Black Mission, they did not have access to the Black male population on campus and 2) because there was a limited number of Black or African

American men who were in the traditionally White fraternities on campus—and most of them were not interested in dating Black or African American women.

Skylar's long-term relationship was with the "other Black student" in her high school, who also attended Mission University. He was called an "Oreo" as well but he was considered "Blacker" than she was because he could "hang more" (i.e., he listened to hip-hop music and attended Black Mission events). Because she was in a relationship, she did not share many of the experiences that the other participants did. However, she noted that she and the others were often fetishized by their White male counterparts in social settings. She had direct experiences with being called "exotic" because of her darker complexion. Here, she detailed a recent interaction at a social event with one of the fraternities on campus:

**Skylar:** Last weekend, two guys at different times were like, "you're so exotic..." (*rolls eyes*). I'm like, if you say that word one more time! And whatever you *think* is about to happen is *not* about to happen. And there are some that say things like, "you're so "Chocolate...". Or, they'll be like, "you're so fit". I'm like yeah, "I work out". Or then, they'll be like (and I hate this), "you're the hottest Black girl I've ever seen". One guy thought it was a compliment, but then he apologized. If you have to apologize, then you know something is wrong. Then he said, "I don't normally hook up with Black girls but you're the hottest one I've seen"... and I literally said, "Thanks...but eff you" and walked off. Bye. I don't know...I just feel like, it's weird, it's just weird.

Skylar noted that this interaction occurred at a frat party, after alcohol had been consumed and that the men who spoke to her only did so in these social spaces. Their comments supported her observation about being fetishized; they also were congruent with Edwards' (2009) and Padavic's (1999) research, which offered that a) attractiveness played a significant role in the admission of Black women into traditional sororities and b) getting "paired" or married was embedded into the culture of these organizations. Additionally, several of the White men in the fraternities were surprised because she was in shape. The implicit stereotype was that

Black/African American women were neither typically attractive nor physically fit. The men also viewed their comments as compliments to Skylar—because she was a Black woman.

Katie, however, only dated White men. While she was raised and socialized in predominantly White communities, she argued that her Jamaican heritage played an equally vital role in her decision to date outside of her race. Because race and nationality are different identities, there are people of all races who are all “Jamaican”. Katie was raised in a multiracial family—who all identified with their Jamaican roots. She explained her familial background and its impact on her dating decisions in the following excerpt from the focus group discussion:

**Katie:** Well, I only date White men so my parents are used to it by now. They would be okay if I married a White man. As long as he treated me well, they’re fine. I’m Jamaican so everyone is different— [we are] Jamaican-Chinese, Indian, Black, whatever. That’s how I grew up...color doesn’t matter to me...My parents instilled in me that people are people. So.... I get down with any...um, you know...

Katie was confident in her decision to date interracial because it was not uncommon in her family; being “Black”, “White” or “Asian” did not change their Jamaican identity. Her Jamaican heritage was more salient for her than her racial identity. Because its authenticity was not questioned because of the dating choices, the stigma of interracial dating in the Black community was less impactful for her.

McKenzie did not express racial preferences for dating. However, her Black friends, at home or at Mission, did not approve of her willingness to date outside of her race. Her family also assumed that she was going to marry a White man—based on her previous relationships and her friends circle.

**McKenzie:** So, let’s say I find someone outside of my race who is attractive, my Black friends will be like, “oh, you think he’s cute?” (*makes disgusted face*). I’m like, “whatever...” and because I date outside of my race, I heard my mom say, “oh, you’re gonna bring a Billy home!”

The term “bring a Billy home”, similar to “Oreo”, is indicative of the racial stereotypes that permeate society. The name “Billy” was used to demonstrate that her potential mate was a White man. While the name usage does not mean that McKenzie’s mother was dissatisfied with her decisions, it does show that she acknowledged the role that race (superficially and in a sociopolitical way) impacted her daughter’s dating choices.

As a biracial woman, Charlie supported interracial dating; however, she had never seriously dated a White woman or man. She knew that her family would not be happy if she married a White person. The first time she brought her White significant other to her parents’ home, her mother asked, “Really? What do you guys have in common?” Her family was multiracial; however, their rule was that you can date anyone—except for a White person. More specifically, she stated, “You can date a light-skinned Latino man; just not a White man”. Her parents, who she stated were not “anti-White” believed that there were “...things that you go through [as a person of color] that White people would never understand”. Those interactions, along with her family’s shared sentiments, shaped her decision to date interracially within non-White races. Moreover, Charlie’s dating practices were further nuanced by her sexual orientation. She described herself as a “bisexual, homoromantic”—which meant that she was physically attracted to men and women but would only be in a relationship with a woman. While her sorority embraced her sexual identity, she also mentioned that she was less focused on the interactions with the men in the fraternities because she was not interested in dating or being in a relationship with them.

The other participants shared varying views on interracial dating. In her individual interview, Amanda said that she was open to dating anyone who treated her with respect, regardless of race—but that she wanted him to be “as much like her father as he could be, inside

and out”. Natasha wanted to date Black men but knew that she would have difficulty with it because she does not socialize in Black Mission—or with large groups of Black or African American people, in general. Her mother, who was raised in an all-White community, strongly encouraged her to connect with Black Mission; she said that her fear of “not belonging” prevented her from engaging and dating within her own racial community. Jennifer, similar to McKenzie, was open to dating men of all races but met resistance from her Black friends when she did not date within her race and from her family, because she did not date Haitian men.

While their pre-college and Mission experiences played a role in the participants’ dating practices, their ethnicity, nationality and familial practices were the most crucial factors in their decisions to date outside of their race. Those who came from multicultural families and communities were more open to dating outside of their racial communities. Charlie’s family believed in interracial dating within communities of color; consequently, she dated people outside of her race—who were not White. Katie saw people in her family who were married to people of all races. Their support and acceptance made her comfortable with her decision to only date White men.

#### *Mission’s Greek Life—in Black & White*

Guiffrida (2005) argued that Black/African American students join campus organizations that allow them to connect with their racial peers, as well as Black faculty and administrators; it creates a smaller community of people who they perceive are like them. Hughley (2008) contended that racially-centered fraternal organizations serve an identical purpose; they provide students with the opportunity to celebrate their culture. The race-centered clubs & organizations at Mission served these purposes, specifically for those students who felt that membership in them helped to establish and maintain their Black/African American identity on campus. This

was not the case for the participants. Although they identified as Black/African American and desired a connection with Black Mission, the women in this research were not interested in joining a Black sorority on campus for several reasons. This chapter focuses on the factors that influenced their decisions to join traditional organizations—which included the notion that BGLO sororities were “too serious”, along with the fear of not being “Black enough” to interact with the members of BGLOs, the perceived lack of diversity within Black sororities and the unwelcoming nature of Black sorority women—specifically at the Mission’s Organization Fair. It also focuses on the impact that being in a White sorority had on their dating experiences at Mission. Most of their stories were very similar; in most cases, the thought of not “fitting in” played the most critical role in their decisions to join traditional organizations.

The assumption was that they chose to pursue the organizations because they were trying to “be White”; this was not the case for the participants. The most common sentiment was that they would not fit in because they did not share any commonalities (other than race) with the members of the BGLOs on campus. The other thought was that they did not want to deal with the weight, or seriousness, of a Black sorority—because BGLOs address racial inequality and promote civic engagement.

Another key factor was the prevalence of Black sororities at Mission. At the time of the research, there was only one BGLO sorority with an active chapter on campus, which limited their exposure to the versatility within Black Greek life. Individually, they did not feel “at home” or comfortable in the Black Mission community; the thought was that the historically Black sororities were microcosms of the larger group that they did not share anything in common with. The further assumption was that Black identity, at least in Black Mission, did not have any diversity. The White sororities were thought to have more members with differing ethnic,

nationality and/or religious backgrounds. They felt that the traditional organizations offered them the diversity that the Black sororities could not. From their perspectives, their organizations (despite their predominantly White membership) had members who identified as Asian, Latino, Native American and/or Black. Further, they offered that their White sisters offered diversity as well—because of their ethnic, national and/or religious backgrounds. In each case, the participant felt “at home” and “welcome” in their sorority houses and with their sisters because of their commonalities and the semblance that their organizations had to their friends’ circles and experiences before Mission.

#### *Differences Between Traditional and HBGLO Sororities*

In her article, “Getting a Man or Getting Ahead”, Padavic (1999) argued that traditional sororities were founded as a means of creating social engagement and dating opportunities for their members, while the historically Black sororities were focused sociopolitical issues and the betterment of their communities. The BGLO sororities were founded between 1908 and 1922. Although women were enrolled at institutions of higher education during this period, Black women were not allowed to join the traditional sororities. The sororities were founded as a means of establishing sisterhood, community upliftment and camaraderie among Black college women; this sentiment still resonates today. For this reason, Black sororities are, arguably, more serious or business-oriented than their traditional counterparts. During the focus group interview, the participants said that the serious nature of Black sororities discouraged them from pursuing membership in a Black/African American sorority. The BGLO sororities were having conversations about “...race, being of color, being women, things that are happening in the world...” while the traditional sororities were talking about “napkins and cookies” (Charlie).

Katie attributed the BGLO members' seriousness to the rigor of the membership intake process, stating that "...their orgs are founded on hardship, you know segregation and slavery and stuff like that. So that sticks stronger, in a sense, which is why they are so proud and they like feel very committed to carrying on the legacy for a lifetime". They noted that they understood and respected the Black sororities but felt that their goals were met in the traditional organizations. Some of the participants did not want their sorority life to intertwine with activism or race-related matters; others did not want the pressure of representing their race and their organization on a daily basis. Natasha who also agreed that the BGLO sororities were too serious, shared her thoughts through a comparison between her cousin's (who was a member of a BGLO sorority) and her experiences in a traditional organization:

**Natasha:** My cousin was the past president of AKA at a different school. She joined her junior year and was president her senior year. And not that we had different commitments but as much as I see [my sorority] as a part of my life, I see hers in a completely different way. I think they are committed to the fact that they are always representing themselves. When I leave my house in the morning, yes, I live in the sorority house, but I don't think of it as something that's always with me all the time...

The idea of maintaining a lifelong commitment to representing the organization, its principles and the Black community was not appealing to her; she did not want the daily responsibility of maintaining this identity. Consequently, Natasha gravitated towards the traditional sororities, as they were more social in nature.

Skylar also felt that the Black sororities maintained a different level of commitment to their sisterhood because of their connection to slavery, hardship and racism in America. She joined her organization because she felt "at home" with the women, both culturally and morally. She offered that traditional organizations are more focused on philanthropic endeavors than racial and cultural issues—which was most important for her.

...not that it [BGLO membership] is about your skin color because that's not the only reason for joining but it's...the foundation. We're [traditional sororities] are doing it for philanthropy and things that mean a lot, but it's not based on things like my family, my ancestors went through difficulty. I think that if I joined a chapter because of that, then my commitment would be stronger. What ties me to it is my rituals, not my heritage.

The other participants agreed; they viewed sorority membership as an opportunity to gain new friends on campus, to focus on philanthropy and to expand their social networks. While they understood the origin and purpose for BGLOs, they did not want their membership to carry such responsibility.

Another critical difference between BGLO and traditionally White sororities is the level of commitment to the members of the organization. Generally, BGLO sororities are committed to their sisterhood on an international level; a woman who is a part of a BGLO should expect a sisterly relationship or gesture from another "soror" (woman who is a part of her sorority)—regardless of geographic location or chapter affiliation. The traditional organizations, on the other hand, only share this relationship with their chapter sisters. For Charlie, being committed to her chapter sisters was all that she needed. She joined her sorority for the relationships and experiences that she gained with her chapter:

**Charlie:** They [BGLOs] have a commitment to their sorority; I have a commitment to my chapter. Like, yes, I'm a [name of organization]. I love my org, but I do everything for my sisters that I see on campus; I don't do it for the sister at UCLA. It's not that I don't care about her; it's important to me. When they meet a sister that's from a different chapter than them, it's completely different than when I see a [name of organization]. Like, I was in Italy last summer and a [name of organization] moved into my apartment. We took a picture together and, then, like we never spoke again. Versus, like, I have friends [in BGLOs] and they know everyone in the state...that's in their organization. Like, they're to their sorority; I'm to my chapter. That's all I need.

*There's No 'Diversity' In BGLOs"*

During the focus group session, the participants said that the lack of diversity within the BGLO sororities deterred them from joining one of their chapters. They argued that traditional sororities were more diverse because of the various religious, national and ethnic backgrounds of the members within the chapters. They felt that the Black sororities did not share this diversity because their members were all Black. Their sentiments eliminated the thought Haitian, Muslim or being from an affluent community also diversifies the BGLOs similarly. Throughout their personal stories, socioeconomic status was the recurring factor that separated them from the Black Mission community. Most of them felt that their upper middle class or affluent communities provided them with resources, opportunities and an exposure to multiculturalism that that Black Missions students did not receive because of their low-to-working middle class status. They felt that that they had more in common with their White counterparts because of these cultural differences.

They also offered that they did not connect with Black Mission or the Black sororities because they did not share the same culture. Yet, they were able to establish relationships with the traditional sorority members. Charlie offered that the “differences aren’t as big between being Black in a White sorority as it is being Black (for them) in a Black sorority because...all of the people that [she] is around same the same general background—maybe not culturally but definitely economically”. Because the morals and values are the same and their economic backgrounds are similar, they had shared interests in extracurricular activities, music, vacation spots, etc. For them, culture had less to do with race and more to do with everyday commonalities.

Skylar argued that her chapter is different than the others; their diversity crossed socioeconomic, racial and academic backgrounds. For her, joining a Black sorority would have highlighted her lack of familiarity with “stereotypical” Black cultural practices (i.e., listening to certain music genres, language or socially engaging solely with the Black/African American community on campus). Her presence would have made the BGLO chapter diverse; in a traditional sorority, each sister (regardless of race) has various identities that contributes to the diversity of the chapter. The overarching assumption was that the members in BGLOs at Mission were all first-generation college students from working and/or middle-class backgrounds who performed race in the traditional—or stereotypical, fashions. Skylar and the other participants felt that those who do not share these commonalities could not “fit in” in a BGLO.

Another difference between the BGLOs and the traditional organizations was that the Black sororities were centered on their members’ similarities as Black women in higher education, while the traditional organizations formed sisterhood bonds based on the differences within the group.

The final recurring theme in this section was that both, the lack of BGLO sorority chapters and their small sizes, discouraged the participants from joining a Black sorority. At the time of the research, there was only one of the four historically Black sororities on Mission’s campus. The chapter had less than 20 members; many of them were from similar neighborhoods and/or were legacies of the organization (meaning that their mothers or grandmothers were members of the sorority too). Katie stated that she might have been more interested, if all of the BGLO sororities had active chapters on campus or if the existing organization has more members. She believed that having large and/or multiple chapters would have increased her

likelihood that someone who shared her background would have been in the group. Skylar felt that it might have been a more difficult decision, if this were the case:

**Skylar:** If we had the same amount of chapters of white sororities as Black sororities, then it definitely would have been different. At least, my viewpoint about why I went Pan-Hellenic might be different then. It might've been a harder decision. I mean, when I came in, I wanted to see—my friend made that switch and I always had the interest to do it. It wasn't like I came in like, I wasn't going to join a Black one; I was interested. But I think they [the Pan-Hellenic sororities] have such a big presence, it makes you feel like you can connect.

*“I Don't Belong There*

Similar to their apprehension about interacting with the Black Mission community at large, the fear of not belonging contributed to their decision to join traditional sororities.

McKenzie was familiar with BGLOs; however, she chose to pursue membership in a traditional sorority because she felt that she had more in common with their members. Despite her “in-between” status, the fear of being an “outsider” influenced her decision to join her organization:

**Joy:** Did you ever think about a Black sorority?

**McKenzie:** Maybe it's the area that I grew up in, but I don't think I would've been successful at all. I go to rave concerts. I've been to a couple rap concerts, but I like electronica music. That's like what I'm into. It's not just a music thing. I can't have a conversation with them about the next J. Cole concert. I mean I love J. Cole...but I can't even relate with them on the music level; how can I relate on other levels? It seems trivial...but the environment that I grew up in, always being around all types of people that's what makes me think that I wouldn't fit in.

Skylar thought that she would “be different and everyone else would be similar”, had she joined a Black sorority.

**Skylar:** In the Black organizations, it's expected to be the same. Like here, if someone says “oh, you don't know this song?”, then it's just like, “okay, you don't know it---fine”. But with [them], it would be like, “We all know this; why don't you know it...” I don't

know; I feel like it's easier; I know I'll find someone to clique with. With them, I already feel like I'm on the outside so...and then I'm not gonna jump in.

The participants also felt uncomfortable and “unwelcomed” by the Black/African American sorority women on campus, specifically after their interactions with them at Mission's Organizational Fair. Several of them expressed interest in joining the Gammas' chapter on campus. However, the Gammas had more serious demeanors and did not approach the participants—as opposed to the traditional organizations, which directly reached out to them. Their approach made them believe that the Gammas were unfriendly and, more importantly, uninterested in them. Skylar was interested in joining a Black sorority—specifically because one of her childhood friends became a member of the Gammas at Mission. Her interaction with the members deterred her from communicating with them any further. Skylar explained,

I don't know—I just couldn't identify. I had the one friend from home who's here and became a Gamma, and that intrigued me because at home, she hung out with all White people, so I was like, okay, cool. She joined. And my dad was like, oh are you considering it, before looking at the White sororities. And then I joined the [name of student organization] and I went there for a couple of meetings. I wanted to embrace that part and it was like, no one was mean to me, but I was going there alone. First it was ok, but I felt awkward speaking up and I'm like a leader person. I'm not the type of person who's afraid to speak up so the fact that I felt like I couldn't speak up made me feel weird. And it was like everyone knew each other. People said hey, but no one reached out to be my friend and get to know me. So, I didn't have that connect. But with Pan Hellenic, I joined, and I became best friends with everyone from day one.

**Natasha:**...I think me, too, and people in the room probably agree with me but when I first met Skylar, I felt like I gravitated towards her because we were so similar but, like, if there were someone else who was Black just for example...I think she and I are very similar, but I don't think that I would've just right off the bat gone to that one Black girl and started talking to her.

This reinforced a sense of “I’m not wanted here” for the participants because they were unable to be themselves. They felt like they couldn’t interact with the members because they didn’t have the social capital to do it.

Because the traditional sororities’ chapters were perceived as more diverse than the BGLO chapters, Charlie believed that their chapters were welcoming to women who identified with other underrepresented groups. This was particularly important for her, as she openly identified as a bisexual woman—who was in a relationship with a woman. Charlie’s sister was a member of the sorority that she was interested in, which she believed was a testament to their acceptance of non-Black sisters. However, sororities have historically been considered as organizations that promote “femininity” and encourage romantic relationships with the fraternity members who engage with them. As a bisexual woman who was in a homosexual relationship, she did not participate in the traditional dating practices of her chapter. She wanted to make sure that her differences would be respected by her potential sisters. Their openness and, more specifically, their respect for Charlie was a deciding factor in her decision to join the chapter, as illustrated in this conversation between Charlie and Jennifer:

**Charlie:** So, my sister [who was also a member of the chapter] was like, just go and see what it's like. One of my biggest concerns is that I was dating a woman at the time and can't be in a sorority that has issues with me dating a woman; I can't do that. My sister told me the truth and said that some people thought that it was a law against gay sisters. But she said, "I looked it up and that's not the truth; everyone was supporting me. One girl said she'd drop if that was the case. But going through the second round of recruitment (because there are three rounds), I figured out that this [the chapter] is where I felt the most comfortable. One of the sisters said, “People are not going to treat you like your sister; you'll be treated as you and even if you don't end up with us, I still want to be really good friends... I think it's more of what [the sorority] has given me more than anything--not the colors or symbols but what it's done. These girls wouldn't have ended up any place else. We have the same value and ideas but we're coming from different places in life. It makes you really think...

Essentially, Charlie was drawn to her sorority because of their willingness to accept her multiple identities as a Black woman and as one who did not participate in the traditional heterosexual practices that are ascribed to women in sororities. For her, both race and sexual orientation were mutually important components of her identity. Being a part of a sorority that accepted her holistically allowed her to engage freely as a sister.

### *The Organizational Fair*

One of the most memorable experiences that the participants mentioned was their interaction with the Black sororities at Mission's Organizational Fair, which was a campus-wide opportunity to learn more about the various clubs and organizations. At the event, the non-Greek organizations were situated around the entire setting, while the sororities and fraternities were located in a more private, separate area of the venue. The groups were further divided between the multicultural and traditional ones. Six of the seven participants had their first interaction with Mission's BGLO sorority members at the Fair; for all of them, it occurred during their first semester on campus. They had hopes of gaining more information about membership into their organizations; however, all of them were met with less than positive responses here—which reminded them of their pre-college experiences with their racial peers. Further, their interactions at the Organizational Fair were nearly identical, even though they attended the event at different points of their respective academic journeys at Mission. Katie talked about her experience with the Gammas at the Fair. Their unwelcoming demeanor discouraged her from approaching the table and asking questions:

**Katie:** At [her previous institution], my friends were mostly White. I didn't fit in with the African American students at all. So, when I got to the Involvement Fair (at Mission), I knew that the Gammas were there. They had finished their performance and I was with my friend. I was kinda intrigued but they gave me a standoffish kind of look. My friend,

was just like, that means that they probably liked you and I was like “I don’t know” (nervous laughs)

Katie approached the Gammas’ table, hoping to gain an opportunity to learn more about the sorority and to establish an initial relationship with the Black/African American women on her campus. However, she was met with the same apprehension and resistance that she encountered at her previous institution. Their response gave Katie the impression that they were uninterested in her. Because of her previous interactions with her racial peers, she believed that their lack of interest stemmed from the assumption that she was not “authentically Black”. Consequently, she did not pursue her interest in a historically Black sorority any further.

Natasha was blatantly “turned off” and disappointed by her interaction. She felt that the Gammas did not engage in a conversation with her because she was not with an all-Black group, saying,

“It was first semester or at the beginning of second semester. I had gone and there were two [organizations] there: one was [the] Gammas and the other one, I don’t remember. But they [the Gammas] kinda shrugged me off as if they didn’t wanna talk to me about it. And it could’ve been because of the people that I was with. I wasn’t with any Black girls. I think it was with one White girl, one girl who looked mixed and one Hispanic girl. Maybe that had something to do with it, but I didn’t feel as welcomed as when I went to other tables. So . . . , that, really set me off. My cousin talked about the Gammas and I thought it was cool but when I got here it wasn’t the same. It didn’t seem like they didn’t have the time of day to talk to me. Plus, I remember I signed up for emails, but I never got an email from them.

Natasha was also interested in learning more about historically Black sororities and, specifically, the Gammas—who had a chapter on Mission’s campus. Her cousin was a member of the sorority, which further piqued her interest in pursuing membership. However, like Katie, Natasha was met with similar resistance by the Gammas. Because it mimicked the experiences that she had with Black women in high school and at the start of her Mission career, she felt that they did not communicate with her because she was an “outsider”. Their response reminded her

that she did not perform race in the typical ways and that there were social consequences for her uniqueness.

Charlie's intention, as she approached the table, was to learn more about the Black sororities; more importantly, she wanted to establish a connection with a student group within Black Mission. Charlie did not have any knowledge about BGLOs, prior to her arrival at Mission. She also lived in a residence hall, where she was the only Black/African American within the entire community. Consequently, she did not interact with Black Mission regularly and did not know the social protocol for communicating with BGLOs about membership. She saw this conversation as an opportunity to connect with her racial peers on campus. However, she had the same experience that Natasha and Katie had with the Gammas:

**Charlie:** I was so against joining a PanHellenic sorority. I wanted to join the Gammas.

**Joy:** Really?

**Charlie:** Yeah. It was the only one that I had ever heard of, so I was like, I'm joining that one! I didn't know anyone in BGLOs. I had no idea what it was before I came here. I was like, on YouTube like stepping?! That's cool; I could do that! My sister was in [her sorority] and I said I don't wanna be in [her sorority]. What's the total opposite? So, I googled it and it was multicultural organizations. I had no exposure to it whatsoever prior to college. At the time, I was on [part of campus] with all of the engineers...and I was like damn, I don't have any one; this sucks. So, I went to the Involvement Fair and I signed my name on a sheet and no one contacted me.

**Joy:** So how did you feel walking up to the table?

**Charlie:** They just kept staring. I'm like, "Oh can I have some information? They're like, "ohh, we have a sheet". And, then they just stared. I was like, "okay...(imitates sheepish look) and signed the sheet. I guess my signature wasn't good enough! (laughs) Like, they didn't like me.

Charlie viewed membership in a historically Black sorority as a means to connect with her racial community—specifically because she did not have the opportunity to do so in high school.

While Natasha and Katie had family members who were affiliated with Black sororities, Charlie's only exposure to the organizations was through television and social media. Because she was not contacted, Charlie assumed that the Gammas were not interested in her. Their communication, as well as her lack of cultural capital within the Black Mission community, played an important role in her decision to pursue membership in her sister's sorority.

McKenzie and Skylar shared the same experience as the other participants, when they interacted with the members of the BGLO sorority members at Mission. They all noted that their interactions with the Black sororities solidified their decisions to join traditional organizations. While the BGLO members responses were perceived as unfriendly by "outsiders", those within Black Mission understood that this stern or serious behavior was traditional on their campus. The purpose was to test the prospective members' interest in the organization. The participants did not have this knowledge, because they were unfamiliar with the social culture of BGLOs.

Unlike the other participants, Jennifer knew the social protocol for expressing interest in, or gaining information about Black sororities. However, she was not interested in the serious nature of the BGLO sororities; she wanted an organization that was more social and less stressful:

**Jennifer:** I did go to the Involvement Fair freshman year, and like they said, you felt so much more welcome at the Pan-Hellenic tables. They were like, Hey! Welcome! Have some Chapstick! And I considered the Gammas because they were the only ones here but I was like, I'm gonna go through Pan-Hellenic recruitment first and if I don't like it, then I'll come back to them, because with them you *need* to know that you want to be there. They're not gonna seek you out; they're not gonna throw hints at you. You need to know where their events are; you have to seek them out. As a freshman, I'm like, I'm not about all of this work! (laughs). From the first round [of recruitment], I knew I wanted my chapter so in the end, I was happy. I never considered them [the Gammas] because they were my second choice. If you want to join them, they aren't supposed to be your second choice...

Because of her familiarity with the culture of historically Black sororities, Jennifer knew what to expect at the Involvement Fair. She was not necessarily interested in developing a relationship with Black Mission through her sorority affiliation; her primary goal was to join an organization where she felt appreciated. She was also uninterested in the rigor and seriousness involved in pursuing membership in a Black sorority. As a result, she focused on Pan-Hellenic recruitment; she felt that the traditional organizations would provide her with the social support and sisterhood that she desired.

*“I Don’t Feel Safe Around Them: Black Men in Black Fraternities*

Similar to their pre-college and early interactions, they were uncomfortable in large groups of Black/African Americans because they were unfamiliar with the “traditional” cultural and social practice of the group. Their social circles included people who shared their socioeconomic and had similar familial backgrounds--which, for the participants, was often more important than their racial identity. The constant theme was that both groups intentionally placed themselves into racial enclaves—which is why Mission and Black Mission existed. This practice was particularly evident in the Mission Greek life social scene.

In their dialogue about the differences between Mission and Black Mission, most of the participants noted that they felt awkward at Black Mission’s parties for two reasons: 1) they did not know how to engage in conversation or socialize with Black Mission students and 2) they felt unsafe because the parties were held at off-campus venues in dangerous neighborhoods. Further, they viewed the Black or African American men within Black Mission as “aggressive” because of their physical size and their assertive nature when they conversed with them. They felt comfortable at the traditional fraternities’ parties because of their previous interactions with them

in other social settings. They also felt at ease with the Black or African American men those events, because they shared commonalities with them. In her response, Jennifer noted that all of the participants attended Mission's frat parties; each of them affirmed her observation. They attended because the crowd was multiracial, as opposed to "all Black", like at Black Mission's events. She also shared why she did not attend Black Mission's social functions and only attended Mission's frat parties:

I mean, we go to frat parties. I've seen all of you guys there! (*group bursts out in laughter*)... But you're not going to see them [Black Mission] there. And there are far too many crime alerts to go to their parties. They go to their parties and they know everyone. I go to the frat parties and *I* know everyone. I feel comfortable there. If my friends go off someplace else, I can just walk up to another group of people and start talking like, "talk to me for a second."

The Greek community mimics the larger campus' racial divide. The historically Black fraternities and sororities are a part of Black Mission and function separately from the traditional organizations. There are several factors that contribute to their polarized relationship, including the organizational and management structure of each group. However, the divide existed, and it was mutually created. Black Mission's parties and other social events were open to the entire campus; however, they were only advertised within their own social media outlets and at the student organization's events. Additionally, the culture within Black Mission was that it was Black-centered space for those who reified their identity in specific ways. Mission's frat parties were only open to members of the host fraternity chapter and their invitees; as McKenzie stated, "... [Black Mission] can't go to the parties. If you're not a brother [of the fraternity], then you're not at that party". Because we socialize with people that share commonalities with us, only those who were within the fraternity members' social circles were invited to their events. Even though Jennifer believed that the women in Black Mission had access to the frat parties, she still

contended that both, Mission and Black Mission, "...shoved themselves into corners. They go to their things; we go to ours and it's not like we are doing it on purpose—but we are both doing it to ourselves".

Natasha shared similar concerns about the safety issues at the "Black parties" and added that she could not enjoy the event "...not necessarily because of the Black people or anything about them" but because she "...didn't wanna go to some street where bad things happen and crime alerts are coming up, especially as a freshman".

The participants also felt that Black Mission men were "aggressive" in their physical and verbal approaches to women. In the following exchange, Jennifer, Natasha and Skylar talk about their interactions at a Black Mission party that they attended. While Jennifer and Natasha called them "assertive" or "aggressive", Skylar was more concerned that she would not be attractive to them because she could not dance, and her thin body type was atypical for a Black woman:

**Jennifer:** I didn't want go to this party, like, I don't want all these guys standing up against the wall (*imitates them grinding on a girl*), right?!

**Skylar:** Not at all! I have nothing there to back up! (*laughs*)

**Jennifer:** they are assertive; they will come up behind you!

**Skylar:** I mean, I can push some scrawny boy off but some big guy....NO! (*laughs*)

**Natasha:** as much as it's similar, it's also a very different vibe. But when I go to a frat party on the weekends, I'm not going someplace where I'll be disrespected like that. And I'm not saying that only Black guys do that. But, like, it's just a different vibe. In that room, it's like, I can't twerk. It's not how I felt comfortable. That's not just multicultural. My guy friends are football players and I don't feel comfortable most of the time, going to a party with them, just because of the way they act and talk to people. I mean, white guys do it too but at times, Black men are more open and bold with the things they wanna say and do. I mean, as a freshman, it was like, ahhh! Get me out of here.

Because of her identity as an “in-betweener” and her relationships within the community, McKenzie felt that the Natasha and Jennifer viewed the Black Mission men from a stereotyped perspective. She felt that the men in the traditional fraternities did not approach them in the same fashion because of their perceptions of Black women—and that their approach with White women mimicked the Black men’s approach to the women that attended Black Mission events. When she asked the question, “Do you think that the guys in the IFC frats are less aggressive because they are afraid to approach us? Do you see them being more aggressive to women who are not of color?” the participants offered that their behavior was different with White women than it was with them. Essentially, the Black Mission men may have felt a level of comfort around the participants, because of their racial commonality. Their comfort level may have been misconstrued because the women were not comfortable in the Black Mission environment. In both cases, their perspectives were incongruent—which led to the uncomfortable feeling that the participants felt.

In sum, in the views of the study participants, Mission University was socially divided into two communities—and the Black Mission community is largely comprised of students who follow the social rules (i.e., living in specific residence halls, maintaining membership in Black/African American cultural organizations and attending BGLO parties and other sociopolitical functions within the Black Mission umbrella. The participants did not have access to programs/initiatives that filtered students to Black Mission because of their pre-college experiences and familial backgrounds. Their pre-college interactions with their racial peers affected their willingness to interact with a large Black community. When they attempted to do so at Mission, the participants felt like outsiders because they were culturally different than the Black/African American students that they interacted with. Consequently, they chose to engage

in the social groups that were similar to their pre-college environments—which were largely comprised of White students. The reality is that mutual stereotyping affected their ability to cultivate positive relationships within Black Mission. The participants assumed that Black Mission lacked ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural diversity; the students that they interacted with in Black Mission assumed that those who do not perform race in a specific way were trying to “act White”.

### **“Black Like Me, Not Like You”**

In his work, James Baldwin argues that Black identity is not uniform; it is conceptualized, performed and understood differently in various environments. Carter (1994) also argues that there is great diversity within Black identity because of ethnic, class, socioeconomic and other differences within the racial group. Each of these factors played a role in the development of the participants’ definition of what it meant to “be Black”. Being Black at Mission was an identity that required one to largely socialize with the Black community, while maintaining little to no contact with the “regular” Mission students. The participants were very clear about their racial and/or national identity. However, they did not feel that they needed to isolate themselves within Black Mission or reify their Blackness in traditional ways to “be Black”. In this section, I analyze the ways in which participants spoke about their intra-racial relationships, or lack thereof, within the traditional Greek community and their thoughts about the assumptions that Black Mission students, as well as their racial peers and other family members, made about their decisions to join traditionally White sororities. The final subsection of the findings, “Their Stories, Their Words”, addressed how these women wanted to be

identified, by their sisters, by the overall campus community and how Black women should be viewed in our global society.

For the study participants, being Black was not a fixed or primary identify. Similar to Bowleg (2008), they saw race and ethnicity as equal parts of their total selves that worked in tandem to shape their individual identities. They did not join their sororities because they did not want to identify with being Black or African American; they wanted to be in organizations with women who shared their socioeconomic status, common extracurricular activities and similar childhood experiences. Finally, nearly all the participants felt that being identified as a woman with solid morals and integrity was more important than their identity as a Black/African American student on campus.

One of the assumptions was that they saw themselves as a community of Black or African American women within a predominantly White Greek system—like Black Mission’s role as a racial community within Mission University. Because race was not their most important identifier, they did not view themselves in this fashion. Instead, they saw themselves simply as women in a sorority; only hanging out with each other would “...make [them] do the same typifying thing that we all don’t like” (Charlie).

Prior to the research, the seven participants were familiar with each other but had never socialized altogether, outside of larger Greek community events. Skylar and Charlie had interacted with the entire group, but they only developed a relationship because they shared a hotel room at a required inter-Greek council training session. The other five shared that they were familiar with each other but did not hang out at all. Jennifer explained that this is what made them different than Black Mission, “...because they only hang out with each other while we hang out with a variety of people in our organizations. That’s what makes us two different

subcultures of Black. Jennifer also talked about her experiences with the Black/African American women who joined traditional sororities within the past two semesters. In her position as a Recruitment Counselor, or “Rho Chi”, she made sure that the prospective sisters felt welcomed during their tours of the sororities’ houses. She saw the Black women who received membership offers from the various sororities but noted that she was not “...going out of her way to talk to her because she was Black”. Her sentiment was that “...we are not Black; we are just women in sororities”. Charlie also offered that it was “...another opportunity to change other people’s views about Pan-Hellenic [sororities] but not as an opportunity to make friends...” All of the participants agreed that it was not important to establish a racial community with the Panhellenic sororities. She also did not feel the need to “...find other Black people to talk about [her] heritage”. Jennifer felt that those conversations should happen with non-Black people within the sororities, in an effort to exchange cultural knowledge with others and to learn more about their heritage.

McKenzie explained the sentiment of the group, during our conversation about the racial communities on campus—and even in their pre-college experiences:

“Like I told you when we talked, I’m aware of the other Black girls in sororities. But like I’m not gonna be like, I gotta make sure that I meet this girl in chapter xyz because she’s Black. You know what I mean? We don’t...we don’t all hang out on the regular. We don’t go out of our way like, oh...all of the Black girls in Pan-Hellenic, let’s all hang out together...”

Natasha further explained that she felt great, knowing that there were other Black women within the traditional sorority community but she “did not feel any different than if she was White in [her] chapter”. She and her sisters did not have conversations where racial identity was a focal point; in fact, they did not discuss race at all. Further, while she liked the other participants, she offered that she would go to parties with them and have conversations about life, but she would

not have initiated a dialogue with them, or any other Black or African American woman, specifically because of their racial commonality. She stated, "...it wouldn't be like 'we're Black; let's do something together'". The other identities (major, athletics, etc.) superseded race—even with other Black or African American students.

Another assumption is that Black students who choose to pursue membership in traditional student groups are not proud of their racial identity or that they are choosing to assimilate or identify as "White"; as a result, they are called "Oreos" or "sellouts"—as Skylar was in high school. For the participants, belonging to traditional sororities did not mean that they wanted to abandon their Black identities. Natasha explained that the biggest misconception she felt people had of her choice to belong to a mainstream sorority was "...that I'm White". Like, people have told me my whole life—oh you're an Oreo. It didn't start bothering more until I got to high school and college. Yes, I may be more similar to you but who's to say Black people are more similar. Who decides that I'm more similar to White people than Black people? Maybe by the way I was raised? But not even that. I was raised by both of my parents but more so by my mom—who I think is a strong, independent Black woman, so I wouldn't say that". Katie concurred, adding that people thought "that an African American in a White sorority is trying to fit in because they are the minority and, like, are you trying to fit in with the majority population".

The women strongly disagreed with what they felt were their Black peers' assumptions about them. Although they expressed it differently, each of them took pride in their racial identities and their "right" to express this identity in any way they chose. Jennifer knew that other Black students called her names because of her "outsider" identity. However, she believed that her culture and heritage was a part of her intrinsic being and that it could not be taken away

from her, simply by saying that she was “less Black because [she] hung out with different people”. “I was never trying to be White,” explained Skylar. “Even when I was ignoring my Black, I was never trying to be White”. Katie felt strongly about her right to choose her own path, saying, “It’s 2015, though; we can join any organization that we want or feel comfortable in. We’re just people; I don’t think my skin complexion should have anything to do with that?”

Charlie saw race as her primary identifier; it was very important to her. As a first-generation immigrant, her parents raised her to believe that her experience as a woman of color was very different than being White in the United States. More specifically, they taught her that society would always “see” as a Black woman first—“even if [she] was the richest woman on Earth”. She also felt that race shapes one’s worldview and how s/he views society. Through her experiences as her chapter’s president, she learned that race plays a vital role in how people perceive others. She stated that she...”can’t go around doing the same things as White people and expecting the same effects because it’s not the same. They get away with certain things that I cannot get away with and I need to be conscious of that. Had I grown up in situations where it wasn’t such a factor, I would have said something different. But, like, the run-ins I’ve had, the encounters I have with certain people...certain figures in my life made me decide that it was the most important to me.” This made race most important for her.

*“Their Voices, Their Stories: What Identity Means to Them”*

Several theorists argue that race is the most critical component of identity for people of color. Drawing on Multiple Identity Theory, Lee (2004), Jones & McEwen (1996) and Bowleg (2008), all contend that identity is fluid and that race, gender, class and sexual orientation work in a symbiotic fashion to create a person’s overall identity. All of the participants, except for Charlie, viewed race and ethnicity/nationality on an equal level with their socioeconomic,

academic and athletic identities; they were unwilling to be solely identified as “Black” or “African American”.

Overall, they wanted to be viewed as successful women who achieved their goals because of their strong moral values and hard work. They understood that the culture of racism and discrimination existed; however, they believed that their hard work, intellect and integrity would supersede any challenges that their racial identity could create. Essentially, they view themselves as successful women who happened to be Black/African American. Katie felt that her grandmother’s and mother’s thoughts that her Black, West Indian and female identities were strikes against her and that she needed to work harder to achieve her goals because of society’s negative views about each group were “old”. Katie believed that neither her race, sex nor her national/ethnic identities were more salient than her identity as an educated person. She stated that she got internship because she “...was Katie, not because [she was] Black”. I have these credentials, my grades...all that”.

Skylar shared similar beliefs; she loved Mission University and wanted to be identified as one its students first but also as a “classy woman” who achieved her goals because of her character:

I think the only reason why I’ve been successful has been my character. It’s how I hold myself, how I view myself—not how other people view me but how I view myself and what’s important to me. I’m representing myself; the light I want to be viewed in. I want to be viewed as a classy woman. A classy woman of color...sure, whatever but I want to be viewed as a classy woman. Period. [I want to be viewed as] someone who holds true to my standards, has good values, has good morals. That, for me, has made me successful and that’s important to me because no one can take that from me. I’m a Black woman, yes. I’m a classy Black woman, yes. I’m a woman, yes. But the way I hold myself to my standards, no one could say that the things that I am most proud of aren’t true. I’m a woman of character, no one can take it or make it a negative. That’s proven true before Mission and it’s been proven true here. Hopefully, it’s something that will continue on as I leave school and I continue on with life.

Natasha added that she did not have the same racial experiences that her mother had, so race was not as relevant for her. As a result, her female identity was most important to her; her achievements, independence and her character were second. She felt that "...having faith in yourself, believing in yourself. That will take you the longest way. But I really do think your character and the things that you'd write on an application (not necessarily that you're Black or a woman) but like, you've held this position, you're reliable, you're professional, you're classy. You have XY and Z so for me that would be most important".

Racial identity was important to all of the participants in some fashion. However, it was more important to those who had directly experienced blatant racism or discrimination. Skylar and Charlie were both major leaders within the Mission Greek life community. In both cases, they were the first Black/African American women to hold such high-ranking positions on their campus. Additionally, they were more connected to their families' cultures and had learned more about the stereotypes that existed about Black/African American people. The other participants only knew intra-racial discrimination; their negative racial experiences came from other Black/African American people. Their personal stories did not include instances of known racism or other situations where their racial identity was most important. As a result, they were able to place greater importance on their other social identities and internal characteristics. Their responses represented the diversity in the Black experience in America, which can range from an "I don't see color" mantra to the experiences of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland and others who were targeted because of their Black identity. In short, the women in this research project wanted the right to be individuals who embodied all of their identities, as opposed to highlighting race— even if society ascribed the identity to them. Being Black/African American was important to them; they simply did not perform it in the same manner that the others did. At the same time, they assumed that "being Black" was a

uniform identity; their thoughts about Black Mission were equally presumptuous. Each of them assumed that they could not identify within any of the Black Mission students because of their music choices, attire and/or hobbies.

The reality was that both the participants and their racial peers were correct—and both were equally Black. Because identity is fluid, there is versatility in how it is performed; there is no “right way” to be Black. Instead, environment, family structure and lived experiences shape his/her perspective and their performance of race or any other identity. Essentially, they were proud of their racial and ethnic identities, but they saw it as a part of their identity. The participants agreed that McKenzie summed their sentiments in this statement: “I just wanna be able to, and it probably won’t happen in our lifetime, but I just want us to be able to...I don’t want us to always identify as a group. I feel like all of us people of color have to identify as a group. Where people who are White, that’s Sarah—not “oh Hey....look at the White girl!” It’s just Sarah...If these people can identify individually. I just want to be able to identify the same way”. In other words, they wanted to be viewed as multifaceted women, who also happened to be Black.

## **Chapter 5 Recommendations & Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to understand Black racial identity through the experiences of Black/African American women who joined historically White sororities at PWIs. This population was chosen because membership in traditional Greek-lettered organizations is often viewed as the “ultimate derivation” from the Black community on most PWI campuses. Drawing upon Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1991, 2000), Multiple Identity Theory (Lee, 2004; Jones & McEwen, 1996) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Parker & Lynn, 2002), the participants’ lives demonstrated how the various elements of identity can shape one’s worldview and perspective. Race (along with class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) are social constructs but their effects are, real---and they influence one’s experiences in memorable ways. Each of the seven participants had at least one impactful pre-college interaction with their Black/African American peers that had a major impact on her relationship with the Black Mission community. Their stories revealed that their understanding and construction of individual racial identity was strongly influenced by ethnicity, socioeconomic status and through their pre-college social and educational experiences. Some of them were called names, made fun of or otherwise ridiculed because they did not perform race in the same manners that their racial counterparts did. The assumption was that they had “lost” or “abandoned” their identities as Black/African American women--which was untrue. The reality is that their experiences diversify the notion of what it means to be “Black/African American” in the United States and, specifically, as students at a PWI. There is an overarching formula for race performance in America; in many cases, it involves the internalization of the stereotypes that are ascribed to the group.

In higher education at PWIs, being Black is largely synonymous with being a poor or working class, first-generation college student who was admitted via an opportunity program or through athletics. The seven women who participated in this study meet some of these criteria—Katie, Jennifer and Skylar are all children of families who migrated to the United States one generation ago; they are also first-generation college students. Natasha and McKenzie are second and third generation college students, whose families were in the United States for more than two generations. Charlie was the product of a biracial relationship; yet, she adamantly identified as Black. In contrast, Amanda, who was also biracial, created a unique identity as a proud Ugandan woman—and she did not want the negative stereotypes of being “African American” used as descriptors of her. There was undeniable diversity in their stories. However, each participant made it clear that she identified as “Black”, “African American”, or “African”, “Haitian” or Jamaican—and that her decision to join a traditional organization was not predicated on their desire to “be” White.

There were also other commonalities in the participants’ stories; all of them were raised in affluent, predominantly White but multicultural neighborhoods and towns. As high school students, they were all a part of extracurricular activities, in advanced placement courses and a part of multicultural social circles. Additionally, they were ridiculed for not being “Black enough” by members within their own racial community. In many ways, they internalized these notions and became skeptical about interacting with other Black students at Mission University—because they did not speak in a certain manner, listen to particular genres of music or attend specific social events that are seen as staples in the Black community at their institution. They did not participate in stereotypical performances of Black identity; instead, they performed race in different ways—including holding senior level positions within the

mainstream Greek council structures, by shedding light on the lack of cultural competence or diversity within their chapters and/or by supporting the historically Black Greek-lettered and other racially-centered organizations on Mission's campus. Their stories support Carter's (1994) notion of intra-racial diversity—that is, there is no one way to “be Black/African American” in educational environments—or in any other place. It also supports Mead's (1934) notion that identity is mutually created, based on one's perception of him/herself and his/her perception of the world.

While the participants demonstrated their pride in their Black/African American identity in non-traditional ways, they still measured it by societal standards. McKenzie and Natasha vividly described their feelings as “outsiders” of the Black community because they could not “twerk”, dance and were not familiar with the latest J. Cole or Kanye West music---while Katie noted that she did not fit in with her cousins or her peers in middle school because she spoke “proper English”, unlike her counterparts who spoke like “yo, yo” or whatever.” Essentially, they accepted the stereotypical norms of Black identity as truth and measured their “Blackness” by their ability to perform in those traditional ways.

### *Limitations*

One of the limitations of this project is that it addresses the concept of “being Black” at a single institution. While this allowed the work to focus intimately on the social experiences on one campus, it does not consider some of the other factors that could have contributed to the similarities within the participants' experiences (i.e., campus culture, the institution's geographic location, the racial dynamics within the United States at the time of the research, etc.). Further research around the construction and performance of racial identity of other Black/African

American women at other institutions is needed, if we wish to examine this phenomenon in a more in-depth manner.

A second limitation is the availability or presence of BGLOs at Mission University; there was only one historically Black sorority with an active chapter on campus when the research was conducted. Carter (1994) notes specifically that there is as much *intra-racial* diversity within Black identity as there is among all races. The absence of the other three BGLOs limits the students' opportunity to see the differences/diversity in each organization. It also narrows the chances of a prospective member to find current sisters whose academic and/or social experiences are similar to theirs. The participants noted that this also played a critical role in their decisions to join traditional sororities.

### **Recommendations for Research**

The participants shared their experiences with racial identity, specifically through the institution of education (K-12 and in college/university settings) and through membership in Greek lettered organizations. Much of the existing research examines Black identity from the perspective of first-generation college attendees whose parents/grandparents were born in the United States. While many Black/African American students are first-generation college students and/or are from working class families, the number of middle-class and second/third generation Black students has rapidly increased—specifically over the past 50 years. For many years, 'being Black' in collegiate environments was only described or understood through the lens of academic deficiencies, the burden of success and the fear of 'acting White'—or losing one's racial identity. The conversation often left out importance of ethnic, national, class, athletic and other identities. This research was conducted in an effort to challenge our preconceived notions about Black identity in general. It is not defined by one's affinity for specific music

genres, dances, use of slang/language, his/her living arrangements—or their choice to join a mainstream organization. As higher education professionals, the research poses a specific challenge to us to acknowledge our own preconceived notions about Black identity and its performance at predominantly White institutions. We must provide educational safe spaces for dialogue about the diversity in Black identity—both locally and globally. In this chapter, I share the implications of this analysis for fraternal organization members and administrators and for higher education professionals.

### *Implications for Greek Life*

In both, the individual interviews and in the focus group, the participants spoke extensively about the cultural differences between the BGLOs and the mainstream/historically White sororities. Nearly all of them recounted their first encounter with the members of a historically Black sorority on campus. They were deterred from seeking further knowledge about the BGLOs because of the members' physical demeanor and response to their request for further information. While the traditional organizations were warm, friendly and inviting, the historically Black sorority members were serious, stern and direct. One participant offered that the seriousness of the BGLOs derives from the history and pride in the organization. Another offered that the stern approach led her to the decision that she was not ready for “this level of commitment”.

Their responses catalyze a very important dialogue around the culture of recruitment and membership in BGLOs. In alignment with Jennifer's response, most D9 undergraduate chapters operate from the notion that potential members should research the organizations first (via internet, written materials and conversations with older members) and determine which one they want to join; they should *only* speak in detail (or declare their interest) with the members of the

chapter/organization that they want to pursue membership in. In contrast, the traditional organizations have an organized process that allows interested women to meet members of all of the Pan-Hellenic chapters on campus (“Rush”). The interested girls list their desired organization and the organizations get to “bid” on the girls—or choose which ones they want, which provides them with options for membership; it is a friendlier process. While the participants’ responses do not reflect those of all Black/African American women at PWIs, their sentiments may be shared by other women on campus. The process of recruitment, or lack thereof, in BGLOs may deter strong candidates from pursuing membership in the organizations—especially if they are not aware of the differences between the BGLOs and their traditional counterparts. Those who supervise Greek life at PWIs, along with the BGLOs, should develop a process of educating first-year students (or those in pursuit of membership in GLOs) about the differences between Pan-Hellenic and NPHC sororities. It would allow prospective members to make informed decisions, as they pursue membership in fraternal organizations. Additionally, potential members would understand how to successfully discuss their interest with either group. Arguably, this change in practice could positively affect the chapter enrollment rates for BGLOs at PWIs—as well as the overall satisfaction that members have with their chapters.

Secondly, the lack of interaction between the IFC/Panhellenic organizations and their NPHC counterparts breeds a level of ignorance among the members of the Greek community at PWIs. During the focus group interview, Skylar recounted an experience during a New Member Education session when the facilitators (who were members of PanHellenic and NPHC organizations, respectively) were explaining their recruitment processes to each other, as they were unaware of each other’s basic practices. Another participant recalled a time when her sisters stated that they would not attend a social function with an NPHC organization because

they did not know them. Essentially, the chapters are operating in separate silos—not as a community. The lack of knowledge allows both groups to draw conclusions, based on stereotypes and other preconceived notions. While there are major differences between traditional Greek lettered organizations and their racially-centered counterparts, there are several commonalities that *all* of the members share. Offices of Fraternity & Sorority Affairs, specifically at PWIs, should develop ongoing training with the entire Greek community about the basic history, purpose and campus culture of all of the organizations. Moreover, the Offices of Greek Life should provide more opportunities for the various councils (IFC, NPC, NALFO, NPHC, MCGC) to interact—in an effort to improve the relationships within the entire population.

#### *Recommendations for Practice*

This research also has implications for race-based student organizations and academic departments. The purpose of both entities is to provide a cultural “safe space”, where students can learn about the historical and present-day dynamics of underrepresented groups. Each of the participants vividly expressed their identity as an “outsider” of the Black/African American community on campus. The majority stated that they want to be a part of Black Mission, but they feel uncomfortable because they are different than the majority of those who are in the community. As leaders of Black Student Unions and/or other organizations that cater to students of the African Diaspora, there is a social responsibility to ensure that students are not deterred from participation or acceptance in the group—simply because they do not contextualize their membership in the same manner that the majority does. There are Black/African American students on all college campuses that do not perform race in traditional (or stereotypical) ways. Their derivation from the “norm” does not negate their identity with, and in many cases, their

pride in being Black or African American; it simply means that their other identities (i.e., class, gender, socioeconomic background and/or sexual orientation) are intersected differently, based on their life experiences. Black student organization leaders should be cognizant of the breadth in Black identity and should work to ensure that intra-racial diversity is represented within their leadership, as well as in their programming.

Practitioners and faculty members also play a critical role in the racial identity development process on university campuses. In many ways, they are responsible for ensuring that Black identity is not narrowly defined (or depicted) through stereotypes that are shown in the media. Courses, particularly in the social sciences (i.e., sociology, gender and cultural studies and education) provide spaces for students to engage in intellectual dialogue around issues of race, class and other social identities; these are ideal opportunities to debunk the existing stereotypes about Black identity. Faculty also have the agency to advocate for interdisciplinary course requirements, which challenge students to examine identity in more complex ways. Classes like these allow students to diversify their perspective on what it means to “be Black”.

### *Implications for Theory*

Most of the existing theories around Black racial identity development, including Intersectionality (Crenshaw) and Critical Race Theory, were constructed from a “race first” perspective—i.e. race intersects with other identities to create the “Black experience”. The reality is that race is not the primary, or only, social identifier for many people; gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, professional and religious identities are equally important dimensions of identity for many Black/African American college students. Often, the assumption is that if race is not one’s primary identifier, then it is not important to him/her at all. Only one of the participants in this project viewed her race as her most salient identity; the others valued their

class, ethnic, educational and moral identities equally. The “race first” model, essentially, eliminates the experiences of those who view race as a secondary (or lower) identifier.

Multiple Identity Theory addresses the multiple levels of identity but still assumes that race is the most important identifier for racial minorities. Developing theories should address the “level” intersection of social identities, as opposed to viewing them from a hierarchal perspective.

#### *Recommendations for Research*

The purpose of this project was to delve into the pre-college and current social experiences of Black women who are members of mainstream/traditionally White sororities at PWIs. The goal was to gain a greater understanding of how they develop, conceptualize and perform race—specifically because their membership in a traditional organization is outside of cultural norm for Black/African American students at PWIs. Several themes emerged, including the notion of “acting Black/White”, stereotype threat and being an outsider in one’s racial community on campus. Most of the current research offers the personal accounts of students (from either perspective). There is a need for research that examines the “in-between” experience—i.e., those who do not perform race in the traditional sense at PWIs but are still able to negotiate positive relationships with their racial community. Additional research around intra-racial diversity is also needed, as the experiences of multiracial, US born and foreign-born Black students are vastly different.

### Conclusion

This study specifically focused on an often-ignored group within the Black/African American population at PWIs—i.e., those who identify as middle-class, who were raised in multicultural environments and had little difficulty adjusting to culture of the institution of its similarities to their pre-college lives. Each of the participants was socially and culturally equipped to navigate through a mainstream PWI environment, which is, essentially, a microcosm of American society. Their challenge lies in the ability to establish relationships within their own racial community because they lacked the social capital that was necessary to catalyze the process. Interestingly, we send first-generation, low-income, urban educated students to PWIs to gain the traditional social and cultural capital; the participants had that but needed access the cultural capital within their own racial group to navigate through Black Mission. Simply put, Mission University was an opportunity for the full-fledged and the “outsiders” to broaden the perspectives on what it meant to “be Black”.

Their experience is incongruent with a considerable amount of the existing research around Black/African American students in higher education. In most cases, the “Black experience” is depicted from a deficit perspective---or, more specifically, the first-generation, poor, low-performing student who views education and the acquisition of “traditional” cultural capital as “acting White”. The reality is both groups, along with other subgroups, mutually exist and are equally valid within Black identity.

All of the participants spoke extensively about the fear of being judged by their racial peers; they felt “unwelcomed” in the Black Mission community because they did not perform race in the stereotypical ways that their counterparts did—i.e., embracing Hip-Hop culture, listening to rap and R&B music, attending “Black parties” and Black Student Union meetings on campus. The irony was that the participants judged their racial peers because of their traditional

reifications of Black racial identity. They assumed that all Black Mission students shared the same socioeconomic backgrounds, music tastes and political affiliations.

The truth is that intra-racial diversity exists—and that each group (Black Mission and the participants) was equally as important and valid; neither group was “Blacker” than the other. As educators and practitioners, it is our responsibility that to ensure that our student programming, instructional materials and research are reflective of the variance that exists within identity. Focusing on one perspective marginalizes others, which promotes the “outsider” phenomenon. Further, it perpetuates the notion that there is only one way to “be Black”. Identity, in all facets, is unique and fluid; there is no one way to perform it—at all.

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*Appendix A: Letter to Chapter President/Chapter Advisor/Greek Life Director*

To: <Name of the Chapter President>  
CC: <Name of Chapter Advisor>  
    <Name of Council President, if applicable>  
    <Name of House Parent, if applicable>

My name is Joy L. Smith and I am a doctoral candidate in the Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Program at Mission University's Graduate School of Education at Mission University (New Brunswick, NJ). One of our requirements is that we conduct research on a social, anthropological or philosophical issue that impacts one's educational experience. As a member of a historically Black sorority (Alpha Kappa Alpha), and as a former advisor to Pi Beta Phi Sorority and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., I have an informed perspective about sororities/fraternities and the challenges we face on college campuses. Greek life is a huge part of the college social experience; thousands of students participate in it (in some capacity) every year.

For my research project, I am interested in understanding more about the experiences of the African American women who have joined the Panhellenic sororities on your campus. Specifically, I want to learn about their personal experience (families, friends, high school/college social lives, etc.) and how these factors influenced their decision. This topic is particularly interesting to me, especially after having worked in various aspects of Greek life and with Black women who are members of the sororities in the Panhellenic Council.

Naturally, I realize that the topic can be very sensitive; essentially, I am an "outsider", which may affect one's willingness to participate in the study. I am more than willing to speak directly to your sisters/chapter members at your convenience; I welcome any questions that you or the students may have. I am also very willing to participate in any public events that you may host and/or assist you in any way that I can. Please feel free to contact me via email at [jsmith@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:jsmith@gse.rutgers.edu) or by phone at any time during the week. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to meeting with and working with you.

Sincerely,

Joy L. Smith, M.S.  
Doctoral Student & Researcher  
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

*Appendix B: Demographic Information/Questionnaire*

Project Information: The purpose of this study is to understand more about your day-to-day experiences in your organization and with the members of your sorority. Because you are a participant in this study, I will need to collect some basic demographic information. Please answer each of the questions; your responses are completely confidential

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

Major(s):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Career Goal(s)  
\_\_\_\_\_

Sorority Affiliation:  
\_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been a member of your sorority? \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Information: (Mobile Phone)  
\_\_\_\_\_

(Campus/HomeNumber) \_\_\_\_\_

(Email) \_\_\_\_\_

Is there a preference, in terms of mode of communication?

Would you prefer to be contacted via [ ] mobile phone, [ ] campus/home ext or [ ] email address?

***Appendix C: Interview Protocol: First Interview (Family/Neighborhood/Campus)***

Researcher Preface: In this first interview, I am interested in learning about your background (family, high school experiences, etc.) and your experiences in college so far. Please feel free to be as candid and honest as you would like; these interviews are confidential. Our dialogue should last approximately 60-70 minutes. If you would like the recording device (camera or digital voice recorder) stopped at any time, please let me know.

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- Where is your family from (nationality/ethnicity)?
- How do you identify yourself?
- How do you like \_\_\_\_\_ University so far? What do you like most about it? What's your least favorite thing about it?
- What made you decide to attend \_\_\_\_\_? What attracted you to it?
- What did your family think about your college choice? What is your family's view on college in general?
- What was your expectation of college before you arrived? How does it compare with the reality of "higher education"?
- How does the campus environment compare to your neighborhood at home?
- What was your high school like? How does it compare to college for you?
- (If applicable): How did you and your siblings (or other family members) interact in high school?
- What did you do for fun in high school? What do you do for fun now?
- I know that you are in as Sorority. How else are you involved on campus (i.e., involvement in other student organizations, attending events, etc.)?
- How many friends do you keep in touch with from high school?
- What was your friends circle like then? What is your current friends circle like now?
- How/where did you meet your college friends?
- Where do you hang out now? What do you do for fun?
- What is the social scene like at \_\_\_\_\_?
- Walk me through a typical night of fun for you. Where do you go? What do you do?
- What, if anything, would you change about the social scene/campus community at \_\_\_\_\_?
- Is there anything else that you would like to clarify?

*Appendix D: Interview Protocol: Second Interview (Race, Identity & the Campus Community)*

Researcher Preface: In this interview, we will talk more about the campus climate and the interactions on \_\_\_\_\_'s campus as a whole. Again, please feel free to be as candid and honest as you would like; these interviews are confidential. Our dialogue should last approximately 60-70 minutes. If you would like the recording device (camera or digital voice recorder) stopped at any time, please let me know.

- How would you describe the student population here—in terms of camaraderie, interactions, etc.?
- How would you describe your campus community—in terms of diversity? How does it compare to your community at home?
- What, if any, involvement do you have in the campus community—other than your membership in your sorority?
- From what I understand, \_\_\_\_\_ has a lot of multicultural organizations (fraternal, social, etc.). What are your thoughts on their visibility, activity, etc. on campus?
- What are your thoughts on having these kinds of student clubs/groups?
- How does everyone “get along” on campus?
- This may sound like a “weird” question; how do you identify yourself? If someone asked you to talk about your personal identity, what would you say?
  
- Race, and even gender, tends to be a very touchy subject—especially on college campuses. Why do you think that is the case? How does it factor in at \_\_\_\_\_?
- Are you involved in any other groups on campus—i.e., the Black Student Union, Carribean Student Association, etc.?
- How does it factor into your identity as a student on campus—and in general?
- How did it factor in when you were in high school—or even as you were growing up?
  
- What is the relationship like between the different racial groups on campus?
  
- How do you view things like race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. in terms of identity—and in terms of your own identity?
  
- Is there anything that you want to add or clarify?

***Appendix E: Interview Protocol: Third Interview ("Going Greek")***

Researcher Preface: In your third (and final) interview, I want to speak with you, specifically about your involvement in Greek life and your sorority. Please feel free to be as candid and honest as you would like; these interviews are confidential. Our dialogue will be a little longer than the last two interview sessions; it should last approximately 85 minutes. If you would like the recording device (camera or digital voice recorder) stopped at any time, please let me know.

- Why did you decide to “Go Greek”?
- Are your friends from home in sororities and fraternities? If so, which one(s)?
- Do you have any family members that “went Greek”? If so, what organizations are they a part of?
- What is the “Greek life” scene like at \_\_\_\_\_?
- How did you view Greek life on campus, as a non-Greek?
- What did you think sorority life was like, prior to joining your sorority? How does it “match up” with the reality?
- What, if anything, did you know about Greek life before coming to college?
- What attracted you to your organization?
- What is life like in your sorority house? [Note: if the chapter does not have a house, ask how things are when everyone gathers together.]
- What is your relationship like with your sorority sisters?
- What sororities/fraternities does your house interact with the most?
- What is your favorite “thing” about being a member of \_\_\_\_\_?
- How do you think that you benefit from your membership?
- How do you see yourself involved with your Sorority after graduation?
- What are your thoughts on Black Greek-lettered Organizations?
- Are there chapters of those organizations on this campus?
- Why did you choose to become a member of \_\_\_\_\_, as opposed to AKA, Delta, Zeta or Sigma Gamma Rho?
- What are your interactions like with the members of the Black sororities on campus?
- Can you talk about your interactions with the African American community at \_\_\_\_\_? Do the African American students have any response to your membership in \_\_\_\_\_ sorority? If yes, what/how?
- How (and how often) do you interact with the BGLOs on your campus? What is the interaction like?
- What role, if any, does race play in the Greek system at \_\_\_\_\_?
- Can you recall a time when you had a conversation/interaction about race and your sorority affiliation?
- What is the biggest misconception about traditional organizations?
- What is the biggest misconception (or most aggravating stereotype) about your membership in a traditional sorority? Can you recall a time when you had to address someone about the misconceptions? If so, what happened?
- What knowledge (about your experience) would you want me to walk away with---as a result of this research?

***Appendix F: Focus Group Protocol (Observations & Discussion with all of the Participants)***

Researcher Preface: In this session, I want to learn more about the common experiences that you all share as members of your organizations. I also want to talk more about some of the interesting themes that emerged from the individual interviews. I will not disclose the identity of those who shared the original information; that will remain confidential. Again, feel free to be as candid and honest as you would like, as this session is confidential. Our dialogue will last approximately 90 minutes. If you would like the recording device (camera or digital voice recorder) stopped at any time, please let me know.

- How has the semester been for you all this semester? I know that balancing schoolwork, your social lives and Greek life can be time-consuming! How are you handling things so far?
- Do your chapters have any major events before the end of the Fall?
- What are the all-Greek council events? Do you have a Greek Week? What type of events do you have planned for it?
- Do all of the councils (sororities & fraternities) participate in the events? Is everyone required to do so? How do you divvy up the work?
- What other organizations/student clubs are you all apart of on campus? Why did you decide to join these organizations?
- (If there is more than one participant who has family members in Greek-letter organizations) Some of you mentioned that you have family members that are members of sororities & fraternities. How did they respond to your membership in your organizations?
- What is the “Greek life” scene like at \_\_\_\_\_?
- How did you view Greek life on campus, as a non-Greek?
- What did you think sorority life was like, prior to joining your sorority? How does it “match up” with the reality?
- What attracted you to your organization?
- What is life like in your sorority houses? [Note: if the chapter does not have a house, ask how things are when everyone gathers together.]
- What is your relationship like with your sorority sisters?
- What are your thoughts on Black Greek-lettered Organizations?
- Why did you choose to become a member of \_\_\_\_\_, as opposed to AKA, Delta, Zeta or Sigma Gamma Rho?
- What are the benefits of being a part of your sorority?
- For those of you who are not in other student organizations, why did you choose to focus on a sorority only?
- Have the NPHC sorority members attended any of your functions?
- (If no one has attended one) Why haven’t you gone to one of their events?
- How do you think that you benefit from your membership?
- What are your interactions like with the members of the Black sororities on campus?
- Can you talk about your interactions with the Black community on campus? Have you attended any of the Black Student Union’s [or cultural organizations] functions on campus? What is that like?

- How (and how often) do you interact with the BGLOs on your campus? What is the interaction like?
- Have you attended any NPHC events while you've been on campus? What was that like?
- Have you attended any since you pledged your respective sororities?
- Can you recall a time when you had a conversation/interaction about race and your sorority affiliation?
- What is the biggest misconception about traditional organizations?
- What is the biggest misconception (or most aggravating stereotype) about your membership in a traditional sorority?
- How do (or would) you deal with someone who questions your reasons for joining your organization?
- What haven't I covered that you want me to know?
- What do you all want me to walk away with---as a result of this research?

*Appendix G: Photo-Journaling Protocol*

The old adage says that “a picture says a thousand words”. Pictures allow us to capture important memories, historical moments and/or notable events in our daily lives. They also allow us to express our thoughts and ideas in a single image.

For this research, I am asking you to use photographic images—to help me to understand your life as a student on campus. Using a digital camera or your smartphone (Android, iPhone, etc.), take at least ten (10) photos that can answer the following questions: 1) How do you define yourself, as a student here—and in general and 2) what does it mean, from your experience, to be a student on this campus? The photographs will be taken over a 7-10 days period and can include places, events, paraphernalia, signs, etc. They cannot, however, include any identifiable images of other people.

You can take as many pictures as you’d like. During our first interview session, I will ask you to show me 8-10 of those that best answer the questions. Please feel free at that time to be candid about the photos and what they mean.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me via email: [joy.smith@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:joy.smith@gse.rutgers.edu).