

Disrupting Fraternity Culture: Folklore and the Construction of Violence Against Women

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Boca Raton

*Disrupting Fraternity Culture:
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Chapter 1. Introduction: What is fraternity folklore?

“Bros over hoes, man. Come one now, she’s a dumb bitch. Just fuck her and leave. If you don’t make it to this party and you don’t get laid, then you are a huge fucking pussy.” This statement was made in the hallway of a popular fraternity house in the Midwest. If you stay around long enough, you will hear several sexually explicit comments, stories, jokes and expressions. For over three years now, I have observed fraternity and sorority life predominantly on one well distinguished Midwestern campus. While this project offers a close analysis of my observations and of the narratives I have collected from these men and women, my reasons for pursuing this study are more than just academic. As a young collegiate woman, I was fascinated and engrossed with the fraternal atmosphere when I first began college. I was excited about the parties, about meeting fraternity men, and I desired to become a member of a sorority. In the midst of the excitement, however, I began to notice misogynistic patterns that dissuaded me from my initial decision. As a woman, I often felt violated, sexualized, and not welcome in an environment of people I considered to be my friends. As a female, I became interested in understanding the role of my gender in this environment. What is expected of women who enter into this environment, and how does the role of “female” contribute to acceptance in the Greek community? As a folklorist, my objective is to try and identify what kind of stories Greek individuals tell, what purpose the stories serve and why certain patterns emerge in telling and re-telling them. Folklore studies prominently reveals how stories and words legitimate the practices and goals of certain groups of people, groups (formed for myriad reasons) that have traditions, rituals, jokes and stories they have to come to call their own. I eventually became most interested in and concerned with why the theme of sex and hostility toward women seemed to surface in fraternity traditions and rituals and ultimately helped to serve the purposes of both fraternal organizations. Both men and women are telling stories and participating in rituals that objectify women, and the attitudes and behaviors conveyed in these environments are ubiquitously contributing to views on troubling violence.

According to Barre Toelken, “folklore makes us consider what people learn in a close society, how they come to learn it, why and from whom” (1979:25). The stories that Greek men and women learn and share belong to a “conversational genre of folklore” (Brunvand 1981:3), largely because these stories are passed on repeatedly by word of mouth, and while they share similar sexual motifs, they exist in different versions. The elements of the stories also adapt “to fit social recurring situations” and surface in other conversational forms such as “nicknames, proverbs, greeting and leave –taking formulas, wisecracks, anecdotes and jokes” (Brunvand 1981:3). In fact, sexual proverbs like “Bros over hoes” and “It’s not the size of the ship but the motion in the ocean” were heard frequently. In some cases, as Anand Prahlad claims, “the proverb functions as a mechanism to boost the morale and increase levels of performance from those to whom it is spoken” (Prahlad 291). Regardless of the conversational form, the sexualized content encourages other members to share and participate in sexual behaviors and rituals. After observing primarily one Greek house for three years, it is evident that sex (heterosexual sex) has become a public issue and an expectation within the house. Although I had convenient access to one primary fraternity house, I was able to collect stories from other men and women at other Southern and Midwestern campuses. From my observations and my contact with fraternity men, it is evident that these men are not only compelled toward heterosexuality but are also compelled to prove it.

From my observation at the fraternity houses, the most flourishing stories and conversations revolve around women. Women are referred to often by specific and offensive nicknames such as “fat-bitch,” “Amazon,” and “cross-eyed bitch.” Most women are referred to often as “bitches,” “sluts,” “cunts,” and “holes with heartbeats” by fraternity men and sorority women. Amazingly, women also hear, know, and even repeat some of the stories and jokes. The most “humorous” and admired stories entail women falling out of lofts, getting vomited on, urinated on, and even ejaculated on. Some jokes mention women being kicked in the head during sex, knocked out and anally raped, or waking up a woman “with a dick in her mouth.” From a folkloric and feminist perspective, it is imperative to explore why such anti-female sexual slang and sexual stories remain the most prevalent and widespread commonality among these men and

women. Whether or not the stories are told as true, these stories circulate among the members daily and their misogynistic meanings have been embedded into the traditional rituals of the house.

When looking at how groups interact with one another, Jan Brunvand articulates that “an important part of many research projects in folklore is sorting out the various threads of influence” (1978:10). Outside influences such as magazines, television, music, language and other cultural elements are crucial to understanding fraternity folklore because these elements help create the hyper-masculine environment of the house. Many physical decorations are purchased to decorate individual rooms and many of these items heavily encourage sex. In one room of the fraternity house I observed, there is a large poster of a woman wearing only a man’s tie that falls right between her breasts with the slogan, “Got Cookies?” In another room, I find playing cards with naked women on the front that have shiny, shaved bodies and pornographic movies lying on the table. All of the women portrayed are white, thin, shaved, large-breasted and covered in make-up. This image is unfortunately what the hegemonic male strives for and in the men’s narratives, it is obvious that these characteristics form the standard by which women are measured by.

Jean Kilbourne, author of “The Beauty and the Beast of Advertising,” argues that the images presented by pop culture shape our view of what is masculine and feminine, normative and other” (Joy 127). As Patricia Sawin has demonstrated, it is media-driven society that is shaping contemporary folklore and we should explore the “ways in which popular texts and images motivate interest and gendered identification of self construction” (30). Jean Kilbourne argues that in portraying women primarily as sex objects, a “climate of tolerance” for domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse is created. The derogatory female images fraternity men are exposed to most sustain the sexual climate of the house. The intention is not to stereotype nor generalize all fraternity men nor assume that non-fraternity men do not share similar stories but my argument is that the environment of the fraternity house allows certain violent stories and words to be shared, encouraged, supported, and maintained.

Jeff Benedict, author of *Public Heroes: Private Felons*, explores the definition of hyper-masculinity and his work is congruously linked to the fraternity milieu and violence against

women: “In fact, there is a relationship between sexual assault in high-risk fraternities and athletic teams” (Humphrey and Kahn 1313). Benedict’s work began when he discovered how many criminal cases filed against professional athletes were inextricably linked to violence against women. Why would violence against women be the number one criminal act of professional athletes? To answer this question, Benedict looks at the hyper-masculine environment in which these athletes live. He claims that the majority of women who surround these athletes are often strippers, prostitutes, and “roadies,” or female fans who adore them. By interacting with these women on a daily basis, it is possible that these professional athletes view all women as wanting them or wanting sex. This argument is applicable to the fraternity men because in an atmosphere that exudes sex, men assume women entering their house want sex as well. The Greek system heavily encourages sorority and fraternity interaction. For many activities, sororities must win the affection of their desired fraternity. The research will show how the interactions are highly sexual, which may influence how men look at sorority women (and non-sorority women) who enter the house. Ultimately, in an atmosphere that condones stories where women are nothing more than body parts, it is easy to look at all women as purely sexual creatures.

When collecting stories from the men, some offered personal narratives or “memorates” (Morgan 67), while others relayed accounts of other men’s experiences. I collected the same story or essentially a “kernel” (Kalcik 3) story from many different individuals that allowed for manipulation and change. The common thread between the stories is that the woman is in some way used, embarrassed, or punished for being sexually active. These “memorates,” or “narratives told by individuals about a purely personal experience of their own” seem to “serve as critical ego supports or buffers” (Morgan 68). If the men do not have a “memorate” to share, stories or jokes of other sexual accounts will suffice. Ultimately, by telling stories or jokes about “getting laid,” whether true or not, the member can feel accepted. In both situations, the member is trying to avoid mockery. Bauman asserts that anything to change the goal of the community will be marginalized: “If change is conceived of in opposition to the conventionality of the community at large, then it is only appropriate that the agents of that change be placed away from the center of that conventionality, on the margins of society” (1975:190); thus, under this storytelling system,

certain individuals are excluded while others benefit. For instance, men who do not meet the qualifications risk being called disconcerting names such as “pussy,” “faggot,” “vagina,” “vag,” and “homo.” In the group interview, these terms were referenced on numerous occasions:

Adam: Tyler just sign the paper and do the interview, you fucking vag.

Adam: I was like look at this pussy-bitch and nothing. He did nothing.

Adam: Nick, what’s the best sex you’ve ever had? You fag.

The terms used to criticize members in the house remain specific to gender and sexual orientation because being a homosexual or a woman is not ideal; both threaten ideal masculinity.

All of the informants in this study are white, middle class and from the Midwest. In many of the fraternities that housed as many as one hundred members or more, not one minority could be found. In the primary fraternity I observed, out of the ninety-three members, one African-American male was present. Despite his presence, the men frequently told racist jokes. In one instance, a member told another member that they had to stop saying the word “nigger” because “they had one in their house now.” Many members also used the word “niggersluts” to talk about black women. As Dundes has ascertained, each ethnic and racial group has its own folklore that produce its own “lingo, legends, and in-group jokes” (13), in addition to “traditional verbal stereotypes” (Brunvand 1978:3). Feminist theory and masculinity studies both have amassed scholarship that suggests “Men, as do whites, have a vested interest in not asking questions about the sources of their privileges” (Brod 162); so racist jokes, like sexual jokes, serve to protect image and masculinity. While this project aims to examine the relationship between gender and Greek Life, it is imperative to remember that race, gender, sex, and class cannot simply be studied in isolation (McClintock 5), therefore this project may implicitly address all of these categories.

Some of the individuals for this project were interviewed at the fraternity house while some were interviewed at their off-campus homes. Interviewing men both in and out of the house allowed me to see how the performance of these masculine narratives were shifted or maintained from one setting to another. As Linda Deigh has suggested, “stories can adapt themselves to any local and social climate” (Dorson, “Folklife” 54) and the research will show how the stories remain necessary to the social identity of this folk group. This project will also examine how “the specific folklore of gender differentiated groups is strongly influenced by the typical roles

assigned to each gender by their culture” (Brunvand 1978:57). For these men, gender is a role or an enactment and the audience consists of the other fraternity men, women, and the society at large. When addressing male chauvinism, Dundes mentions “how folkloristic patterning acts as a critical cultural force in shaping opinion and prejudice” (1980: X). While many of the rituals in the fraternal context are gendered, Kristin Anderson and Debra Umberson, in their article, “Gendering Violence: Masculinity and Power in Men’s Accounts of Domestic Violence,” argue that the larger cultural issue of troubling violence is similarly “gendered through social and cultural practices that advantage men in violent conflicts with women. Young men often learn to view themselves as capable perpetrators of violence through rough play and contact sports, to exhibit fearlessness in the face of physical confrontations, and to accept the harm and injury associated with violence as ‘natural’” (363). In many ways, the narratives of male abusers parallel with the narratives of some of the fraternity men in that the language often reflects “hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity,” and often times, the female is held responsible for the violence enacted upon her (Anderson and Umberson 362). If young men are participating in a sexualized, derogatory, and abhorrent culture now during the college years, this dangerous “cultural force” may not be easily expunged after they graduate and their attitudes about women may easily surface when men enter relationships and marriage.

For this project, I have changed the names of all the individuals involved and will not provide the name of the fraternity or sorority houses involved; however, I will incorporate their narratives verbatim when quoting in the text. Toelken importantly acknowledges that “language is a traditional frame for learning and a basis for human interaction” (1979: 25). Therefore, the deliberate use of crude language and profanity when telling the stories and jokes has, as W. Edson Richmond states, “familiarized the speaker with a kind of ideal and standardized language deemed especially appropriate of expression within his particular speech community” (Dorson, “Selected Essays” 145). In the individual interviews, the men were more reserved and “polite,” less likely to use profanity, asked me if they could get vulgar (*Steve: You want me to get vulgar?*), refused to tell me stories they thought were too vulgar, were less likely to tell personal narratives (*Tony: No. No. Not that I want to share. No. I’m sorry!*), and were less likely to joke around as in the group

interview (*Adam: Just show us your tits and you'll get the interview*). In the group interviews, the men dominated the interactions and I was talked over, ignored, and interrupted. The men also wanted to get more personal and graphic, attempting to discuss sexual positions and interrogate me about my own sex life (*Adam: "Let's get down and dirty Brandy. What's the best sex you've ever had?"*). The difference between the individual interviews and the group interviews demonstrates that context is very important in understanding fraternity folklore, and as Barbara Allan suggests, personal narratives or "stories, generally...are formed up just for the audience and just the occasion for their occurrence" (237). Ultimately, stories are "precisely positioned for rhetorical effect in their conversational settings" (Allan 237). Allan stresses that these stories are ultimately responses to the social setting so they are told frequently because the members have recognized and accepted these stories as criterion for the setting they interact in daily.

Dell Hymes argues that a particular set of conditions makes a story possible, accepting, and even rewarding. It seems that that the reward for these men is to feel accepted into this particular group because of the "liminal" status many of these young men occupy. As Victor Turner suggests, it is in this "liminal phase" (95) that young men and women remain most vulnerable and willing to participate in events in which they would not ordinarily partake. Toelken's work, "The Folklore of Academe," discusses the impact that the "college setting" alone has on students. Outside of class, there are "cultural elements that bind students together in such close, identifiable groups" (Toelken 1986: 504), therefore the fraternity "provides a socially sanctioned framework for the expression of critical anxiety-producing problems" (Dundes 9). Anxiety about class, being away from home for the first time, and trying to fit in at a large university are common factors these men share. Cultural influences around campus also reveal what is masculine, and at a university filled with young women, anxieties about male identification certainly begin to surface. The sexual stories, jokes, and expressions I collected are most appropriate within this setting and they "grow out of a shared cluster of live experiences, common fears, hopes, and frustrations that have been experienced in common by a substantial number of the group's membership" (Toelken 1986:504). It was evident from the interviews that

men wanted to join fraternities long before they came to college because of the alluring promise of social freedom and access to women provided by being a fraternity man.

While the fraternity itself can be considered a folk group, “any group whatsoever sharing at least one common factor” (Morgan 68), it is important to remember that “smaller folk groups are present within” (Dundes 10). Thinking about the fraternity as a concentric set of folk groups coming together proves useful because these men are coming from different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds to unify under this fraternity group identity. The largest factor these men share is that they are students who have decided to become Greek. While the reasons for joining the house differ by individual, they have come together to support this particular fraternity. When asking the young men why they joined a fraternity, the most common response was often to meet new friends and be part of a group because many of them never felt accepted in high school. Many men also believed that the fraternity provided a structure and most importantly, a social outlet. From the responses, it is evident that the fraternity is believed to provide structure, a temporary or kind of “stand in” family, and secure a safe masculine domain. In order to attain this domain, men endure intense physical and mental hazing, and after completing the initiation process, the men desperately rely on one another to learn the traditions and adapt them into daily life to remain accepted.

While these men are coming from different backgrounds, their similarity to one another as a folk group lies in the common process of initiation or accepting the traditions of the house, and the “acceptance of traditions by these groups usually implies some degree of conformity with group tastes and values” (Brunvand 1978:50). In fact, looking in one room of the house is like looking into all rooms of the house; the same pornographic magazines, posters and movies sit in practically every room of the house. Each member is also required to hang their hazing paddle somewhere in the room, demonstrating Toelken’s claim that folk groups have “some factor in common that makes it possible, or rewarding or meaningful, for them to exchange informal materials in a culturally significant way” (1979:33). The older members expect the young pledges to conform and essentially perform a subservient role. The new members want so badly to participate and learn the “insider’s code” and to “cease being a victim, must try to move as quickly

from the outside audience to the inside audience” (Toelken 1979:114). The men are rewarded for adopting and maintaining the image of the house even if it comes to the expense of others, namely women.

In such a large folk group as a fraternity, it is possible that a “member of the group may not know all the other members but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity” (Dundes 7). However, many men and women expressed disappointment when other members did not recognize them as a member of the house, as illustrated by this exchange with sorority member, Allison: “She says to me oh are you in the house? I’m your next door neighbor. Are you serious?” Jon, a male who decided not to join a fraternity after partaking in Greek events, states, “You know they don’t know your name but when you wore that shirt...everyone knew.” As the research will indicate, the goals of the group often clash with the intended goals of Greek Life. The young men and women receive contradictory messages about academics and social events, relationships, and self image. The terms “brotherhood” and “sisterhood” evince contradictory meanings. As one sorority member eloquently tells me: “Oh yea, we’re really diverse. Blah, blah, blah.” Greek literature promises parents that students in fraternities and sororities do better in school and give back to the community, but many of the informants tell a different story.

In Toelken’s article, “The Folklore of Academe,” he states that he hopes his article will “make readers attempt a further-careful folkloristic scrutiny of their own culture” (Toelken 1986: 502). As a college student, I am interested in further scrutinizing college culture, specifically Greek culture. Toelken further acknowledges that “the Greek system serves as a nucleus for a number of collegiate practices and stories” (1986: 513). It is often difficult to obtain the stories if you are not an active insider. Having several friends in fraternities and sororities, and having a relationship with a fraternity member, I was able to amass great stories and learn about some of the rituals, yet I was not allowed to know about others. In fact, this project would not have been possible without my acquaintances. This project will also explore the tension and anguish I felt by using their stories albeit they gave them to me voluntary and willingly. Although these men and

women remain some of my closest friends, it is imperative to explore these rituals, narratives, and jokes because they are perpetuating negative attitudes about women.

It is important for me to elucidate how painful and emotional this project was for me because of my many roles; female, friend and ethnographer. My autoethnographic impulses are therefore inseparable from the larger ethnographic project I intend to explore and analyze. While most ethnographies and folklore projects inevitably celebrate or recognize the importance of specialized rituals and stories that define group identity, this project remains more critical rather than celebratory of the content that is defining Greek identity. As Dundes suggests, “a knowledge of such patterns can provide the means of raising levels of consciousness” (Dundes: x). Why do certain environments support and encourage anti-female attitudes and violence? How are the words we use to talk about women contributing to the objectification and the violence? When a woman is told by a man whom she knows, loves, or trusts, that she is a “bitch” or a “slut,” when a woman is threatened with her life or beaten to the point where she cannot recognize her own face, it is imperative to remember that these words and actions are not just directed at this one woman, but at all women. It is impossible to end the violence without examining where it begins and where it is maintained.

2. Masculinity as an Institution: Terrorism, Troubling Violence, and Gender Performance

Before I present my fieldwork, it is necessary to examine the theoretical discourses that shape the focus of this project, namely masculinity studies and performance studies. While my research also relies on feminist theory, the burgeoning field of masculinity studies is central to examining this group of men. In fact, aligning my work with many scholars in this area, I agree that it is necessary to analyze the “fraternities as social institutions,” and not provide a “psychological analysis of fraternity men as deviant individuals” (Brod 168). As Judith Gardiner explores in her book, *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, both feminist theory and masculinity studies are “myths of power: masculinity of the natural consequence of male self with social privilege and feminism of perfectly self-regulating collectivity” (11). More precisely, as Peggy McIntosh argues, “denials protect male privilege from being fully recognized, acknowledged, lessened, or ended” (70). However, as Judith Stacey expresses, feminist theory may also purport a false sense of positivism and subjectivity. I would like to believe that a delicate theoretical combination can challenge and critique notions of masculinity: “Masculinity studies can be informed by a feminist project to interrogate different masculinities whether real (as in corporeal) or imagined (as in representations and texts)” (Gardiner 3). Larger cultural influences often present feminist agendas as “man-hating” and perpetuate myths about the binary representations of male and female roles. Consequently, “Men identify women –both whom they batter and who lead movements to criminalize domestic violence as the ‘Other’ who has stolen their male privilege” (Anderson and Umberson 371). This project does not intend to separate gender construction and troubling violence, but it will assert that “masculine identities are constructed through acts of violence” and the “practice of domestic {or troubling} violence helps men to accomplish gender” (Anderson and Umberson 379). For this project, the term “troubling violence” is more preferable since it encapsulates all forms of abuse ranging from physical and verbal abuse, stalking, objectification, harassment, and rape in all age groups and relationship levels. While domestic violence and partnership violence are accurate terms, using the term, “troubling violence,” is useful because it extends outside of marriage and intimate “partner”

relationships. In the fraternity narratives, it is evident that violence against women serves as a rhetorical strategy for these men and that they are essentially “respected” and accepted for encouraging troubling violence.

R.W. Connell, prominent scholar in the field of masculinity studies, is recognized for creating the “gender order model.” Connell claims that there are many masculinities and femininities but the ideal masculinity, or what he coins, “hegemonic masculinity,” (Connell 1982 and 1995) is problematic because it is constructed as antithetical to the “female.” This means men have the dominant traits and therefore feel the right to exercise them over women. The gender order model describes the characteristics of the hegemonic male as athletic, sexually charged, preferably not monogamous but promiscuous, aggressive, competitive and heterosexual (Connell: 1982 and 1995). This standard encourages males to demonstrate their sexuality (heterosexuality) by sleeping with multiple women and not getting emotionally attached. Having sex is crucial to attaining the ultimate masculinity and this “requirement” may contribute to violence against collegiate women. Connell explains that men benefit from this system of masculinity no matter what because it subordinates women. Even if a man does not live up to the hegemonic image, he is sustaining this subordinating system by striving to achieve the ideal. This explains why men can talk about sex even if it is not a personal experience. Connell’s theory is astute because he looks at masculinity as an institution and in any institution, there are going to be rules that are designed to support the institution and ensure its continuation: “The more natural a practice is, the more natural it seems to refer to it as an institution” (Card 298). The fraternity itself is an institution of masculinity and it is maintained when men adapt to the conditions of the house and perform masculine (sexual) stories.

This project explores masculinity as a construction and as an institution that has fierce consequences for women. Claudia Card’s “Rape as a Terrorist Institution” suggests that rape and acts of violence against women are not individual. Card claims, that to regard these violent acts as individualistic “ignores its relationship to institutional rules and thereby its terrorist implications” (296). In fact, “Rape and domestic violence are both forms of terrorism, a backdrop to the daily lives of women...” (Card 296). Card further asserts that terrorism should not be strictly defined as

something public or political because “ethically that exclusion is arbitrary and irresponsible. It maintains an invisibility of routine violence against women, underlying visible sexist stereotypes” (296). Fraternity men, like rapists or abusers, do not publicly congregate and plan a systematic agenda of violence, but because of the popular perceptions about women, “unwritten” rules become enforced and therefore institutionalized. As a result of this informal or social indoctrination, it seems natural for men to be violent, and “irrational” or unnatural for women to display violent tendencies. Shulamith Firestone explores this gendered differentiation between power, love, and troubling violence by suggesting that “‘Romanticism is a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing her condition” (147). The globalized myth of romance and the way culture trains us to see male violence as “natural” may explain why women stay in abusive relationships, and why men in groups such as fraternities continue their oppression of women to attain their ideal masculine fantasy.

Along with rules and regulations, consumption is another factor that keeps large institutions running. In the main fraternity house I observed, I learned that it costs six thousand dollars a semester to live in the house, or essentially twenty-four thousand dollars over the course of four years. This does not include smaller items like T-shirts, hay-rides, or other informal fraternity events. Some fraternities cost considerably less, while some are more. My informant, Jon, claims that “there are no poor fraternities. It’s an oxymoron.” Sororities also require substantial amounts of money, and these institutions largely exclude the lower class. In one sorority interview from Amy, I learned that finance actually plays a role in acceptance to the house: “Um. Well actually a thing that’s not really mentioned but kinda you go through is um they kind of pick on your financial status like girls who didn’t have a certain level of income were automatically cut.” Members are also fined for breaking the rules such as not coming to mandatory chapter meetings or for not paying the house bills. Another informant, Allison, points out the irony of the financial requirements: “I have to work to pay for my sorority but yet I miss sorority stuff to work and I have to pay fines.” The men and women commit themselves psychologically as well as financially to the organization. In addition to the cost of living, the fraternity men also purchase several items to “fit in.” The most popular items are often pornographic and it seems that

the popular images of women that are often depicted prevent the men from seeing the female oppression to which they contribute. As Card suggests, “The clandestine nature of the institution is part of the explanation why many do not imagine that they are taking part in an institution” (307).

Throughout my observation and research, I have come across several articles and books about fraternity and sorority life. The field work of Ayres Boswell and Joan Spade conducted in the mid 1990’s has coincided with my own observations. These scholars have conducted studies on the environment of fraternities by observing male and female interactions in the house compared to other social arenas. Boswell and Spade have concluded that the phenomenon of “hooking up” has replaced dating, and fraternities are notorious sites for “hooking up.” They also conclude that “this environment is so horrible and unhealthy for good male and female relationships and interactions to occur” (140). Boswell and Spade have also tried to comprehend why date rape and acquaintance rape are so prevalent on college campuses. They believe that many fraternities maintain a “rape culture,” “a set of values and beliefs that provide an environment conducive to rape” (133). After studying fraternities and local bars close to the college campus, they concluded fraternities to be more of an environment prone to sexual aggression and designated some houses as “high risk” and “low risk.” While these conclusions are important and necessary, it is not pragmatic to separate environments. Men inside the fraternity house do not leave the anti-female attitudes at the house; they take them to the local bar and other social arenas. Designating some houses as “high risk” and “low risk” reinforces the idea that not all fraternity houses condone violent behavior, but it may also be misleading and put pressure on women to be cautious and know the difference.

Also appropriate to this discussion is Thomas Leemon’s, *The Rites of Passage in a Student Culture*, a book that depicts his experiences living in a fraternity house during the spring of 1963. Leemon provides small graphs or charts of the men’s behavior and eight pages of meticulous documentation that indicates which members were present at each event. Leemon occupies a distant position from the men because of the visible age difference and his academic persona. Alexandra Robbins, a journalist who went under the radar to do research on sororities, recently published a book called *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities*. Like Leemon, Robbins

provides little analytical writing, offering mostly descriptive accounts of the women's lives and events within the sorority. Both texts seem voyeuristic and focus on "getting the dirt" or giving the public what they want. I believe my project offers a different lens than this scholarship because of my status among the Greek individuals. As a young college student and friend to many Greek individuals, I was able to get their stories easier than most other ethnographers. The individuals did not hold back, hesitate, or refrain to interact because of my presence. As a folklorist, I have been trained to carefully observe and elicit evidence, to be reflexive and to try and understand an experience on my "subjects" own terms rather than my own. Unlike prior field work I have conducted, however, I knew specifically what stories I wanted from some of the informants because I was present when they initially told them. However, occupying the position as ethnographer and friend simultaneously proved difficult because I was offended by some of the behavior, but I also felt "guilty" about drawing conclusions from this fieldwork about people I know and like.

In addition to using feminist scholarship and masculinity theories, this project will also use performance as a lens to examine the role of gender and the importance of narrative. Hymes argues that social factors make behaviors and performances possible, and that "the notion of performance is central to the study of folklore as communication" (11). This project offers a new insight into Greek studies by exploring fraternities and sororities as folk groups and focusing primarily on how storytelling and performance serve an important role in shaping Greek identity and ideology. What do these men and women talk about on a daily basis? What patterns emerge and reemerge? Most importantly, how are the stories and rituals scripted? These men and women perform stories to revitalize the goals of the group. Thus, the relationship between ethnography and performance additionally adds a new perspective to the literature surfacing about Greek Culture.

Chapter Seven will specifically examine the relationship between performance and the field work for this project. While I was collecting material for this study, I enrolled in a course entitled "Ethnography and Performance." In this course, I was required to perform the narratives of my fraternity and sorority cohorts. This experience allowed me to explore the contradictions

and difficulties in re-presenting fieldwork and re-performing gender. Studying gender through a lens of performance is certainly not new in folklore scholarship but looking at the relationship between troubling violence, masculinity, assimilation, and performance is. This project will also define performance as a reflexive and autoethnographic tool. Victor Turner's definition of performance as "the proper finale of an experience" (Simpson-Stern and Henderson 9) has come to be my own after experimenting with ethnographic performance. This project will explore the effectiveness of this method. Writing has always been the "proper way" to explicate experience; yet writing, unlike performance, fails to evoke the esoteric and visceral reactions ethnographers often have to their findings. I began to realize that writing papers and taking good field notes could not capture the essence of the Greek world because it was much larger than my experiences and the experiences of my friends and informants. The field work could not remain imprisoned on the page. Through performance, I put the corporeality back into the experience. John Foley articulates this point well when he asks his readers in *How to Read an Oral Poem*, "What difference does performance make?" and answers with "performance is part of the meaning" (182). Recreating an experience solely in a text does not convey what the rhetoric of sound, gesture, and inflection can. It also seems that the ethnographer becomes more disembodied in the written text. Pedagogically, performance serves as an exemplary tool for raising awareness about Greek Culture

In addition to taking the "Ethnography and Performance" course, I also began to perform my fieldwork outside of the classroom for the *Troubling Violence Performance Project*, an organization that began in 2002 under the directorship of Professor Elaine J. Lawless and M. Heather Carver. Rather than lecturing and handing out statistics on troubling violence, group members in the *Troubling Violence Performance Project* share (perform) poignant narratives and hold "safe" discussions afterwards. The troupe started out performing narratives from Elaine J. Lawless's book, Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative, but over the last three years, the troupe has gathered many stories from men and women who want to offer their stories to raise awareness. Since many of the stories circulating about Greek Life and troubling violence are often regarded as taboo, performance offers a less intrusive methodology. In Walter J

Ong's article, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," he suggests that two historians will never relate an event in the same way even though they are telling the truth: "There are many things that can be said and there is no one thing to say about anything" (70). This statement notably applies to this project because storytelling and performance, while similar, relay information in different but poignant ways. While attempting to recreate a subjective narrative can be dangerous, it is more effective than providing scripted statistics.

If stories, as William Wilson suggests, construct image and identity, then the performances of these stories serve to build masculinity. Toelken asserts that "performances help to reinforce and maintain the central ideas of the group" (1979: 106). In telling these narratives, these men are performing their gender. Building on Judith Butler's notion that, "gender is performative" (Butler 307), the language and verbal communication of this particular community is reflective of the social and cultural elements that shape the ideal "self." In this case, "the development of sexual identity is inextricably intertwined with language and communication" (Sawin 35). The men go beyond speaker and listener to performer and audience when they converse in groups. There is a change in both speech and behavior. Using excessive profanity, using nicknames and labels to talk about women, and telling jokes to enhance the narrative are all "breakthroughs into performance" (Hymes 11). There are visible changes when talking about women and sex and "these transitions are one of the main objects of the study of folklore in context" (Hymes 14). The transitions in speech and behavior are necessary for these men because their "competence and commitment to the community is being evaluated" (Bauman 1975: 170) by the other members when conversing as a group. When describing the behaviors of abusers, Anderson and Umberson write that "through their speech acts, respondents presented themselves as rational, competent, masculine actors" (362). Both abusers and fraternity men perform masculine roles and rely on "gender scripts," which are "embodied in rape myths and stereotypes" (Boswell and Spade 134). There is considerable social pressure to fit the hegemonic prototype: "The audience's function is to recognize the culturally specific genre being enacted and to evaluate the quality of the performance according to the local standards for that genre" (Sawin 35). One purpose of telling sexual stories is to justify the standards that this community of men has

established, which is why they cannot occur in isolation if they are to be successful. Analyzing the context that has allowed for this interaction to occur reveals how central ideas have come to take meaning. Having defined performance as an influential and powerful tool, it would be useful to examine some narratives offered by the fraternity men.

3. Storytelling and Ritual: Prominent Patterns and Content

In my initial interviews with the primary fraternity house I observed, I often asked the men questions such as, “Why did you join a fraternity? Why did you choose the fraternity that you did? What has been the most rewarding part about being in a fraternity? Can you tell me any stories about your house?” When I asked the men for stories that they heard about the fraternity house or had heard inside the fraternity house, I began to notice that the majority of the stories given to me depicted sexual incidents. From the stories the fraternity men chose to tell me, it is evident that as a folk group, sex (heterosexuality) is looked at as an expectation within the house, so watching other men have sex without the participants being aware and drawing attention to sex as it was occurring, were major motifs in the stories I collected. Since social relations are such a prominent part of fraternity and social life, I began asking the fraternity men to talk about or describe their best and worst dating experiences. If an informant gave me a sexual story, I would then ask for other sexual stories they had heard. I have combined the individual’s comments together instead of leaving it in interview format in order to make the story more coherent. To see the context and my comments, see the transcripts.

Steve: You want me to get vulgar? Well I guess you can use whatever. You remember “Greg Simpson?” I don’t think too many people will tell ya this one when you talk to everybody for this. Well he was with this girl that we called Amazon. For obvious reas... Well she was just a big girl. Oh no, I take that back. Was it Amazon? You know, I think her name was Slip n’ Slide actually and that’s because we’d pour beer in the hallways and she would slide down the hallway. And um, one time he was in there and he was like fisting her and the reason that we knew it was happening is because you could, there was like a hole in the door or something and she was on the couch and it was, that’s probably the funniest story I have of any sexual experience in the ***house. Yeah, or something like that. I don’t remember exactly. I just remember you could see it. I didn’t see it personally, look in there. But some people.... Yeah, some people looked in there, yeah. And they said he had his whole fist....

This story is exemplary of the fascination with sex and the need to make sexual acts known in this environment. There also seems to be a hint of competition when telling these stories because Steve wanted to convince me he was giving me a story no one else would: “I don’t think too many people will tell ya this one.” Tony also did this in his interview: “Oh. This is the best story. This is the best story you’re probably ...This is.” In the group interview, Adam dominated the session also hoping to give me the best stories. Steve believes that the story he shared with me is the

“funniest story” of any sexual experience he can recall yet he was not even there to witness it. Once a story is told to a member, apparently he can also claim it and feel responsible for spreading it to others. Notice how graphic and specific he was in re-telling it: “Greg Simpson” was not simply “fooling around” with this woman but he was “fisting” her, demonstrating how every narrator that passes this story on addresses this significant detail and “highlights the story’s pertinence and situational appropriateness as clear as possible to the audience” (Allan 241). Watching other members have sex has somehow been deemed one of the “rules of appropriateness” (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 4). It is the context, (the environment of the fraternity house) that has allowed for something most of us see as intimate and personal to become a public item of folklore to be shared again and again. The following narrative demonstrates just how aware of sex the men ultimately are:

Tony

T: I know of a guy last year that was, it was during finals and yeah, it had to have been second semester and finals week and he was having sex in the dirt room and somebody heard it or knew it was going on or whatever and came down with like two or three other people and they had like a volleyball or something and threw it at him and hit him while he was having sex. You always hear these random stories but you never like commit them to memory or anything. I just remember that one cause I remember thinking how funny that was. That that happened.

When a member has sex in the “dirt room,” he is essentially trying to make his sexual encounter known to the other members because it is a ritual that is held in high regards. The “dirt room” is a small room in the basement of the house that consists of one couch, one light, and a doorway with no door. If a member has sex in that room, he gets to spray paint his name on the wall and there are hundreds of names spray painted on the wall. The sexually active member relies on the other members to spread the story so when they hear it or discover it is going on, he will have the evidence needed to be rewarded and get to spray-paint his name on the wall. It has become an unwritten rule to make sexual acts public because stories construct the image and identity not only of the individual but of the community (Wilson 130). In today’s society, the contemporary definition of folklore has somehow been created out of the influential cultural elements that shape communities so it is important that “folklorists know when and why people turn to it” (Sawin 30). In the situation described by Tony, the member knows that the story of his

sexual encounter in the dirt room will be distributed among the house. Perhaps members “turn to” narratives and folklore to elevate their masculine status within the house.

Mike

I know I have had, let’s see, every roommate I’ve ever lived with has committed sexual acts either in front of me or on the other side of the loft with me. While I was either awake or committing similar acts simultaneously. Not only for me specifically but I would say for most people. It’s more or less accepted and expected. You live in the same room with another guy and he has a girlfriend, you’re gonna see that from time to time. It’s encouraged. (laughs) Ok, um. People have had sex in every room of this house, public or private, including the kitchen, the back kitchen where “Jim” makes our food, the pool table, uh...I heard, we have a room that is private to initiated members. I have heard stories of guys blindfolding their female partners and taking them into the private room so they didn’t know where they were... No. No. It was just to be able to say it was done. Uh, people have had sex in public showers on the floor. Yeah. (laughs) Um... People know that I have had sex in the room that we refer to as the Dirt Room. You get to put your name on the wall if you have...if you penetrate a feminine orifice (sarcastic tone) within the confines of the room. Uh, well. I’ve had roommates have sex on couches directly below my loft and I’ve seen that by just looking down to see what was going on and that’s always fun. Uh, I’ve definitely seen one of my roommates in the past getting oral sex in the middle of the floor when he thought I was asleep so that’s fun. (laughing)

The narratives given by the group and by Mike,” show that sex is everywhere and men have literally attempted to have sex in just about every room in the house because sex is already considered a public activity. In fact, when a woman sleeps or “shacks” (fraternity lingo) over during rush week, the pledges make breakfast and deliver it to their fraternity brother and his “shacker” in bed. The twenty or so boys who deliver the breakfast also deliver a song, which is as follows:

She was a virgin in her freshman year.
She was a virgin with her conscience clear.
She never smoked or drank or necked or fucked.
She was a virgin with all kinds of fuckin luck.
She met a man from ***, that was the end of her virginity.
They did it once (uh), twice(uh), oh it was so nice!
It was a man from ***.
<***indicates the name of the fraternity, which I am not revealing>

Once the condition is accepted that sex is public business in the house, situations and stories are created at any cost to ensure continuation of the house image.

It is appealing to men to tell their stories or to relay other member’s sexual experiences because as Bauman asserts, they gain a sense of credibility and “competence” (Bauman 1975: 184) when doing so. The commitment to the conditions set forth by the house and the narratives “contribute to the ongoing shaping of the context of social interactions among real individuals”