

Initiating Race:  
Fraternal Organizations, Racial Identity, and Public Discourse in American Culture, 1865-1917

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by

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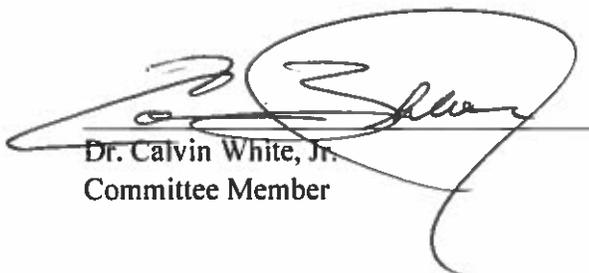
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## **Abstract**

Drawing on ritual books, organizational records, newspaper accounts, and the data available from cemetery headstones and census records, this work argues that adult fraternal organizations were key to the formation of civic discourse in the United States from the years following the Civil War to World War I. It particularly analyzes the role of working-class white and African-American organizations in framing racial identity, arguing that white organizations gave up older, comprehensive ideas of citizenship for understandings of Americanism rooted in racism and nativism. Counterbalancing this development, now-forgotten African-American fraternal organizations were among the earliest advocates of Afrocentrism. These organizations, form a bridge of continuous intellectual and cultural development between the post-Civil War clashes of the first Ku Klux Klan and the African-American Union League and the World War I era emergence of the second Klan and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. While white organizations clung to a cultural and political vision rooted in the traditional, patriarchal family, African-American organizations showed a breadth of responses to modernity, including creating organizations that breeched the gendered public and domestic spheres and allowed women to exercise significant leadership in partnership with male co-fraternalists.

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## Introduction

The history of rise and decline of American fraternalism from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War I is integral to understanding the period's political, social, and cultural history, though it has largely been overlooked by historians of Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era. For as many as thirty million Americans, including a disproportionate number of civic leaders and social agitators, the ritual vocabulary of fraternalism formed their discourse on individual and group identity and of citizenship.<sup>1</sup> While a number of scholars have looked at middle-class white organizations or studied aspects of African-American fraternalism, no comprehensive study of this phenomenon exists. By examining working and lower-middle-class African-American and white organizations, this project shows that these groups were integral to the reformulation of racial identity during this fifty-year period and also contributed significantly to the debate on the limits of American citizenship. New ideas about the "scientific" basis of racism as well as counter arguments about the ancient contributions of Africa to world civilization would find ready venues in fraternal ritual.

As the nineteenth century progressed into the twentieth, older republican and fraternal comprehensive ideals of citizenship and appeals to the bond created by the dignity of labor gave way to an increasingly racialized and militaristic rhetoric that crystallized in the second Ku Klux

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<sup>1</sup>The thirty million figure is an approximation and an indication of how little is known of the scope of fraternalism. While reliable membership figures exist for Freemasons only from 1924, information is scarce or, in the case of most African-American and working-class institution, entirely unavailable beyond the groups' own statements. The common practice of belonging to multiple organizations further clouds the picture. See, Craig Heimlichner and Adam Parfrey, *Ritual America: Secret Brotherhoods and Their Influence on American Society: A Visual Guide* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2012), 1-21.

Klan and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Rather than being sudden reactionary responses to changing economic and political circumstances, both organizations drew their strength from fifty years of evolving but unbroken fraternal rhetoric stretching back to the post Civil War clash of the Union League and the first Ku Klux Klan. Scholars have given various explanations of Garvey's 1922 meeting with Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard Edward Young Clarke, but their meeting becomes comprehensible when the two are viewed as the endpoints of parallel fraternal processes of racialization. This project examines the period between the Reconstruction-Era clash of the first Ku Klux Klan and Union League and the World-War-I era of the second Klan and UNIA to uncover the fraternal organizations that incubated and refined racial ideology in these years. In the intervening period, groups ranging from the white Knights of Pythias to the African-American Supreme Royal Circle of the Friends of the World would be active participants in defining Americans' racial self-understanding.

In the years after the Civil War, the United States suffered from a double identity crisis. Rapid industrialization and the rise of permanent wage work had frayed the credibility of older, republican concepts of citizenship. As Mark Noll has shown, animosity generated by decades of debate over the licitness of slavery had destroyed the religious consensus coming out of the Second Great Awakening and its confidence that common sense readings of the Bible would create a national religious vision.<sup>2</sup> Fraternalism exploded over this fractured landscape, growing from a relatively small number of groups including the Freemasons, Odd Fellows, and a handful

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<sup>2</sup>Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of others before the Civil War to millions of members belonging to hundreds of national fraternal organizations founded in the thirty years that followed it.<sup>3</sup>

Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch has argued convincingly that, before the Civil War, Freemasons and Odd Fellows were already helping to reshape male identity in the South to stress whiteness rather than class in order to mitigate the tensions caused by the market revolution.<sup>4</sup> In the years after the War, there would be tension working and lower-middle-class groups stressing similar themes and those attempting to create worker and farmer identities built around the dignity of labor and ideas of social transformation. In the 1880s and 1890s, this second group of organizations such as the Knights of Labor, the Knights of Honor, and the Woodmen of the World provided a framework that sometimes allowed Americans to bridge race, class, and religion as they debated the boundaries of the public and private spheres. In the same period, working-class African-American groups would drive the earliest instances of mass dissemination of Afro-centrism as a counter offensive against the social Darwinism used to justify disfranchisement and legal segregation.<sup>5</sup> By the outbreak of World War I, increased racial coding in both black and white organizations strengthened African-American organizations' positions as power centers in the ongoing struggle for civil rights. In white organizations, a rising tide of racism and nativism in both newer and older organizations would drown out older calls for workmen's solidarity and prepare the way for the triumph of Jim Crow and the rise of the second

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<sup>3</sup>Alvin J. Schmidt, *Fraternal Organizations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 367-370. This figure drastically under reports African-American organizations and does not include a number of trade-based organizations such as the Knights of Labor.

<sup>4</sup>Ami Pflugard-Jackisch, *Brothers of a Vow: Secret Fraternal Orders and the Transformation of White Male Culture in Antebellum Virginia* (Athens, GA: University Of Georgia Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>John Treat, "Ham-Amun and Cush-Osiris as Guardians of the Ark: Ethiopia, Egypt, and Israel in the Ritual Work of Moses Dickson," European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, Riga, Latvia, April 2015.

Klan. Both groups of organizations would add new paramilitary units complete with elaborate uniforms and drills for public parade in which black and white manhood and discipline were put on display as a statement of solidarity and, sometimes, menace.

To understand the fraternal model's ability to redefine the way individuals and groups conceived of themselves and others, one must understand the psychological power of fraternal rituals. Scholars of religious studies, anthropology, musicology, and neurobiology have all examined this phenomenon in a literature generally overlooked by historians. The shared experience of initiates, described by anthropologist Victor Turner in his concept of the liminal state, and the behavioral effects of spoken and musical repetition and rhythmic movement, documented by neurobiologists, coalesce in fraternal organizations to produce changed patterns of thinking. While economic and sectional interests are of foremost importance for understanding the period, to understand the political identities people crafted and the choices they made, one must understand the hold of the fraternal system on millions of Americans and its rituals' ability to define ideas such as "brotherhood," "citizenship," and the "Americanism," in ways that no stump speech or party platform could compete with, but which the skilled politician knew how to appeal to. While many fraternalists, particularly white male organizations, touted the apolitical nature of their organizations, the coding that took place in secret society rituals set many of the parameters of political discourse.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, 2nd ed., Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 2 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 326–39; Ian Cross, "Music and Social Being," *Musicology Australia* 28 (2006): 114–26; Aniruddh D. Patel, "Music as a Transformative Technology of the Mind" (Music: Its Evolution, Cognitive Basis, and Spiritual Dimensions, Wolfson College, Cambridge University, September 19, 2008), [http://www.nsi.edu/~ani/Patel\\_2008\\_Templeton\\_Essay.pdf](http://www.nsi.edu/~ani/Patel_2008_Templeton_Essay.pdf).

Cultural anthropology has a long-established body of work analyzing the role of ritual in society. The field of religious studies is producing a growing literature of fraternalism, primarily under the aegis of the study of western esotericism. Yet, over the last fifty years, history as a discipline has produced only a thin and contradictory body of work on fraternalism. Political, labor, and economic historians have treated fraternal organizations as nuisances, whose impact must be downplayed, or straightjacketed to fit models of market behavior. Millions of Americans belonged to initiatory organizations as varied as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Templars of Honor and Temperance, the Order of the Eastern Star, and the International Order of Twelve. Yet, this very numeric strength often becomes a reason to discount the importance of fraternal organizations on the grounds of their ubiquity, dismissing them as a Victorian and Edwardian phenomenon that does not signify.

Cultural historians have primarily studied fraternalism through the lens of gender, emphasizing how male organizations supported the gender binaries of the emerging public and private spheres and, more broadly, how middle-class fraternal organizations championed bourgeois values. Only in histories dealing with African-American fraternal groups have fraternal organizations been granted agency in their own right. As of yet, there is no major study of native-born, white, working-class fraternal groups to shed light on how they are similar to and different from more elite white groups and from African-American groups.

Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch's work, cited above, represents a hopeful, but only partial shift in the historical literature. Her 2011 *Brothers of a Vow* follows the arguments made a generation ago by Mark Carnes and Lynn Dunemil that fraternalism was an eminently gendered affair that

helped midwife the world of the separate spheres.<sup>7</sup> Until quite recently, labor historians have been squeamish about the fraternal character of many early unions and craft groups, agreeing with Eric Hobsbawm that fraternalism among the working classes was a case of “misplaced ingenuity”—a waste of energy that could have been directed toward meaningful activism.<sup>8</sup> In the last twenty-five years, social historians have managed to validate the role of fraternal organizations in social change while simultaneously devaluing their fraternal character.

The most important piece of recent scholarship on the role of fraternalism in American history comes from sociologist Theda Skocpol and her fellow contributors to the 2006 *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African-American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality*.<sup>9</sup> Skocpol’s work challenges previous work by cultural historians, who have portrayed fraternal organizations as uncritical supporters of the gendered world of the two spheres. She argues that black organizations patterned on white middle-class organizations (Prince Hall Freemasonry, the Knights of Pythias) did often fall into this category, but those that were founded by African Americans often gave women leadership roles and real power that was not to be found in white organizations. Historian John Giggie, building on the work of Evelyn Higginbotham, has argued that black women resisted fraternalism in partnership with African-American ministers, who felt similarly threatened. Skocpol’s model suggests that Giggie’s

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<sup>7</sup>Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood*, 11.

<sup>9</sup>Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz. *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality*, 1st ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

monolithic conception of fraternalism misses important differences in the roles and power open to women.<sup>10</sup>

This work combines social and cultural history. Theories from the fields of cultural anthropology, religious studies, the emerging field of neurobiology will build a comprehensive argument about the power of initiatory organizations to transform individuals and to create group cohesion. Victor Turner's twinned concepts of liminality and *communitas* offer a starting argument for the ways in which initiations create both new self-understanding and group bonds.<sup>11</sup> Henrik Bogdan's *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, which focuses on Masonic rituals, is a groundbreaking analysis not only of Turner's ideas but also the more recent literature of initiation in the field of religious studies by scholars including Antione Faivre of the Sorbonne and Wouter J. Hanegraaf of the University of Amsterdam. Bogdan contends that "the secret of a Western esoteric ritual of initiation is the experience of undergoing the ritual" rather than any actual secrets the ritual purports to impart and that "[i]t is through an [individual] act of interpretation of the experience . . . that the ritual . . . becomes an initiation in the strict sense of the word."<sup>12</sup>

The work of neurobiologists Ian Cross and Aniruddh Patel validate the ideas of anthropologists and religious studies scholars such as Bogdan. Cross and Patel's research shows that group rhythmic activities create a receptivity and sense of community far more effectively

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<sup>10</sup>John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59-95, 102; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>Victor Turner, "Liminality and *Comunitas*," *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Michael Lambek, ed., 2nd ed., 326-39 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>12</sup>Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, Kindle edition, Suny Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), loc. 653, 660.

than rational discourse alone. Cross labels this phenomenon “entrainment,” and, while he was primarily studying the phenomenon as it relates to music, he sees its implications for other forms of rhythmic, synchronized activity, which characterize fraternal rituals in addition to their explicit, and often extensive, musical components.<sup>13</sup>

Analysis of individual organizations’ rituals forms an important part of this study. Like the complex relationship of the families of biblical manuscripts, these rituals almost entirely spring from the Ur source of Freemasonry, often directly, but also via the rituals of other groups inspired by it. Looking at this process of adaptation reveals key messages that group leaders hoped to send and the values they wished to instill. The differing definitions and uses of terms across the fraternal oeuvre provide important insight into the worldviews individual groups aspired to inculcate or challenge. They also show how these rituals became more racialized and nativist over time.

A key figure underpinning these arguments about the role of these rituals in American society from the Civil War to World War I is Wellesley religious studies professor Steven Marini. Marini has argued that Americans were able to build a protestant theological consensus that transcended individual sects because most protestant denominations shared a body of hymnody, which built a pan-protestant group identity. Fraternal ritual functioned in an equally pervasive and powerful way, giving black and white Americans across the class spectrum a shared political and moral lexicon which could both create unanimity and also provide a basis for

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<sup>13</sup>Aniruddh D. Patel, “Music as a Transformative Technology of the Mind,” *Music: Its Evolution, Cognitive Basis, and Spiritual Dimensions*, Wolfson College, Cambridge University, September 19, 2008; Ian Cross, “Music and Social Being.” *Musicology Australia* 28 (2006): 114–26.

significant dissent by contesting definitions of what rhetorician Richard Weaver labeled “god terms.”<sup>14</sup>

The daily growth of internet repositories such as Archive.org and Google Books make it possible to study fraternal organizations in a way that was not possible for scholars writing even a few years ago. Theda Skocpol and her fellow authors of *What a Mighty Power We Can Be* had to rely on ebay auctions and antique stores to obtain source material.<sup>15</sup> Today, hundreds of rituals, volumes of annual proceedings, and long-out-of-print fraternal histories are available online. These have proven invaluable in shedding light on American fraternalism.

Ritual books, whether obtained online or from archives are at the heart of this project. Their constant use within the group formed their members’ identities and their frequent revision shows in almost real time how various groups responded to changing social and political circumstances. Likewise, the annual proceedings published by national, state, and local organizations can make for dry reading, but provide invaluable insight into group health and shared concerns via their ledger pages, rosters of local lodges, and transcribed speeches of various officials.

An invaluable and unexpected resource has been the fraternal regalia catalogs printed in the period and the magic lantern slide sets used to teach new initiates the meaning of the ritual they had passed through. This window into material and visual culture allows the researcher to see the different paraphernalia used by different groups and classes as well as documenting their ideas about religion and race in illustrations of costumes and background scenes. Extensive

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen A. Marini, “Hymnody and the Development of American Evangelicalism,” in *Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: Hymnody in the History of North American Protestantism*, ed. Edith Waldvogel Blumhofer and Mark A Noll, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 2004); Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics Of Rhetoric* (Literary Licensing, LLC, 2011), 211–14.

<sup>15</sup>Skocpol, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be*, xi-xiii.

catalog sections for magic lanterns and special effects machines show that, while most of the groups studied claimed their authority from imagined golden ages of the past, they were avid consumers and popularizers of the latest technologies, hinting at the tension they attempted to balance between purportedly timeless values and the contemporary imperative to champion progress qua progress.

For white working-class groups and for African-American groups along the class spectrum, newspaper articles remain an invaluable source for groups whose records have long been lost. As Google Books and Archive.org have drastically changed the availability of bound volumes available to scholars, newspaper databases such as Gale's Nineteenth-Century U.S. Newspapers, African-American Newspapers 1827-1998, Newspapers.com, and the Library of Congress's Chronicling America have yielded hundreds of articles linking individuals to fraternal organizations where no other records exist.

This work consists of seven chapters, which assess the scholarly literature, argue for the importance of fraternal ritual in conveying ideas and concepts, and examine how white and African-American groups used ritual to instill messages about race and values. Chapter One examines the specific contributions of recent historians to the literature of fraternalism and challenges the pervasive opinion that fraternal organizations were more odd cultural artifacts than powerful contributors to political, social and cultural history. Chapter Two draws on work in anthropology, neurobiology, and religious studies to argue that the fraternal initiatory model provided a uniquely powerful way to transform the individual's self-concept, create group identity, and to define important political and moral terms. Chapter Three traces the development of working-class white fraternal organizations and how ideas of shared class identity were increasingly replaced by a stress on racial identity, eventually becoming explicitly nativist and

racist organizations by World War I. Chapter Four argues that African-American fraternal groups that have been largely forgotten today were integral to creating grassroots African-American leaders and to instilling positive racial identity in ways that have been overlooked and which contextualize the later popularity of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Chapter Five examines the African-American International Order of Twelve (IOOT) on the ground in Kansas, providing an in-depth case study of an African-American organization's growth and decline over a sixty-year period. Chapter Six focuses on class and gender dynamics in the IOOT with a case study of its Arkansas members. Chapter Seven looks at Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, both recovering the importance of its essentially fraternal character and showing how earlier African-American fraternal organizations had prepared the intellectual and organizational ground for its rapid growth.

What follows is by no means comprehensive. Only a handful of African-American and white organizations are studied, but those organizations and the lives of their members show that fraternalism is an integral part of America's racial and civic history during the fifty years following the Civil War. Names like Moses Dickson and Richard Williams need to be added to conversations about the history of black agency and separatism in that have long revolved around the familiar names of Henry McNeal Turner, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey. Discussions of why America's white working class failed to develop a worker identity need to expand to include the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, the Knights of Pythias, and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, which kept producerist rhetoric alive long after it ceased to be a political possibility and which were key sites for the creation of the idea of whiteness. This is an illustrative beginning of those conversations.