Critiquing the Reinforcement of the White Racial Frame in Greek Fraternities

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The world that we live in is harmfully structured by a white racial frame that has been reinforced through a history of discriminatory violence. The ramifications of the white racial frame can appear covertly through examples that are deemed “micro”aggressions or unconscious bias but are also overt in cases such as police brutality and hate crimes that can have fatal consequences, as exemplified in Gregory Johnson Jr.’s case at San Jose State University. While there is controversy about whether Johnson’s death was a result of a suicide or murder, there is clear evidence of the detrimental effects of the white racial frame that shape his story. Strategies such as preserving the white space and weaponizing white innocence and colorblindness reproduce and protect white supremacy while concurrently tormenting those who do not fit within the confinements of the white racial frame.

In 2008, Gregory Johnson Jr., a student at San Jose State University (SJSU) and the only Black member living in the Sigma Chi Fraternity house at the time, was found dead hanging in the basement. His fraternity brothers claim that Johnson committed suicide by hanging, but inconsistencies in the story have led Johnson’s parents and other skeptics to believe that the fraternity is attempting to cover up their son’s murder. According to the fraternity brother who found his body, Johnson, who was 6’2”, was hanging from the 5’10” ceiling, making it nearly impossible for him to hang himself. Johnson’s parents were also told that he was hanging for over an hour, but his parents noted that there were no marks on his neck in which the electrical
cord used should have been deeply embedded. Not only were there red flags based on the incident of the hanging but also in the police procedure in contacting Johnson’s family. The crime scene was completely cleaned and disinfected by the time Johnson’s parents could make it to the scene, and they were denied seeing their son’s body until more than a week later because the police said that the fraternity brothers had already identified the body. The fraternity members also denied that a cell phone found at the scene belonged to Johnson, which they later admitted was his when identified by his sister-in-law. By the time his phone was recovered, his family found that all of his photos had been deleted. Despite these caveats in the case, along with the fact that there was no suicide note, Johnson had no sign of mental illness, and he was even in the midst of planning his 21st birthday trip to Las Vegas, the coroner and police department ruled Johnson’s death a suicide.

The fact that Gregory Johnson Jr. was the only Black member of Sigma Chi at SJSU cannot be ignored in understanding the fatal effects that arise in preserving the white space. Fraternities have a long racist history of excluding anyone who is not a white man, and Sigma Chi is no stranger to that. In 1965, Sigma Chi’s national organization suspended Stanford University’s chapter after they caught wind that the chapter encouraged a Black student to rush (Higdon). This preservation of keeping spaces white is essential in maintaining a white settler racial frame. Despite the United States being forcefully occupied land, white settlers have created a sense of self-determined ownership that must be preserved by deterring outsiders. Anderson describes this preservation through his description of the “normative sensibilities” in maintaining the white space “in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present” (10). Therefore, a Black student in a fraternity (one of the greatest examples of white space) is an invasion or a threat worthy of termination. Unlike the Stanford chapter, Sigma Chi
could not prevent Johnson from entering the white space, and as a result, he was a victim of the fraternity’s exertion to “put the black person “back in his place’” (Anderson 14). The way in which Johnson’s body was found, hanging from his neck, should not go unnoticed. Lynching is a horrid historical act that has not only been used to end someone’s life but also to make a bold, public statement in the name of white supremacy. Sigma Chi’s lynching of Johnson, for simply “exist[ing] “while black’” (Anderson 12) is a heartbreaking example of the effects of the white racial frame.

The harm done unto Johnson and his family was not only in the act of Johnson’s death, but in the response to the aftermath. After the authorities concluded that Johnson’s death was a suicide, Johnson’s parents and others skeptical of the decision called out Sigma Chi for murdering their fraternity brother and called for a reinvestigation. This resulted in several pages calling for action, such as the website Justice for Gregory Johnson Jr., the Instagram page justiceforgregoryjohnson, and donation pages on change.org and GoFundMe. In response to this activism, members of SJSU’s Sigma Chi chapter created a website called Peace for Gregory Johnson, Jr - Truth & Justice. The front page of the site showcases “An open statement from friends of Jr” which passive-aggressively describes how his passing was traumatic not just for his family, but the Greek life community, and goes on to defend the fraternity. They say, “despite misleading and inaccurate allegations … levied against us in a negative way,” they still offer their “sympathies and prayers” to the Johnson family. They are operating under the guise that they are trying to create “peace” for Johnson, but in reality, the only thing they care about is how his death threatens their reputation. The statement is an act of weaponizing white ignorance and innocence. One of the last lines of the statement reads, “We love Junior…and not only are those who knew him best still scarred from the events 12 years ago…but now people without direct
information or evidence are harassing and purposely causing harm to them, their families, and careers” (Peace for Gregory Johnson Jr). Even while someone whose life is lost forever and whose family will always hold that burden, the members of Sigma Chi are framing themselves as the victim. White innocence has been a consistent strategy of the white racial frame in avoiding accountability, as described in Racist America: “Numerous writers, journalists, and politicians have written accounts of U.S. history designed to preserve the white sense of innocence and of inculpability for the genocide, slavery, and segregation so central to that history” (Feagin and Ducey 92). Sigma Chi fails to even acknowledge its complacency in asserting white supremacy through Greek life’s racist history. Fraternities were created and still exist to reinforce white elitism and exclusion of people of color. However, this history is lost on Sigma Chi as they swiftly turn down the allegations of Johnson’s murder and the racist foundation that the fraternity stands on.

This idea of escaping accountability is furthered by the weaponizing of colorblindness to deny the racist intentions associated with Johnson’s murder. Following the open statement on the Peace for Gregory Johnson Jr. website, Sigma Chi includes a graph showcasing the makeup of Sigma Chi - 2008 Chapter Ethnicities

![Sigma Chi - 2008 Chapter Ethnicities](https://peaceforgregoryjohnsonjr)

Fig. 1. Peace for Gregory Johnson, Jr. - Truth & Justice, https://peaceforgregoryjohnsonjr.
the 2008 chapter with no description or caption entailing the purpose for why it is presented (Figure 1). It can be assumed that the members included this graph to showcase the “diversity” of the chapter and implies that because of this diversity, the accusations of a racist attack have no grounds. However, even students at the University of Puget Sound in 1965 describe how Greek fraternities “strik[ing] out a clause of an organizational charter” to allow for integration is simply not enough to end discrimination (Puget Sound Trail). White people who are complicit in the white racial frame utilize colorblindness to avoid admitting that racism is still dominant and harmful. As the Sigma Chi chapter simply lets students of color in, they believe that they are pardoned from being racist and, therefore, do not deserve the backlash when someone calls them out for their white supremacist values. This is exemplified in a Tweet that was reposted on the JusticeForGregoryJohnsonJr Instagram page that describes how white men fail to take accountability for their complacency within the white racial frame (Figure 2). The man in the original Tweet is complaining about the ongoing criticism of white men who are complicit in

Fig. 2. (justiceforgregoryjohnson) “Sigma Chi Twitter response” Instagram, 30 September 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CUdTwV3P2Jl/.
the harms of the white heteropatriarchy. However, as he sarcastically exclaims that they “GET THE MESSAGE,” he showcases how obviously he does not. People like Gregory Johnson Jr. lose their lives for simply existing while Black but white men cannot stand to hear that their complacency in their privilege causes real harm. Jane Hill’s description of white innocence and colorblindness describes the “lack of white empathy for those racially oppressed” because they think of themselves as a “good and normal mainstream sort of White person” that “operates out of the often arrogant pro-white center of the white racial frame” (Feagin and Ducey 89). As exemplified by the response to Johnson’s death, weaponized white innocence and colorblindness allow white people to persist in the white racial frame without acknowledging how systemic and historical racism continue to play a part in our everyday lives and the justice that one has the opportunity to receive.

While this paper takes Gregory Johnson Jr.’s case into the perspective of the white racial frame, it is distinctly important to recognize the life that was lost at the hands of white supremacy. Up against the Sigma Chi fraternity, it is heartbreaking that this is one of many examples in which a deeply rooted white supremacist institution evades responsibility for taking the life of a Black man and traumatizing his family and community forever. In recognizing the harmful tools used to carry out and reproduce the white racial frame, such as preserving white spaces and weaponizing white innocence and colorblindness, we can better understand and work to prevent the harm that is generated through these strategies. The loss of Gregory Johnson Jr.’s life is not an isolated incident, and we must actively resist the white racial frame to protect those who fall victim to its torment.
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