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# Money, museums, and memory: cultural patronage by black voluntary associations

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## ABSTRACT




While the middle- and upper-class is typically cast as using museum patronage to support narratives that reinforce the position of dominant racial groups, this paper presents an alternative perspective. Drawing on ethnographic and archival data, I conceptually and empirically elaborate how gifts by black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations to African American museums are enabled by racial uplift ideology and directed at nurturing counter-narratives about African Americans. As *patrons of memory* they aim to reconstitute recollections of African Americans by challenging master narratives of national life where they are either absent or marginalized. Gifts to black museums also support the inclusion of their own organizations and members as protagonists in this counter-memory. By turning attention to cultural patronage among black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations, this paper demonstrates how museum patronage among elites can unsettle, rather than reinforce, master racial narratives.

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**KEYWORDS** Black middle-class; collective memory; black voluntary associations; racial uplift; museum patronage; counter-narratives

## Introduction

On 22 February 2014 The Links Foundation, Inc. donated \$1,000,000 to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, D.C. To commemorate the occasion, leaders from the social and service organization posed for photos with museum director Lonnie Bunch holding a giant replica of the check. This was not the only large gift given by a black middle- and upper-class voluntary organization to the museum's capital campaign. Organizations such as Alpha Phi Alpha, Fraternity, Inc. and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. also gave in the million dollar category. By the time the museum opened in September 2016 all members of "The Divine Nine", the historically black Greek-letter

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organizations, had pledged significant amounts (Figure 1). These organizations' gifts to the NMAAHC are not without precedent. There is a broader pattern of African American museum patronage by black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations. For example, The Links, Inc. also gave a one million dollar donation to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, TN and Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity donated \$100,000 to the National Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>1</sup>

While donations to the NMAAHC are part of a larger patronage tradition among black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations, they are distinct among elite voluntary organizations at large. It is only black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations that gave big to the NMAAHC. No major donations were given to the museum by historically white elite voluntary associations or exclusive voluntary organizations historically rooted in other racial and ethnic minority communities.<sup>2</sup> How do we explain this distinct pattern of museum patronage among black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations? This paper sheds light on the meanings and motivations underlying African American museum patronage by black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations with a particular focus on the NMAAHC.

Bringing together scholarship on middle- and upper-class blacks and the literature on narratives and counter-narratives, I elaborate how their gifts are enabled by racial uplift ideology and directed at reconstructing historical narratives about African Americans. As what I term *patrons of memory* they aim to reconstitute recollections of African Americans by challenging dominant narratives of national life where they are either absent or marginalized. More specifically, by giving to black museums these organizations support an *advancement narrative* which places African Americans as central agents in

	\$1,000,000 to \$1,999,999	\$500,000 to \$999,999	\$250,000 to \$499,999	\$100,000 to \$249,999
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.		x		
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.	x			
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.			x	
Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.				x
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.		x		
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.	x			
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.		x		
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.				x
Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity/ Boulé Foundation				
The Links, Inc.	x			
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.			x	

**Figure 1.** Six- and seven-figure donations to the NMAAHC by black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations.

Note: Author's analysis of the NMAAHC donor lists.

their own emancipation and as critical figures in the broader national project of democracy and equality. Gifts to the NMAAHC also support the inclusion of their own organizations and members as protagonists in this counter-memory.

This analysis advances scholarship on museum patronage and race. Typically, the middle- and upper-class are cast as using museum patronage to nurture majoritarian stories that reinforce the dominant position of whites (Blackwood and Purcell 2014). By describing the efforts of these associations to inscribe a black counter-memory, this paper complicates the common view that museum patronage reproduces the racial status quo. This paper also contributes to the scholarship on the black middle- and upper-class. While there is growing research on how racial uplift ideology informs black middle- and upper-class social action (Banks 2010; Fleming and Roses 2007; Gaines 1996; Pattillo 2007), collective memory is not systematically examined in this scholarship. This paper not only contributes to the literature on middle- and upper-class blacks by elaborating how memory patronage serves as an anti-racism strategy of this group, but it also affirms other scholarship noting how their efforts to gain cultural membership are at times middle- and upper-class-centric (Lamont and Fleming 2005; Pattillo 2007).

## **Theory and literature**

### ***Narratives, museums, and patronage***

While it is commonly thought that the historical narratives presented in museums are purely objective chronicles of what happened in the past, scholars of collective memory remind us that they are in fact subjective accounts. What we collectively remember is selective. We emphasize some elements of the past and downplay others (Alexander 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Remembering and forgetting is aligned with present needs so that we accentuate some people and events while minimizing others based on their ability to help us cope with present conditions. In this vein, one use of collective memory is to rationalize the position of dominant groups. Scholars of race and narratives specifically elaborate how master or majoritarian stories explain and legitimate the dominant position of whites (Delgado 1989; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Museums are among the primary institutions that produce, reproduce, and disseminate narratives that define racial groups and justify their positions vis a vis one another (Lidchi 1997; Scott 2008).<sup>3</sup> For example, in the United States mainstream history museums have centred whites in retelling the past and at times erased or trivialized the contributions of African Americans (Seymour 2015).

One factor contributing to museums producing and reproducing master racial narratives is patronage. Museums rely on patronage for their existence. Yet, like patrons of other types of cultural institutions, museum patrons are selective about the types of culture that they support (Accominotti, Khan, and Storer 2018; Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper 1991; DiMaggio 1982a; Ostrower 2002). Museum patrons seek to further their particularistic interests through supporting specific types of culture (Alexander 1996). For example, research on race and museums asserts that mainstream museums in the United States have emphasized master racial narratives partly because these are the stories that reinforce the dominant position of wealthy white patrons who support them (Blackwood and Purcell 2014). While this scholarship elaborates how museum patronage is a driver of racial reproduction through supporting master racial narratives, we still have little understanding of how museum patronage can disrupt majoritarian stories about race. By turning attention to black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations, the potential for museum patronage to unsettle master racial narratives is given light.

### ***Counter-narratives, museums, and patronage***

While one use of collective memory is to rationalize the position of dominant groups, non-dominant groups create counter-narratives that challenge their marginalized position. Scholars of race and collective memory describe how racial and ethnic minorities, such as African Americans, create counter-memories to challenge racial inequality (Autry 2017; Delgado 1989; Eyerman 2002; Pelak 2015; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). For example, scholars in the burgeoning field of “Negro history” laboured to produce scholarship that challenged negative black stereotypes (Autry 2017). This “vindicationist” narrative emphasized achievements by African Americans across a range of endeavours. The black museum movement in the 1960s and 1970s also brought increasing institutionalization of black counter-memory (Autry 2017; Burns 2013). Black activist founders aimed to construct a historical narrative that would challenge the marginal position of the race. In their view, an achievement focused history would help to catalyze social action to redress racial inequality. This was a narrative that was sorely absent from the nation’s majority museums. While African American museums may institutionalize black counter-memories, they can’t exist to embody these narratives unless they receive funding from patrons. I argue that middle- and upper-class black voluntary organizations are one group of patrons who see fit to invest in the black historical narratives that they construct. More specifically, I suggest that racial uplift ideology motivates these organizations to support black counter-narratives at African American Museums. To better understand how racial uplift ideology underlies these groups’

museum patronage, it is useful to turn to the scholarship on black middle-class voluntary associations.

### ***Uplifting the race***

Within the United States, middle- and upper-class social life is organized around voluntary associations (Baltzell 1958). Historically, these organizations not only shut out the working class and poor, but they also refused admittance to blacks of all class levels. In reaction to this racial block, middle- and upper-class African Americans formed parallel organizations for the fellowship of men, women, and children (Drake and Cayton 1945; Frazier [1957] 1997; Graham 1999). A comprehensive associational life came to define membership in the black upper crust so that any one family might be associated with several organizations. While these organizations mirrored their white counterparts in not opening up the door to the working class and poor for membership, their values were not altogether the same. As members of a racially marginalized group whose fates were tied to their less socioeconomically fortunate brethren, they had an interest in concerning themselves with the broader welfare of the race. As sociologist Mary Pattillo writes “[m]iddle class-blacks’ sense of collective fate translates into action” (2007, 101).

Across their history, black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations have engaged in behaviour that is directed by racial uplift ideology. Arguably best captured by W.E.B. Du Bois’ ([1903] 1996) treatise on “The Talented Tenth”, racial uplift ideology implores privileged blacks to use their talents, time, and treasures to advance the race. Indeed, it dictates that to not do so is to abdicate one’s responsibility as a privileged member of the group. At times embraced full force, and at other times more hesitantly, racial leadership came to be a defining ethos of black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations (Hughey and Parks 2011). For example, racial uplift ideology directed their involvement in civil rights efforts in the 1950s and 1960s (Gasman 2001). The ethos of racial uplift has also influenced black middle- and upper-class action in the cultural sphere.

In their research on the cultural patronage of the League of Women for Community Service (LWCS), an elite black women’s organization, Crystal M. Fleming and Lorraine E. Roses (2007) describe how the art world in early twentieth century Boston was transformed by their activities. Embracing ideals of cultural leadership that were grounded in race and class, the LWCS laboured to create an integrated audience for black artists. Through efforts such as staging exhibitions for black artists in the Boston Public Library and creating a lending library featuring the work of black authors, the LWCS aimed to expand the audience for black cultural production. Yet, as Fleming and Roses (2007) conclude, while racial leadership partly directed their patronage and contributed to black cultural

advancement, their actions may have also reinforced intraclass boundaries among African Americans. By centring black artists grounded within the tradition of high culture, such as classically-trained musicians and European-trained visual artists, the LWCS potentially alienated blacks outside of their middle- and upper-class circle.

### **Patrons of memory**

I further elaborate how the racial uplift ethos informs the cultural patronage of middle- and upper-class black voluntary associations by focusing on contemporary organizations and by analyzing collective memory, or shared recollections about the past. Through supporting black museums they aim to nurture counter-narratives of African American life. One counter-memory that they are inclined towards is what I term an *advancement narrative*. This advancement narrative not only situates African Americans as confronting and overcoming racial inequities, but it positions them as being agents of their own freedom. Rather than being passive victims whose emancipation depends entirely on benevolent whites, this narrative situates blacks as central architects of their own liberation struggle and the nation's broader realization of democratic principles.<sup>4</sup>

With a desire to support this counter-memory, the patronage of middle- and upper-class black voluntary associations is directed at redefining the past of blacks as a whole. However, there is also a class dimension to the advancement narrative that they seek to institutionalize. While black-middle and upper-class voluntary associations aim to nurture an equality narrative that champions black agents, they also aspire to ensure that they and their individual members take their rightful place in this narrative. In this way, they are patrons of a racial counter-memory that operates at two levels. At the most basic level is inscribing blacks into the nation's democratic story and establishing them as exemplars of succeeding against the odds. At the second level is ensuring that the roles of their organizations and members are not forgotten or given short shrift in this narrative of overcoming.

### **Methods**

This analysis draws on ethnographic and archival data from a larger study on philanthropy at African American museums. To understand the meanings and motivations underlying philanthropy at African American museums, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with supporters of African American museum in eleven cities, talked with museum staff and other stakeholders, carried out participant observation at museum events, visited museum archives, and collected other original data on these institutions. Most participants were identified through public lists of African American

museum supporters, while others were identified through snowball sampling. Interviews typically lasted around 90 min and were content-analyzed using inductively identified codes. While this study was not originally designed to cast light on giving by black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations, several patrons who I met with are members of these organizations and we discussed them during the course of their interviews. I also encountered patronage by these organizations in the course of participant observation at museum events and collecting archival documents on fundraising at African American museums. This corpus of data includes two parts. One segment is confidential. The other part is drawn from public sources and reveals the identities of individuals, museums, and voluntary associations. The latter includes data such as fundraising documents on the NMAAHC from the Smithsonian archives, notes from a session with the NMAAHC fundraising team at the 2017 Association of African American Museums meeting, and ethnographic notes from the Grand Opening of the NMAAHC and photographs from other visits there. This paper draws on data from both the confidential and non-confidential portions of this trove of data.

This paper also draws on data specifically collected for the purpose of understanding museum patronage by black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations. Included are all Greek-letter organizations in the National Pan-Hellenic Council,<sup>5</sup> as well as Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity and the Links, Inc. I draw on public texts from these voluntary organizations, such as press releases and newsletters from online archives, media and social media videos and texts where African American museum patronage is discussed, as well as informal conversations with members. Data collection took place over the course of nearly a decade with a concentration in three periods: 2008, 2012, and 2016.<sup>6,7</sup>

### **Advancement narrative**

When Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. announced their million dollar gift to the NMAAHC, Mark S. Tillman, the organization's president, described the significance of the donation. "Our history matters", he remarked (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc 2016).

African American stories, art, and culture are the heart and soul of American history . . . . Alpha men are proud to support this museum, helping to bring our collective voices to a history that has largely worked to silence us. We look forward to seeing our struggle documented in meaningful and enriching ways culminating in a powerful experience for everyone who visits this institution of historical struggle and progress.

Tillman's comments emphasizing how the Alpha's gift would help to publicly commemorate the African American experience of challenge and triumph are echoed by Robert L. Harris, the fraternity's national historian. "You cannot



understand American history if you do not understand African-American history”, he says about the gift (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc 2016):

This [the original efforts to establish a national black museum] is an idea that started with black civil war veterans who wanted people to understand the contributions that blacks have made to building this country. To see it finally become real is awe-inspiring.

Harris also wrote about the gift for a special publication documenting the fraternity’s commitment to “Advocacy and Action”. He concludes his essay noting the million dollar donation to the NMAAHC. “The NMAAHC vividly tells the story of African Americans in the United States and their centrality to the American story”, he writes (Harris 2017, 32). Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity also highlighted the NMAAHC in one of their publications. In a cover story on the museum in *The Boulé Journal*, George Strait, a member from the Pacific Region describes the themes of the museum. It is not about “victimization” he notes in the introduction (Strait 2016, 6):

First, what the museum is not: It is not encyclopedic. It is not a black America hall of fame, and not every famous African American is mentioned or displayed. The museum is not angry, although some of what is displayed may make the viewer angry. Victimization is not a theme, although many victims are featured. So what is it? This is a museum that celebrates America through an African American lens. It shows some and teaches others how African Americans have been and continue to be a vital thread binding together the American fabric.

Margot James Copeland, the national president of the Links Foundation and the Links, Inc. also underlines how their gift to the NMAAHC will help to present to a wider public a story of black agency and progress (The Links, Incorporated 2014a):

We are thrilled to contribute to the National Museum of African American History and Culture . . . . This museum will allow our rich African-American story to be told and displayed for all to see. The contributions of our people, from the past and present, will be showcased, and will provide hope and inspiration to continue building on our great legacy.

When the organization gave one million dollars to the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) in Memphis, Tennessee, Gwendolyn Lee, then the national president, also highlighted how the gift would play the role of institutionalizing a public narrative of African Americans as central figures in American democracy. “We are pleased to announce that this grant will preserve the legacy of a people and a movement that defined social action and social change across this nation”, she comments (The Links, Incorporated 2006):

With the deaths of Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks, women who were stalwarts in the Civil Rights Movement, it is the right moment in time for The Links, Incorporated to take this historic step in capturing the contributions

of those who paved the way for social and economic justice for African Americans.

In describing the significance of their gifts leaders from these organizations not only highlight how their donations will nurture a black advancement narrative, but also how they are part of their broader traditions of uplift. The Links, Inc. made the final instalment of the payment to the NCRM during Copeland's presidency. In her comments about the donation she describes the "dedication" and "duty" that the organization has to African Americans. "This contribution is significant, for it symbolizes that The Links are dedicated to educating our youth and our community about the importance of preserving civil and social rights progress in this country", she says (The Links, Incorporated 2014b).

As an organization devoted to enriching, sustaining and ensuring the cultural and economic survival of African Americans, it is our solemn duty to honor those who paved the way for social and economic justice for African Americans. Our success as a people, and as a nation, rests on the shoulders of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, Dr. Dorothy Height and the legion of others who forged down roads they were told they couldn't travel.

The gift was also contextualized as part of a deeper commitment to racial uplift by the organization. A press release for the donation notes that it was only one among others with an aim "to assist a host of service organizations" including a series of \$1 million grants to The United Negro College Fund and The NAACP Legal Defense Fund (The Links, Incorporated 2006).

Leadership in Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity pinpointed how their gift to the NMAAHC also grew out of the broader philanthropic commitment of its members. The donation is highlighted in an annual report for the organization's foundation. Writing about the gift, Anthony W. Hall, Jr., Chair of the Foundation's board of trustee, reminds members that, "When the museum opens on the National Mall in 2016, you can reflect on this combined \$1 million commitment by our great fraternity and be able to say, 'I helped to build this place'" (Hall 2014). Irving J. Matthews, a member who was a recipient of the Robert V. Franklin Legacy Award for being a major donor to the Sigma Pi Phi foundation, also punctuates how support of the museum is part of the uplift tradition of the organization (Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity 2014):

I support the foundation because I've been truly blessed and feel that I have an obligation to share those blessings. Secondly, the foundation's objectives, relative to young black males and the special projects it supports such as the Haitian Earthquake Relief Campaign and The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, are consistent with my objectives. Finally, supporting the Boulé Foundation is an opportunity for us to do something for our people versus waiting for others to fill the void.

Tillman, Alpha Phi Alpha's president, also punctuates how the organization's gift was part of a broader concern with serving the African American community. In the group's "Tillman Quadrennial Report" he lists "initiatives" that were committed to at the beginning of his presidency along with "accomplishments" in those areas. The NMAAHC donation is listed as an accomplishment for the initiative to "Re-energize our membership to commit to service". The NMAAHC gift is listed alongside other uplift efforts such as releasing "Official fraternity statements on national and world events (e.g. the tragedy of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, police shootings in Louisiana and Minnesota, the riots in Baltimore, Flint Water Crisis) ... ". and facilitating "[V]irtual 'town hall' meetings with membership to highlight specific updates and actions on issues such as the Michael Brown grand jury decision, the Baltimore riots, and the Flint Water Crisis" (Tillman 2016, 25).

To summarize, one motivation underlying the gifts of black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations to African American museums like the NMAAHC is to publicly present a narrative of African Americans as exemplars of American ideals of democracy and equality. This commitment to rewriting the African American story is enabled by a racial uplift ethos that also directs social action in others areas of black life.

### **Black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations as protagonists**

At base the patronage of black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations to re-construct the African American narrative is a practice directed towards uplifting the race as a whole. However, there is also a concern with highlighting the role of their organizations and members in this advancement narrative.

Like some other black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations who gave to the NMAAHC, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. put out a fundraising appeal to gather contributions from members. They created a webpage describing the significance of the museum and a special pdf "NMAAHC Pledge Card" that members could fill out and send to the fraternity's national headquarters. Using this strategy the fraternity made a six-figure gift to the museum. The appeal to members emphasizes that a donation to the NMAAHC is a worthwhile cause not only because the fraternity's founder once worked at the Smithsonian, but also because brothers from the fraternity will be featured in exhibitions (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Incorporated n.d):

Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Incorporated will make history as a Major Gifts Donor of The Smithsonian Institution's historic National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC). The fraternity's groundbreaking contribution is expected to take place over the next five years. We're asking all Sigma Men to join us in this worthy cause by making a financial contribution to assist with

the fraternity's overall gift . . . . Our illustrious Visionary and Founder, the Honorable Abram Langston Taylor was one of the earliest African American employees of the The Smithsonian Institution. The roster of Sigma Men who will be on display include George Washington Carver, A. Philip Randolph, Dr. Alain LeRoy Locke, James Weldon Johnson, John E. Lewis, Huey P. Newton, Harry Belafonte and more. As Phi Beta Sigma continues its celebration of over 100 years of Culture for Service and Service for Humanity, it is only befitting that our history be forever exhibited amongst those persons and institutions who have helped to build America.

To reinforce the message that members of the fraternity will be highlighted in the museum, the appeal relies not only on text, but also visual imagery. At the top left of the appeal is an image of the NMAAHC's facade. At its right are the fraternity seal and the Smithsonian logo along with photos of Lewis, Newton, and Weldon Johnson. A NMAAHC fact sheet for Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.'s donation also underscores that sorority members will be featured in the museum. Under photos of noted sorority sisters Zora Neale Hurston, Esther Rolle, and Dionne Warwick, it notes the specific opening exhibitions where they will be featured (NMAAHC 2014):

Prominent Zetas pictured above from left to right: Zora Neale Hurston, Author, will be represented within the Cultural Expressions inaugural exhibition; Esther Rolle, Actress, will be represented within the Taking the Stage inaugural exhibition; Dionne Warwick, Singer, will be represented within the Musical Crossroads inaugural exhibition.

It is not just the highlighting of individual members in the NMAAHC that was meaningful to members of black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations, but also that the organizations themselves would be featured in the museum. As I walked through the museum on opening day, I paused at the familiar sight of Black Greek "paraphernalia" in an exhibition case on "The Divine Nine" (Figure 2). Across the aisle was an exhibition case featuring artifacts from Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity and the Links, Inc. These artifacts were part of the larger exhibition "Making a Way out of No Way". As the title for the exhibition suggests this exhibition features stories of how African Americans succeeded in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. "In this exhibition, themed stories show how African Americans crafted possibilities in a world that denied them opportunities", the exhibition summary notes (NMAAHC n.d):

Taking its inspiration from a popular African American expression, Making a Way Out of No Way explores themes of agency, creativity, and resilience through personal stories of African Americans who challenged racial oppression and discrimination and created ways out of 'no way'.

The significance of the NMAAHC featuring artifacts from their organizations did not go unnoticed by the membership of black middle- and upper-class



**Figure 2.** The Divine Nine exhibition case at the NMAAHC © [Patricia A. Banks].

voluntary associations. In 2013, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. held the 50th anniversary of their founding in Washington, D.C. As part of the celebration they opened a “fraternal museum” highlighting their history. In the fraternity’s museum a wooden paddle hangs on a wall flanked by framed documents and two panels of Kente cloth. The fraternity’s Greek letters are embossed in black ink on the paddle along with names of the founders and their motto, “Building a Tradition Not Resting Upon One”. Not only did the fraternity give a substantial financial gift to the NMAAHC, but some of the artifacts in the fraternal museum were donated there. A write-up of the gift in the fraternity’s newsletter points out that the artifacts will be in a special display at the NMAAHC: “The items will remain on display as the museum has dedicated an area for the National Pan Hellenic Council as Greek letter organizations and its leadership ha[ve] been a significant part of the black history” (Clark and Gilbert n.d, 34). In one of my visits to the NMAAHC, I noticed an Iota paddle hanging in the “Divine Nine” exhibition case.

Other organizations that made large financial donations to the NMAAHC also emphasized the significance of their histories being featured in the museum. For example, an Alpha Phi Alpha press release about their gift points out that the museum “will also include exhibits on Black Greek Lettered Organizations such as Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and its members” (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc 2016). The Tillman report noting that the gift marks an accomplishment for the fraternity’s “service” initiative also specifically

mentions artifacts given to the museum: “Became a ‘Founding Donor’ with a \$1,000,000 contribution to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, including donating the passcards [dues cards] of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thurgood Marshall as artifacts” (Tillman 2016). The dues cards of Alpha members King and Marshall are now exhibited in the same NMAAHC display case as the lota paddle.

A Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. annual report similarly makes note that the NMAAHC will feature their organization (Battles 2016):

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity raised \$722,000 toward the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The Fraternity will be recognized on the Major Contributor Wall once the museum opens to the public on September 24, 2016. Kappa artifacts will be displayed in an exhibit at the museum.

A story on the NMAAHC opening in the Delta Sigma Theta, Sorority, Inc. newsletter emphasizes how artifacts from the organization are featured in the museum as well (Stallings 2017, 2):

The Sorority donated nearly half a million dollars and several artifacts for the museum’s History/Culture collection. Artifacts gifted include: a Delta pin; gavel and sounding block; poster of the 22 Founders; and the book ‘Shaped to Its Purpose: Delta Sigma Theta the First Fifty Years’ by Mary Vronan.

An illustration accompanying the story shows Dr. Bertha Roddey, the sorority’s 20th National President, and Deborah Parks Coleman, a member, posing next to “The Divine Nine” exhibition case. In the photo, Coleman is pictured with her hand gesturing towards a Delta Sigma Theta roll book. An issue of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (2016) newsletter featured a similar photo and write-up of the museum’s opening. “The museum, which includes several items from Zeta’s history, will allow all Americans to remember, commemorate, and celebrate the struggles and contributions of African Americans throughout our country’s history”, the story notes. One of the photos accompanying the story shows the president of Zeta Phi Beta, Inc. posing alongside the president of their brother fraternity, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. in front of the Divine Nine exhibition case.

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. featured a story about the NMAAHC in its journal *The Oracle*. In comments about the opening, Antonio F. Knox, Sr., the organization’s Grand Basileus, notes how artifacts from brothers are displayed in the museum: “Brother Michael Jordan and Brother Art Shell are represented in Sports and Entertainment, Brother Carter G. Woodson is represented with his book *Negro Makers in History* in the Wilberforce College section”. Knox reports that artifacts from the fraternity are also exhibited (Brown 2017):

The initial rotation of Omega artifacts included The Gavel used in the 1925–26 Grand Conclave, a 1938 picture of the Mu Psi Chapter at NC A&T, a 1957 picture of Brothers with other members of the Pan-Hellenic Council and the

Grand Basileus Ring of Immediate Past (39th) Grand Basileus, Brother Dr. Andrew Ray.

He ends his comments noting, “We do have other artifacts there that will represent Omega’s history as the curator prepares for the rotation. Thank you brothers for letting the world know who we are and the importance of championing our history. We are one!”

To celebrate the opening of the NMAAHC the fraternity put out a “Call to Action for the Brothers of Omega Psi Phi” to travel to Washington, D.C. Five hundred members dressed in black and dark-blue suits and purple ties (one of the organization’s colours) gathered on the National Mall on September 24 for the grand opening. Two brothers marched holding a purple and white sign announcing that “The Ques are Here”. (Omega Psi Phi Fraternity-Friendship is Essential to the Soul 2016).

To summarize, while black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations seek to support a counter-memory of blacks that emphasizes their agency, they are also concerned with directly and indirectly centring their own organizations in this narrative. Black museums like the NMAAHC are meaningful to them as donors not only because a narrative strand of the exhibitions focuses on black agency and overcoming, but also because their organizations and members are featured.

## **The boundaries of race and class**

This paper elaborates how African American museum patronage by black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations is enabled by racial uplift ideology and directed at reinforcing black counter-narratives. More specifically, by giving to African American museums like the NMAAHC they seek to nurture a racial advancement narrative of black life. There is also a particular concern with ensuring that they and their members are presented as exemplars of success within this narrative. Below, I discuss the implications of this analysis for the literature on museum patronage and the scholarship on middle- and upper-class blacks.

While scholarship on race and museums documents how master racial narratives are supported at museums by the patronage of middle- and upper-class whites (Blackwood and Purcell 2014), we know very little about the narratives that racial and ethnic minority elites support through their museum patronage. By elaborating how black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations use museum patronage to reinforce black counter-narratives, a more complex portrait of museum patronage is revealed. In particular, this research documents how elite support of museums can function as a practice that disrupts rather than reproduces dominant racial ideologies. Given that museums have been central institutions that produce, reproduce, and

disseminate racial stories that justify and explain the position of dominant racial groups (Lidchi 1997; Scott 2008), understanding how elite patronage challenges master racial narratives is critical. Future research should examine the museum patronage of other racial and ethnic minorities, such as middle- and upper-class Latinos and Asian Americans, to see if it is also directed at reinforcing counter-narratives related to their respective groups.

The analysis also contributes to the scholarship on the black middle- and upper-class. This literature documents how an ethos of linked fate directs their efforts to combat racial inequality in a range of contexts. Among other activities, middle- and upper-class blacks seek to reform schools, revitalize neighbourhoods, and challenge discriminatory laws – all in the name of racial leadership (Pattillo 2007). Yet, while the racial uplift of middle- and upper-class blacks is aimed towards advancing the race, it can also reinforce intra-class boundaries among African Americans (Gaines 1996; Pattillo 2007). This paper advances our understanding of anti-racism among middle- and upper-class blacks by elaborating how this complicated race-class dynamic plays out in the cultural field among voluntary organizations.<sup>8</sup>

As Fleming and Roses (2007) show, racial advancement in the cultural arena can potentially contribute to intra-class boundaries among blacks. Turning attention to collective memory, a neglected area of study in research on black middle- and upper-class anti-racism, this paper also shows how racial uplift-directed cultural patronage can contribute to class distinctions. Collective identities depend on collective memory (Eyerman 2002). Given this, the memory patronage of black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations is a practice of black identity construction. However, their patronage is also a practice of black middle- and upper-class identity construction by commemorating the past of black middle- and upper-class associational life. This finding is consistent with the broader contemporary literature on black middle- and upper-class voluntary organizations which elaborates how they nurture racial and class identities (Barnes 2015; Hughey and Parks 2011; Lacy 2004).

As privileged members of a stigmatized racial group, some middle- and upper-class blacks take up the mantle of fighting racism. Voluntary associations provide a robust organizational structure through which to undertake this work. Given growth in the diversity of the middle- and upper-class (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2018), it is of increasing importance to better understand how racial and ethnic minority elites use museum patronage to reinforce racial counter-narratives.

## Notes

1. Information about these gifts, as well as other donations discussed in this paper, comes from the author's analysis of museum annual reports and other public listings of donations.



2. This is based on the author's analysis of donors giving \$100,000 or more to the NMAAHC.
3. This approach views museums as institutions that create "representations" (Hall 1997) of racial groups.
4. My conceptualization of *advancement narrative* engages other research on African American counter-memory including Ron Eyerman's (2002) conceptualization of a "progressive narrative" and Robin Autry's (2017) "vindicationist" narrative.
5. It is important to note that Black-Greek Letter Organizations are distinguished from their mainstream counterparts in that membership is not centred in college and university life alone. Instead, these organizations are central to black middle- and upper-class organizational life as a whole. When members pledge as undergraduates they often stay active throughout the course of their lives and it is also common for individuals to join after college (Graham 1999).
6. For the broader study I conducted formal in-depth interviews with over 80 supporters, some formal in-depth interviews with staff, and had informal discussions with dozens of supporters, staff, and other stakeholders involved in black museum philanthropy. Of the formal in-depth interviews, 25 addressed philanthropy among black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations. Of the archival and other documents over four dozen pertain to giving to black museums among black middle- and upper-class voluntary associations.
7. To understand why black middle- and upper-class organizations give to black museums, digital copies of archival data and interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis programme. A coding key centred on meanings and motivations underlying patronage was developed based on a subset of data and subsequently applied to all of the data. Through this inductive process the theme of giving to reinforce a black advancement narrative emerged.
8. For analyses of how cultural patronage among black middle- and upper-class individuals reinforces racial and class boundaries see Banks 2010, 2017.

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