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Abstract: This essay examines Tajuana Butler's *Sorority Sisters* (1998) regarding its portrayal of friendship, sisterhood, and sorority culture. The novel conceptualizes 'sisterhood' as a fictive kinship structure and emphasizes the empowering potential of friendship among women. It fully embraces sorority culture and presents pledging as a 'social drama' in all its facets. Overall, *Sorority Sisters* provides an intervention into dominant representations of sorority life and black femininity. Yet, this intervention hinges on a discursive system of control shaped by conventional femininity and an uncritical affirmation of the ideology, practices, and significance of sororities.

Keywords: sorority fiction, Tajuana Butler, friendship, sisterhood, femininity

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Searching for Sisterhood: Friendship and Sorority Culture in Tajuana Butler's *Sorority Sisters*

Katharina Gerund

Tajuana "TJ" Butler's debut novel *Sorority Sisters*, which was first published in 1998, is part of a growing number of (young adult) fiction books that focus on sorority life, its social and cultural significance, its challenges, and, most of all, the friendship among members. Butler is not only an author but also a public speaker who, among other things, offers lectures and workshops on sisterhood; and she is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (AKA), the oldest black sorority founded at Howard University in 1908. Deborah Whaley credits Butler's novel as a "forerunner of what is now a burgeoning genre of fiction that uses Black sororities and Black college life as its central focus"¹ and regards it as an attempt to fill the "empty space of sorority representation for Black women in the popular imagination" (*Disciplining* 143; 7). Butler has described the novel's primary (implied) audience as consisting of potential pledges and sorority members but, ultimately, encompassing a much broader readership and conveying a universal message:

My audience was people who had the experience or who were considering pledging, and not necessarily [considering pledging] Alpha Kappa Alpha. However, what I have found is that the audience is much broader. I hope people would come away from the book knowing that no person is without faults, and that you can't judge a book by its cover. [...] I wanted people to come away with the idea that things you experience in life can be learning tools, and that what an individual does can affect the people around them in a positive way. (qtd. in Whaley, *Disciplining* 146)

Such representations challenge the depiction of sororities in the mainstream media (mostly focussing on scandals, hazing, and other 'negative'

headlines) as well as potentially stereotypical and simplified portrayals in popular culture (as, e.g., in Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze*).² While black sororities have gained increasing attention in the cultural imaginary, the lack of scholarship on the topic has been addressed by several studies and collections. As Tamara Brown observes in 2005, "after almost 100 years, the general public knows very little about BGLOs [black Greek-letter organizations] beyond their high-energy step shows and periodic hazing incidents. What is more distressing is the paucity of scholarly research that has been conducted on these groups" (1). There are some histories of BGLOs, including Lawrence Ross's account of the major black fraternities and sororities *The Divine Nine*,³ and a few noteworthy monographs and scholarly collections on the cultural, social, and political functions of black sororities. Among those are Whaley's study *Disciplining Women*, which focuses on AKA "as inhabiting many of the characteristics of a Black counterpublic, that is, as a site that converges cultural and social spaces with political platforms" (8) and Paula Giddings' history of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. which "asserts Black sorority politics as embodying the characteristics of a social movement" (Whaley, *Disciplining* 4). Both scholars emphasize the transformative potential of sororities for individuals but also in the social, cultural, and political arenas; and they draw attention to the fact that black sororities cannot simply be regarded as corresponding to or even mimicking their white counterparts (cf. Whaley, *Disciplining* 6; 17; Giddings 18). Rather, they were initially driven by a "special sense of urgency to form social bonds" and responded to "[r]acism, sexism, and the sense of racial obligation" (Giddings 18).⁴ While several other publications have begun to excavate and analyze the specific history, politics, and cultures of BGLOs,⁵ it is still the case that, overall, black sororities at large as well as individual aspects of sorority life and culture have received little attention. In 2010, Whaley states that none of the existing studies "discusses cultural practices, colorism, hazing, and the performance of femininity for undergraduate and graduate members of the sorority nor entertains the effects of popular culture on how the larger society views BGLOs" (*Disciplining* 4-5). Novels like Butler's *Sorority Sisters*, in her opinion, strive to fill a void in the popular imagination and, to some degree, set the record straight by "present[ing] pledge scenarios as opportunities to understand loyalty, friendship, perseverance, and performance under pressure and provid[ing] insights into the process from the perspective of pledges and sorors alike" (146).⁶ In the following, I examine the ways in which Butler's novel constructs friendship and sisterhood and how it represents black Greek-letter life between social movement, communal action, and individual empowerment; between loyalty, solidarity, and enabling support on the one hand and exclusionary practices, secrecy, and enforced norms on the other. In order to

do so, I analyze the representation and development of its five protagonists and, particularly, how they form (and are molded into) a sisterhood in the pledging process and how that transformation affects their individual lives and social bonds. Additionally, I focus on the depiction of sorority culture and the negotiation of friendship, sisterhood, and kinship in Butler's novel, which, as Whaley holds,

stays true to the genre of a popular, young adult novel. Yet [...] [it] manages to illustrate cultural aspects of BGLOs, including stepping, and it alludes to forms of community action in which Black sororities involve themselves, for example, the mentoring of young Black women, community development work, and philanthropy. (*Disciplining* 145)

I will expand on and complicate this assessment and show that Butler's novel can be read ambivalently in its constructions of sisterhood as an extended kinship structure and special kind of friendship, as an "affective economy"⁷ (Sara Ahmed), and as an empowering but at the same time controlling discursive regime.

The Formation of Sisterhood

Divided into three parts and thirty-one chapters, *Sorority Sisters* revolves around five young women who pledge a sorority, become line sisters, and, ultimately, close friends. The first part introduces the protagonists individually and offers accounts of their families, social lives, and motivations for joining a sorority. Part two focuses on the pledging process beginning with rush, i.e. the first recruitment event, and ending with the induction ceremony, when they are officially initiated as sorors; it shows the formation of the five women's sisterhood. The final chapters include their coming-out party, when they are officially introduced on campus as new sorority members, and first experiences as sorors, and zoom in on the changes in their lives instigated by pledging and 'crossing the burning sands,' i.e. being initiated into full membership. The protagonists represent a diverse group of women:

[T]hey are mentors and proto-feminists; sexually naïve and sexually confident; hedonist materialists and former welfare recipients; women whose lives revolve around their boyfriends, and women who do not define themselves through men; women who are legacies, and women who are the first in the family to attend college and pledge a sorority. (Whaley, *Disciplining* 143)

Though not all of their lives revolve around men, they are all introduced in their respective relationships, dating routines, or lack thereof and, despite their diversity in socio-economic status, social capital, and maturity, they are all beautiful heterosexual black women who are intelligent and/or ambitious.⁸ Cajen Myers, for example, is “one of the most desirable girls on campus” (Butler 8). Throughout the narration, she struggles with her on-and-off relationship to Jason and tries to cope with her diagnosis of herpes. Malena Adams is romantically involved with and torn between two men and pledging is “part of her bigger plan on the road to success,” i.e. founding her own PR firm (18; cf. 19–22). Stephanie Madison has been adopted into an upper middle-class family and is expected to pledge according to tradition. Her mother explains:

I’m so glad I had the experience of pledging and being a part of such a positive sisterhood. [...] I’m just glad you finally got off your high horse and decided to write your letter of intent. I was beginning to worry there for a while that my only daughter would not be carrying on our family legacy. Your grandmothers, all your aunts, and most of your cousins are proud members [...]. (14–15)

Her remarks hint at elitism as she voices her expectation that Stephanie’s family background will prove helpful to be accepted: “You are Patricia White-Madison’s daughter. They have no choice but to let you in [...]” (15). Stephanie, however, feels that as an adopted child she is no ‘real’ Madison. In contrast to Stephanie’s upper-class background, Tiara Johnson has grown up in the projects and feels responsible to get an education to help support her mother and siblings (cf. 27). She represents an independent-minded woman who does not rely on men for her ego or her future. Tiara, who is described as “look[ing] like a model” and having a GPA above average (54), wants to join “what she considered the greatest sorority in the world – the same sorority of which her Big Sister, Rhonda, was a member. She looked up to her Big Sister, and wanted to follow in her footsteps and someday “be somebody” (24). The sorority here clearly represents social upward mobility, a gain in status, and a meaningful step towards personal and professional success. Chancey Wright, finally, is depicted as highly intelligent and “a natural beauty” (31) who has already found her “Mr. Right,” Donald, a committed partner and rising football star. The girls’ initial motivations range from the search for friendship to obligation, from careerist aspirations to proving one’s self-worth and value for the community. For all of them, the sorority offers a projection screen for their individual hopes, dreams, and ambitions. The five girls do not know each other before attending rush and becoming line sisters. Significantly, while most of them want to pledge together with friends, their

respective friends either decide not to pledge or drop line early on.⁹ They are thus on their own and the tight schedule, secrecy, and efforts of pledging force them to largely suspend other social contacts. It is in this specific context and timeframe that they bond across their differences. Butler has identified as one of the benefits of sororities that “[y]ou meet people different from you that you might not ordinarily be friends with. Different class backgrounds bring diversity to the group; it continues to make our purpose broader” (qtd. in Whaley, *Disciplining* 144). Despite their class difference, the protagonists all have a relatively high degree of capital—be it economic, social, cultural, and/or symbolic—which enables them to partake in rush and pledging.¹⁰ All of them imagine their future Greek life as distinguishing them from the other women and enhancing their status: “They would be sorority sisters and everyone would watch them and think about how exciting their lives must be as they danced their sorority steps in line around the party. They imagined they would be the envy of all non-Greek women” (146). They are intrigued by the affective economy of sisterhood that is evoked, for example, by the calls, steps, rituals, and paraphernalia, enhanced by the aura of secrecy and exclusivity attached to them, and affirmed by the (perceived) status and collective identity of sorority members.

The novel reproduces the secrecy and exclusivity of the sorority. The members are only once referred to as “ladies in pink” (56) but the sorority remains nameless and is not clearly identified by Greek letters or obvious symbols.¹¹ Its rituals and practices are kept a secret and, for example, Patricia Madison-White does not even share her experience of pledging with her daughter: “I remember my rush. I was so nervous and what followed... I don’t even want to go into it [...]” (14). At Stephanie’s rush, sorority members “march[] to the front of the room singing one of their songs” (82) and the president sketches their mission: “Our sorority is one with deep roots. We take our vows seriously. [...] Yes, it’s nice to socialize and wear our letters, but that is only part of the many benefits. Our sorority was founded for purposes with greater meaning. We are a sisterhood bound by our desire to better ourselves, our campus, our community, and our world” (82). While readers learn that the participants hear a lot more about the history and achievements of the sorority, these are not shared by the narrator and the depiction of the sorority remains rather vague regarding its rules, goals, and practices. Throughout the novel, readers are left unaware of many of the details of the pledge sessions, the symbols of the sorority, and the songs, steps, (hi)stories, and rituals. They are let in on some of the secrets but are largely positioned as outsiders with little access to the explicit and implicit knowledge that the protagonists acquire (unless they can draw on their own experiences to fill in the gaps). At the first nocturnal pledge session, “Dean Big Sister Nina” swears the pledges

to secrecy: “we like to keep the things surrounding our sorority a mystery to outsiders, and therefore would prefer that nobody knows anything about the way we govern our session and ceremonies” (86).

This mythical secrecy of the sessions—for the protagonists—evokes “the same kind of anxiety they used to get when they knew their parents were going to punish them” (87). Their relationship to the sorority members is prefigured in terms of family structures; it reflects the power structures but also potentially legitimates the actions of the big sisters, who “ordered them around, yelled in their faces, and expected them to know everyone’s names and entire life histories” leaving some of the pledges “crying, others star[ing] into space in deep thought” (87; 88). Nina offers a social Darwinist legitimization for their behavior and further naturalizes hazing: “Life is a test. The strong survive and the weak fail. This experience is a step to prepare you for the real world after college” (88). For the reader, this secrecy stands somewhat in contrast to the seemingly open and unapologetic portrayal of hazing, i.e. “behavior that often endangers, abuses, degrades, humiliates, and/or intimidates pledges” (DeSantis 6).¹² The narrative largely portrays the actions of the big sisters as legitimate and does not question their purpose, function, and meaning. Not all of the sorors, however, are shown to enjoy hazing like Nina, who “[o]nce [...] made them [the line sisters] greet her seventy-five times before she finally granted them permission to stop greeting her” (125). Some, for example, refer to it as “hazing nonsense” (125) or are portrayed as not being “into the hazing aspect of pledging as much as [...] into the teaching” (139). Yet, there are numerous nightly meetings which deprive the girls of sleep and pledge sessions which are highly stressful, exhausting, and intimidating. During “Hell Week” the pledges get bricks which they “were to paint [...] pink” and “dedicate [...] to one of the founders whom they felt they were most like” and carry with them (145). At that point, they all “wonder[] if it was really worth it,” get increasingly tired of hazing, and grow more reluctant to obey every order of their big sisters (148; cf. 151). The hazing depicted in the novel does not feature violent and physical excesses and it leaves none of the protagonists traumatized or (emotionally) damaged. Rather, the narrative implies that it strengthens them both individually and collectively and that it affirms the exclusivity and appeal of the sorority.

According to Tamara Brown and Gregory Parks, “the group experience of pain or discomfort” and the secrecy are two of the “numerous explanations for why pledging precipitates bonding” (450). Pledging, as they argue, also “provides a source of institutional continuity” and has been analyzed with regard to the “concept of self-respect and self-esteem” as well as “respect, commitment, and the process of breaking down and building up” (451, 452).¹³ All of these aspects figure in *Sorority Sisters’s* portrayal of

the formation of sisterhood among the protagonists who learn to respect and appreciate themselves, their line sisters, and their sorority. Early on, “[t]he five girls, who didn’t know each other’s names before rush, were now not only working well together, but bonding” (103); as Chancey remarks: “It’s amazing how pledging makes people closer quicker” (104). The narrator explains in great detail how the women cherish the (almost) unconditional acceptance of the other pledges and the ability to share their secrets or perceived stigmata (cf. e.g. 102, 116–17, 120). This acceptance as well as the creation of a collective identity, however, emerge in a climate of anxiety and pressure, and they come at the price of submitting to the uniformity of the group and the pledge rules. The protagonists are “no longer individuals, but pledges” (87). The line sisters, for example, all have the same backpack and wear matching outfits to their sessions (106–07), and they learn to act (mechanically and interdependently) as a group: When the big sisters arrive at the rehearsal for their fundraiser, “[l]ike clockwork, the girls stopped what they were doing, jumped into line according to number, and began to greet their big sisters” (125). As pledges, they give up (or at least suspend) part of their individuality and are assigned “line names” and “line numbers” that are used interchangeably (cf. 126). As the pledges are frequently told how to dress, style, and behave, the novel also portrays what Marcia Hernandez has aptly termed “appearance enforcement,” i.e. the “interactional process” which reifies “middle-class standards of dress, speech, and conduct as normative behavior” and encourages “women to behave as if their actions, dress, and speech are under constant scrutiny by both members and nonmembers” (213). While an uncritical affirmation of this habitus not only fosters exclusivity but also confirms middle-class values, traditional gender roles, and consumerism as the norm, it fulfils a more complex function for black sororities where appearance enforcement can be seen as “both a literal and symbolic act of cultural and ideological resistance to dominant perceptions of black women in popular culture” (Hernandez 213). Paradoxically, this process challenges negative and stereotypical images of black women and, at the same time, “creates another system of control for black women,” reproduces inequalities and power asymmetries, and consolidates the boundaries between members and nonmembers (215). The stereotypes and negative images are marked as unsuitable for the sorority members but “may apply to others who were not worthy of the group” (225). The pledges and sorority members in the novel are highly invested in appearances and enforce rather traditional images and scripts of femininity: the pledges learn the importance of dressing well, making good impressions, and capitalizing on their femininity from the very beginning. Thus, *Sorority Sisters* paradoxically does offer an intervention into popular representation of black femininity and, at the same time, it installs its own

normative regime of representation. In its glorification of sorority culture (and pledging) it presents an empowering narrative but inevitably reproduces the exceptionalism and exclusionary practices, the secrecy and normativity, as well as the (potentially) essentialist and elitist logics of sorority discourses.

The fundraiser, a male auction, is not only revealing with regard to the depiction of gender roles and the normative binary concepts of femininity and masculinity that shape the novel's discourse.¹⁴ But even more so in its evocation of African American history and the genealogy of black sororities. Clarenda Phillips suggests that black sororities can be seen as "a continuation of African cultural traditions and a form of resistance to the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression in the United States" (346). The male auction is, of course, an obvious reversal of the "male gaze" (Laura Mulvey) and might indicate the empowerment of the girls but, at the same time, it participates in the objectification and exoticized commodification of the black (male) body. The line sisters had planned the event to start with Malena "com[ing] onstage dressed like an African queen and talk[ing] about healing the ills of slavery by re-creating auctions we don't have to be ashamed of" (111). She does so with "tribal music" playing (141) and offers a speech from the perspective of an enslaved ancestor:

[...]. I was shackled and abused. I was torn from my beautiful homeland and my family was split apart! With my severed family, my stolen heritage, and my lost identity went my pride and my security. I was a slave – mind, body, and soul, until I realized one important fact: My masters could own my body, but they could never possess my spirit. [...] My hope for your tomorrows gave me the courage to be strong, to withstand; the courage to demand change. You were my hope, the essence of my dreams. So don't ever forget me and my plight. Reach forward and grow upward. Move ahead. Today, let us pay homage to the progress of our race. Let us remind ourselves that we control our destiny. Let us replace the pain and suffering felt at the auction block with hope and courage. Today's auction is a celebration of our ancestors. [...] (140–41)

Drawing on a historical perspective reaching back into the days of slavery and an empowering narrative of progress, uplift, and hope, she admonishes the audience to cherish their history and to enjoy their freedom, options, and possibilities but also to live up to the responsibilities this heritage entails and to meet the values and standards of their ancestors. This speech evokes the "traditional black American narrative of victimization," Charles Johnson controversially declared outdated and at risk of turning into "ideology, even kitsch" (36, 38). Using this narrative, on the one hand averts attention from issues of ongoing social precariousness and recodes

freedom primarily as the freedom to consume. On the other, it suggests the sorority's position in a continuum from the "formation of secret societies" among enslaved men and women in the US, which as a cultural practice "shared ancestry with their forebearers in African secret societies," to black benevolent societies, social fraternal and sororal groups, and "women's clubs and other civil rights organizations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [...] [which] provided a gender-exclusive arena for self-actualization through involvement in political and social reform" (Whaley, "Links" 49; cf. 49–54; 31). The fact that the proceeds of the male auction go to "Hope for Tomorrow, a local home for pregnant teens" (141) hints at the social engagement of black sororities.¹⁵ The auction exemplifies the ambivalences of the novel's take on sorority sisterhood: it draws on the history of enslavement and resistance but transforms it into a commodity spectacle; it asserts the cultural and social relevance of sororities, yet focuses on appearances and performances more than on activism or community engagement; and it presents an empowering and progressive narrative but capitalizes on individuality and freedom of choice as the freedom to consume more than on collective action and social change.

The novel's main concern is the individual and collective development of the protagonists rather than the social, political, and cultural work of sororities. The induction ceremony and coming-out party, finally, represent their official new status as sorors and, to use Alan DeSantis' words, marks the "exchange of autonomy for an active social life, popularity, and an emotional connection" (218). The pledging process, ultimately, leaves all of them individually changed and affectively bound to each other. Cajen breaks free from Jason and recognizes her friend Eric as a suitable partner. Stephanie has acquired "new strength and confidence" and, "[f]or the first time she didn't depend on [...] any man to feel secure" (187). Tiara has her "first real date" (197), Malena has resolved her romantic entanglement, and Chancey gets engaged to Donald. Even before the end of "Hell Week" Malena had toasted to "sisterhood because," as she maintains, "I have gained four new phenomenal sisters in my life, and I sometimes wonder how I ever made it through life without you. [...] I hope we'll make efforts to continue being friends and keep in touch like real sisters do" (153–54). And the others had joined her in hoping that "they would continue to share the special bond that had formed among them" (154). The formation of their sisterhood took place under very specific circumstances and it requires continuous efforts. It is depicted as an empowering network and is defined in analogy to 'real' sisters as well as friends yet differentiated from both.

Sisterhood and/as Friendship

Sororities draw on family and kinship structures as a model to conceive of solidarity, support, and friendship. Clarenda Phillips proclaims the specificity of black sororities' notion of sisterhood:

sisterhood is about embracing people who are not related by blood into meaningful family-like relations. Although every woman—white or black—who joins a sorority is called a sister, it is different for African American women. For them, a woman is a sister not just because she is in the same sorority; she is a sister because she is an important part of their lives and their “families.” (345)

She argues that this “bond of sisterhood” goes “much deeper than mere membership in an organization, because the image of family on which these sororities were established drew heavily from the traditional African notions of family and family formation” (344).¹⁶ Women who pledge a black sorority are thus “adopted into a family unit, or fictive kinship network” (345). Sisterhood, in this context, is used as a metaphor that implies the affective ties and substance of an extended kinship structure. This is ever more pertinent here considering that such extended kinship structure was denied to black women (and men) historically in the context of slavery. Phillips emphasizes that it is “intentionally develop[ed]” (350); and Whaley similarly holds that “the process of sisterhood does not happen easily or in a vacuum, even for women who share a racial bond and, seemingly, a socioeconomic class” (*Disciplining* 39). This idea(l) of sisterhood is also reflected in, for example, Alpha Kappa Alpha's statement on sisterhood on their website:

Sisterly relations play a major role in the strengthening of the bonds that unite us as sorors. Each soror must make it a personal goal to foster sisterly relations by “nurturing the ivy.”

To nurture means to give care and attention to someone and to supply them with nourishment to further their development. It is important for all sorors to embrace the concept of nurturing the bonds with personal traits and qualities proven to make for healthy relationships. (*Alpha*)

The statement refers to the special bond among sorors and stresses the personal effort of each member necessary to create “sisterly relations.” Sorors are encouraged to support each other and value the sorority (represented by its official symbol, the ivy). The concept of nurture used in both contexts evokes an intentional, necessary, and potentially natural effort for the good of AKA and its members. *Sorority Sisters* illustrates along the same lines that it takes an intentional effort to form and sustain

sisterhood; and it depicts the aspects of pledging and sorority culture that offer the context, framework, and incentive for this process to take place. While the novel shows how the five women bond across and despite their diverse social and economic backgrounds, “[i]n contrast to most other college novels that feature African American student protagonists,” it has, as John Kramer argues, “relatively little to say about racial matters” (151). It addresses neither the “racial bond” between the women nor the specificity of black sororities in explicit terms or great detail.

In Whaley’s study, one sorority member is quoted as follows, merging the family analogy with the ideology of an achievement-oriented society and social Darwinist logics:

To attend a top university you are evaluated heavily, to get a promotion at work, you are put to the test. These things are done to separate the weak from the strong. To me sororities are the same. Just like in a family unit, when you have invested so much time and dedication into a child’s future, you refuse to let outside entities tear it apart. The sorority is the same way. We take care of our own. We teach our own. We refuse to settle for anything less than the goals we have set out to accomplish. So if we are misinterpreted for defending our investments in ourselves, our families, or communities, then several professional institutions need to reevaluate their own guidelines and regulations before commenting on ours. (*Disciplining* 19)

She justifies the selectivity of the sorority and counters potential criticism by claiming that their structures, goals, and rules are guided by the same parameters as society at large and further naturalizes them via the comparison to a family unit. The statement emphasizes the community and support network of the sorority as well as its exclusivity – “We take care of our own. We teach our own.” – which, in fact, are mutually constitutive. As the “family unit” implies, there are clear limitations as to who (formally) belongs and who doesn’t, responsibility for the group and its members, and the expectation if not obligation to take care of and support each other. What James Grunebaum has pointed out for friendship, to some degree, also holds true for kinship: It is necessarily “partial, specific, and particular” (1).

The conception of sisterhood in the novel oscillates between familial relations and friendship; and the protagonists and sorority sisters assume shifting social roles: as friends, (big) sisters, or parent-like mentors. As Phillips holds, “[s]orority women have the opportunity to mother one another or to act as sisters and friends when needed” (350). The narration highlights the special relationship between sorority sisters which is defined in contradistinction to their non-Greek friends as well as their families (in a narrow sense). Sisterhood is often compared to ‘real’, i.e. biologi-

cal and/or biographical, siblings, which not only reveals analogies but also inevitably draws attention to the differences that nonetheless exist between the two social relations. For example, Nina admonishes the pledges during one of the sessions: “If you are to be sisters under our sorority, you are to know everything about one another just as you would your real sister, if not more” (89). And Stephanie, early on, describes her feelings for her line sisters: “Sometimes I feel like I’ve known all of you for years. Like y’all are the sisters I never had” (117). *Sorority Sisters* imagines a sisterhood that is like kinship (or even more intense, as Nina’s remark indicates) in terms of the degree of intimacy, the durability of the relationship, and the institutional character, including rules, obligations, and codes of conduct towards each other.

In Western discourses, friendship is usually regarded as “spontaneous and voluntary” and defined as “a continuous creation of personal will and choice, [...] ungoverned by the structural definitions that bear on family and kinship” (Pahl 14; 38). But “like kinship, [it] marks off a difference and a specialness that differentiates friendship from moral relations that can universally apply to everyone” (Grunebaum 2). Friendship is generally defined as “a privatised relationship [...] characterised by non-formal and non-prescriptive modes of interaction, by spontaneity and by interaction on the basis of feeling and inclination” (Lynch xi-x). Yet, friendship not only “ha[s] to be seen in context” (Pahl 169), but is also subject to great “[c]ultural variation” (Grunebaum 161). The friendship that forms among the line sisters in *Sorority Sisters* – who become collectively known as the “Phenomenal Five” – emerges in the context of pledging, i.e. a context that is also “uniquely American” (DeSantis 6). Their sisterhood shares traits with dominant notions of kinship as well as friendship: they have to adhere to the structures and strictures provided by the pledge rules and are grouped together not by their own choice but through the selection process. The initial framework for their bonding is thus formalized and prescriptive rather than spontaneous and voluntary – though Chancey and Cajen already meet at rush and instantly bond to work the floor together (cf. 83–84). While all of them make continuous and willful efforts to become friends, they also share the common objective of joining the sorority of their choice for which bonding with each other is a necessary prerequisite to reach their shared goal of ‘crossing the burning sands.’

Once they have become sorors, however, they also seem to have become close friends – the novel ends with them “engaging in the same kind of discussions good friends have when they come together to enjoy one another’s company” (Butler 224). The formation of friendship and/as sisterhood and the integration into the larger sorority community also has effects on their social life at large: Stephanie fulfills her family legacy so

that her mother now calls her “soror” and no longer regards her as her “little girl” but as a “lady” who is “following in the footsteps of some amazing women” and promises to organize a “celebration party” for her daughter together with the other family members who are fellow sorors (213). Similarly, Tiara becomes her Big Sister Rhonda’s soror, who is proud of her mentee and promises her that they will “have a slumber party and stay up all night exchanging line stories” (211); her mother, on the other hand, is not sure how to react appropriately to the good news: “So, you crossed? Well, congratulations, I guess. I am supposed to congratulate you, right” (193). While the experience of pledging brings Tiara closer to her mentor, her mother’s reaction illustrates the distance between Tiara’s life and the situation of her family. Similarly, Tiara and her two best friends, Gina and Sandra, who “met their freshman year” and “grew close after forming a late-night study group” (53), vowed to stay friends though Tiara is the only one to pledge: “Greek or non-Greek, we will always be friends” (58). And after she has crossed, Tiara confirms: “There was always Gina and Sandra, and, of course, she had four new sisters to hang out with” (195). The three friends had earlier “imitated members of each organization, dancing around the room while throwing up different fraternity and sorority signs. They got in a line and tried to do the sororities’ steps around Tiara’s small room, but it did not work because no one remembered the same moves” (56). For Tiara, the signs, ritual, songs, and steps of her sorority now have a special meaning and she is part of the secretive and exclusive group, all of them had envied in the beginning of the narration.

Like Tiara, who holds on to her ‘old’ friends, Stephanie tries to mend her friendship with Sidney once she has crossed. Sidney had been her best friend until she confessed to her that she decided against pledging because she accidentally got pregnant from one of Stephanie’s ex-boyfriends. At that point, Stephanie was only concerned with Sidney’s breach of trust and angered that she would have to pledge alone (cf. 63–66). She “could not find it in her heart to feel sorry for Sidney” (65). Trust, i.e. “self-disclosing trust,” is generally regarded *the* central element of friendship (Thomas 31, cf. Pahl 61). In the novel, this kind of trust is elementary for friendship and sisterhood alike. Both require a willful and voluntary effort, reciprocity, and an emotional investment. When Stephanie apologizes to Sidney seven weeks later, she explains her change of mind: “You’re right I haven’t been a friend, but I’m trying to change all of that right now. And you are right, I did feel guilty. I still do feel guilty, but not because I have new friends. I know I lost my oldest and closest friend for selfish reasons. I love you like a sister, Sidney [...]” (190). In this specific context, Stephanie labels her new sisters ‘friends’ while Sidney is singled out as the one she loves ‘like a sister’. This might, of course, be a

(maybe inadvertently or unconsciously) strategic move to win her friend back but it also showcases how the lines between friends, sisters, and family are negotiated, blurred, and recast in different social situations. The concept of sisterhood is evoked throughout the novel to emphasize solidarity, support, mutual respect, and friendship among women. Yet, the connection between 'sorors' is endowed with a special (symbolic and affective) significance and clearly marked as particularly durable, strong, and supportive.

None of these relationships might ultimately amount to what Aristotle famously described—albeit in masculine terms—as “perfect friendship” among virtuous [wo]men, i.e. a friendship that is “perfect both in respect of duration and in all other respects, and in it each gets from each in all respects the same as, or something like what, [s]he gives” in contrast to friendship based on utility or pleasure (cf. book VII, sections 3–4).¹⁷ Sisterhood is shown to offer the possibility of “companion friendship”¹⁸ and positioned at the intersection of (fictive) kinship and friendship. It is depicted as merging ‘the best of two worlds’ as it combines the structural framework of a family with the (seemingly) voluntary association among friends. Despite the novel’s general emphasis on the empowering potential of friendship among women, the sisterhood among the line sisters stands out as it contributes significantly to their individual development as well as their capability to bond. *Sorority Sisters* represents sisterhood as an affective economy, special friendship, and social formation that has to be actively pursued and upheld through the constant investment of its members and its institutional(ized) framework and rituals. This positive portrayal of sisterhood and wholehearted embrace of sorority culture counters the criticism and clichéd depictions of black sororities in the popular imagination.

This intervention, however, comes at a price. It reinforces middle-class values, consumer culture, and “pseudo-individualism” (Theodor W. Adorno), heteronormativity and dominant scripts of femininity. It focuses on individual growth and development more than on collective action or social responsibility. And, it avoids^{19,20} engaging directly with the charges that have been raised against black sororities like, for example, “elitism, fierce intersorority competition, and intraracial colorism” (Phillips 535). *Sorority Sisters’* portrayal of sisterhood is ambivalent in the sense that it (1) oscillates between conceptions of friendship and (fictive) kinship but also in the sense that it (2), at first glance, offers an emancipatory agenda which, however, adheres to and even reinforces dominant normative scripts and values, and that it (3) shows the empowering potential of friendship among women but singles out the sisterhood that emerges within the ideological framework and socio-cultural ramifications of sorority life, which it fully encourages. Its unapologetic approach to hazing

and portrayal of the “social drama” (Victor Turner) of pledging in its diverse facets stands in contrast to its reproduction of silences and secrecy, exclusivity and exceptionalism. While—at the end of the story—it was clearly ‘worth it’ for the protagonists, the reader might (choose to) come to a different conclusion despite (or because of) the novel’s overall affirmative take on sisterhood and sorority culture.

Sisterhood Continued

Butler’s second book *Hand-Me-Down Heartache* (2001) starts off as a sequel to her debut novel but the connection is only loosely established in the prologue, which focuses on the protagonists of *Sorority Sisters*. The remainder of the narration is concerned with the life of their (former) dean of pledges Nina Lander and depicts her struggles to get settled in life after college as she returns to her parents after graduation, attempts to start a career in sports journalism, and tries to find a stable romantic relationship. The prologue is set at Chancey and Donald’s wedding, one year after the events of *Sorority Sisters* and, like the rest of the story, it is told in first person and from Nina’s perspective. Nina refers to Chancey as her “soror” and to the protagonists of *Sorority Sisters* as “my girls” whom she “had birthed into [her] sorority” (3). In the very first paragraph, the special relationship and connection between the sorority members is clearly marked and the allegory of family invoked. Nina is positioned both as mother/mentor and as sister/friend to the five women. She relates what has become of them over the last year and, in this context, expands on *Sorority Sisters*’ portrayal of sorority life and culture. It reveals that Cajen has become “dean of [the] new line, or intake chair, as it’s called now that hazing and pledging are illegal” (3) and alerts readers to the social responsibility and work of sororities as Cajen “had used the sorority to begin monthly Sisterly Awareness meetings, which had become very popular with young women on campus, who came to discuss such issues as dating, safe-sex, and self-love” (3). Tiara also represents a sorority success story; Nina admits that she has “learned a thing or two from Tiara [herself]” and regards her “a shoo-in for the presidency of [their] sorority’s chapter” (4). Malena and Stephanie have succeeded professionally and personally—despite several setbacks and challenges they had to face regarding their relationships, family, and friends. Malena works for a PR agency in New York and Stephanie is about to start law school and takes care of her (newly discovered) brother after her biological mother has died. Judging from the development of the five women, their sorority seems to have fulfilled its historically assigned role—in Clarendia Phillips’s words, “[f]rom their inception, African American sororities have

created a large sisterly network of social support. These networks sought to socially integrate African American women into college and professional life" (351).

Though Nina—who in *Sorority Sisters* was so adamant on casting pledging as a preparation for the reality of life after college—admits in the beginning of *Hand-Me-Down Heartache* that, even with her sorors around her, she feels alone and somewhat unprepared to face the "real world" (6–7), the prologue, overall, showcases the positive effects of sorority life and Butler's second novel emphasizes the importance and power of friendship among women throughout. Nina's best friend Janelle is "basically family because [they] had been friends since eighth grade" (12); but she also is a 'soror' with whom Nina can share pledging stories (cf. 17). The distinction between friends, sorors, and family that Nina makes in her account of her graduation (cf. chap. 1) merges in the character of Janelle. Sorority culture itself does not figure prominently in the novel but its effects on Nina's life and identity are referred to explicitly, for example, when Nina reflects on her "small niche of friends: Janelle and [her] college sorors" (127) or when Maurice gives her a painting, "an original, a sorority piece by WAK,"²¹ as a gift (66). They also become visible implicitly as they affect her friendship to Janelle and as they have contributed to her determination and success in dealing with her family troubled by domestic abuse, her romantic issues, and her professional setbacks.

Butler's vision of friendship among women as sisterhood with characteristics of both, fictive kinship structures and voluntary and willful friendship, emerges in *Sorority Sisters* and continues to shape her second book. The representation of empowering and powerful relationships among women offers an intervention into popular depictions of black women as well as into critical or clichéd notions of sorority life. However, at the same time, it uncritically and overtly idealizes sorority culture in its multiple facets. In doing so, the novels avoid explicitly scrutinizing the (potential) downsides of sorority culture like exclusivity, secrecy, and competitiveness. It embraces a highly normative femininity that draws on dominant beauty standards, enforces heteronormativity and binary gender logics, and focuses on appearances and (conspicuous) consumption, and it reifies dominant middle-class values and an ideology of progress and social (upward) mobility. The sisterhood and friendship that evolve among the pledges and sorors is presented as a dependable, and loyal support network. Yet, it is prefigured and facilitated by the rituals, practices, shared experiences, and affective economies of (pledging) a sorority and emerges within a framework characterized by exclusivity, potentially essentialist logics of race and gender, secrecy, and a strict set of rules and regulations. The novels celebrate friendship and/as sisterhood as empowering and (potentially) emancipatory. They intervene

in established representational logics but, at the same time, run the risk of substituting one powerful discursive regime with another that also controls (and limits) representations of black femininity and sorority culture. Overall, the texts clearly set out to revise (negative) images of black femininity, to empower their readers, and to make a plea for the benefits of sorority culture. Yet, they also have effects that run counter to these intentions because their narratives reproduce the power structures and exclusivity of sorority culture, establish normative scripts of femininity, and show individual empowerment to be largely conditioned on the acceptance into the sorority and on social, economic, cultural, and/or symbolic capital.

Notes

- ¹ Examples for the proliferation of the genre are Dorrie Williams-Wheeler's *Be My Sorority Sister: Under Pressure* (Sparkledoll 2003), Kayla Perrin's *The Sisters of Theta Phi Kappa: A Novel, The Delta Sisters*, and *We'll Never Tell* (St. Martin's Griffin 2002, 2005, 2007), or Kimberley Noelle's *There Was a Spirit* (Kimberley Noelle Publishing 2005).
- ² Recent debates about VH1's reality show *Sorority Sisters* exemplarily attests to the controversy around representations of black sororities. Cf. for example Elber, Lewis, and Phillip. These popular representations are even more relevant considering the secrecy surrounding sororities. As Alan DeSantis holds, "[b]ecause of the highly secretive and protective nature of fraternities and sororities, most Americans [...] know little about the inner workings of these groups—except perhaps for what has been portrayed in movies such as *Animal House*, *Old School*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Legally Blonde*, and *Sorority Strip Party*" (2).
- ³ The following fraternities and sororities are commonly known as the Divine Nine: Alpha Phi Alpha (1905, Cornell University), Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908, Howard University), Kappa Alpha Psi (1911, Indiana University), Omega Psi Phi (1911, Howard University), Delta Sigma Theta (1913, Howard University), Phi Beta Sigma (1913, Howard University), Zeta Phi Beta (1920, Howard University), Sigma Gamma Rho (1922, Butler University), and Iota Phi Theta (1963, Morgan State University).
- ⁴ Giddings also elaborates on the commonalities of black and white groups including "Greek names; a closed, or exclusive rather than inclusive, membership; and the culture of 'secret societies' replete with rituals, oaths, and symbols. Members of all the groups had to meet particular criteria and go through 'novitiate' periods where they were subjected to hazing and the discipline and orders of the organization. All were created out of the desire to form social bonds with like-minded students" (18). Similarly, Whaley points towards a shared elitism as "BGLOs, like White and Black American

social fraternals, represent who has cultural capital and social, political, and economic power in their communities" (*Disciplining* 25).

- ⁵ Cf., most prominently, Brown, Parks, and Phillips; Parks; and Hughey and Parks (*Black*).
- ⁶ Deborah Whaley explains, "[s]orority women interpret 'soror' as representing a true sister and the term *member* to denote a woman who was read in at the sorority headquarters' retreat without having to endure pre-retreat rites and without having to undergo the 'old' pledge experience to emotionally bond with her sister-initiates." (*Disciplining* 95-96)
- ⁷ I use Ahmed's term to insinuate that "emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation" (253). She further elaborates that she uses "the 'economic' to suggest that objects of emotions circulate or are distributed across a social as well as psychic field" (253).
- ⁸ When the protagonists meet for their first pledge session, they are described with an eye to both their similarities and differences: "They were beautiful, intelligent sisters. They differed in height, shape, and skin color, yet they shared the common goal of crossing over into the Greek world." (Butler 86)
- ⁹ Stephanie's friend Sidney decides against pledging when she discovers that she is pregnant, Tiara's two best friends, Sandra and Gina, also do not attempt to "cross the burning sands" – Sandra's parents do not permit her to pledge "until she completed two satisfactory years of college" (57) and Gina has doubts about the time and effort in addition to her other responsibilities –, and Malena's friend Tammy drops line early in the process for the sake of her relationship (cf. 95-97). This narrative can be interpreted as a pre-selection process where the five protagonists already stand out.
- ¹⁰ While the narrator declares, for example, that joining a sorority is a "big step for someone with her [Tiara's] background" and she has to work part-time, it is also evident that her relationship with her Big Sister Rhonda who "exposed Tiara to nice restaurants, plays, museums, and the importance of pampering and loving herself" and frequently sends her expensive gifts including an expensive dress for rush is an invaluable prerequisite for her being able to pledge (26; 25). Rhonda's mentorship, of course, also constitutes an instance of sorority community engagement and social work.
- ¹¹ This adds to the novel's almost universal(istic) representation of black sorority life – also the setting (e.g. the college campus) is described in very uncertain terms. The "ladies in pink" and the author's own affiliation, of course, suggest that the sorority portrayed could be AKA whose colors are salmon pink and apple green.
- ¹² In 1990, "the long-standing tradition of pledging was replaced with a three-day to three-week MIP [membership intake process] composed of classroom-like settings of instruction and tests" according to a decision of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (Hughey and Parks, "Public Realism" 11). While many BGLOs have accepted this change, "others remain decidedly opposed and have vowed to continue the pledging process as a collectively secret tradition that most know occurs, but of which few openly speak" (11-12).

- 13 Brown and Parks hold that, according to research, a rather severe initiation process makes the group more attractive in the eyes of those accepted (cf. 453).
- 14 As Alan DeSantis has shown in his study on the significance of gender and gender roles in fraternities and sororities, “[e]lite Greek organizations are locales where traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity are not just reinforced but are strengthened” (219).
- 15 As Marybeth Gasman holds, black sororities (and fraternities) “have a rich history of service, activism, and leadership training” and, for example, “participated in myriad ways in the struggle for civil rights” (27). Whaley argues, that in contrast to “the mission statement of the first White sorority, Kappa Alpha Theta, formed in 1870, [which] avows to create and promote sisterhood, AKA’s counterpublic work moves beyond creating sisterhood in a gender and race-biased institution (i.e., the college university). [...] AKA’s organizational mandate aims to ‘cultivate and encourage high scholastic and ethical standards, to promote unity and friendship among college women, to study and help alleviate problems concerning girls and women, and to be of service to all [hu]mankind’” (*Disciplining* 41).
- 16 BGLOs have been shown to rely and draw on African traditions in several ways. Gloria Harper Dickinson, for example, has argued that “BGLO choices regarding nomenclature, iconography, organizational structure, core values, pledge practices, performance, chapter locales, and programs of service have direct links to African religious practices, secret societies and title associations, aesthetics, philosophy, values, and educational norms” (11).
- 17 The Aristotelian triad roughly corresponds to Kant’s distinction between friendships based on “need, taste and disposition” (Lynch 17-18).
- 18 Laurence Thomas uses this term somewhat akin to Aristotle’s “perfect friendship” and distinguishes it from romantic love and the love between parents and children (31). Companion friends, in his conception, “are very much a reflection to one another’s life,” they “care deeply about one another and are eager to spend time together,” and “they stand entirely as equals with respect to one another” (35).
- 19 Regarding other aspects that affect the lives of young women, the novel, however, does address sensitive and controversial issues as it openly discuss sexuality, including unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. As Butler has pointed out, “[i]t was very important to talk about sexuality. [...] [Sidney’s] situation can be seen as educational device. I know parents who are giving my book to their children for this reason, kids who are in high school” (qtd. in Whaley, *Disciplining* 145).
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- ²¹ Kevin A. Williams/WAK is a popular African American artist whose original and lithograph artworks are bestsellers and have appeared on several popular vistas including the TV shows *Law & Order* and *Soulfood* (cf. "About the Artist").

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