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Ashley F. G. Norwood
University of Mississippi

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Recommended Citation

Norwood, Ashley F. G., "The Fly In The Buttermilk: The History, Perceptions And Principles Of Black Greek Lettered Organizations At Ole Miss" (2016). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 657.
<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/657>

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THE FLY IN THE BUTTERMILK: THE HISTORY, PERCEPTIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF
BLACK GREEK LETTERED ORGANIZATIONS AT OLE MISS

A Thesis
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media
The University of Mississippi

by

Ashley F. G. Norwood

May 2016

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ABSTRACT

At the University of Mississippi, engaging across racial and cultural lines is still something many find difficult, or they simply don't want to do it. Over the years, the university has chartered a variety of culture specific organizations, counsels and groups. In 1973, the first black Greek-lettered organization chartered at the university. The presence of black fraternalism is culturally different from the white Greeks that have been established on campus as early as the 1850s. This thesis studies the chartering of the nine black Greek-lettered organizations at the university, the past and present perceptions of these groups and the principles of these groups.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who assisted in the study and production process at the University of Mississippi and Jackson State University. In particular, my mother, Joan W. Norwood, who inspired the title and my father, Sollie B. Norwood, who raised me to understand and appreciate the value of black fraternalism. To Dr. Thomas Wallace, Dr. Thomas “Sparky” Reardon and Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough, there will be no more untold history.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BGLO	black Greek-lettered organization
WGLO	white Greek-lettered Organization
NPHC	National Pan Hellenic
NPC	National Panhellenic
IFC	Interfraternity Council
HBCU	historically black college and/or university
PWI	predominantly white institution

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation to my academic advisor, Professor Joseph Atkins, and my thesis committee chair, Dr. Andy Harper. Thank you both for believing in my vision and advising me through the production process.

In addition, I thank Dr. Donald Cole, assistant to the Chancellor concerning minority affairs at the university. Thank you for providing early access to important sources and historical information. Thank you also for making my experience at the university hopeful.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am so quick to forget names, but faces I hardly forget. It was the same girl I saw standing outside of the student union. I walked toward her as she stood at the bus stop and introduced myself. I told her that I overheard a conversation between her and her friend at “Union Unplugged”. At first, she didn’t recognize the event by the name alone so I continued to describe its environment.

On the plaza, just before the steps of the student union at Ole Miss, black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLO) gather to stroll, chant and hop to the most popular hip-hop tunes. I recalled her whispering to her friend and asking, “Why are *they* always out here? What are *they* doing?” Her face had wrinkled in confusion. “I don’t understand why *they* are always out here.” Suspecting that someone may be listening, her friend didn’t respond. “I just don’t get it,” she said before they departed for class.

I was bothered for some time by the fact that she openly challenged the relevancy of black Greek culture. I am a member of a BGLO and she didn’t bother to ask me, “Why are *they* always out here?” Engaging across racial and cultural lines is still something many find difficult, or they simply don’t want to do it.

In 2013, the University of Alabama was called out on the lack of diversity in its Greek system. Kennedi Cobb, a black woman, submitted herself into the rush process for a white Greek-lettered sorority and did not receive a bid from any of the sixteen sororities

on campus. Before her attempt, there had only been one black person to become a member of a white Greek-lettered organization (WGLO) since the university's existence. Most recently, members of Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity at the University of Oklahoma were on video singing, "There will never be a nigger SAE." America has progressed in terms of race relations, however discrimination continues to appear in politics, careers and on college campuses across the nation.

In researching the history of black Greek presence at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), I was inspired by those students' courage, culture and vision for change. In 2003, the History Channel aired the documentary *Frat Boys*. The documentary presented the full history of the Interfraternity Council (IFC), which includes white fraternities, since the 1820s and an in-depth look at the predominantly white Phi Delta Theta at the university. It became clear to me that someone needed to tell the story of black Greek-lettered organizations' history, principles and present perception at Ole Miss.

II. THE FORMATION OF THE “DIVINE 9”

Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough, president of Dillard University in New Orleans, La., the author of *Black Greeks 101*, and a member of the historically black Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., he offers a detailed history of black fraternalism. Before the “Divine 9,” which is the nine BGLOs that continue to exist on college campuses today, Freemasonry provided the first accurate idea of black fraternalism in the United States. In 1784, Prince Hall petitioned the Grand Lodge of England for a warrant to charter a masonic lodge after it being denied by the white Masons of Massachusetts. The warrant was approved, and Hall established the first lodge of African American Masons in North America known as African Lodge No. 459. Since then, Masonry has spread nationwide and is very diverse in membership. It was over a hundred years before blacks would attempt to initiate a fraternal organization. (Kimbrough, 21)

In 1903, Alpha Kappa Nu formed at Indiana University. The society survived fourteen months before it revamped under another name in 1911 (Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.) (23) In 1904, Sigma Pi Phi fraternity, also known as the Boule’, formed in Philadelphia. It was established as a graduate fraternity composed of elite black citizens. Members included W. E. B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson and Martin Luther King, Jr. The Boule’ remains an active fraternity, but very exclusive and secretive. (24) In 1905, the *Chicago Defender* stated that a black fraternity, Pi Gamma Omicron, had been established at Ohio State University. However, there are no records of the organization at the university. Meanwhile at Wilberforce University, Gamma Phi Fraternity

was founded March 1, 1905. The organization existed at least three decades at the university but it isn't clear exactly when or why it ceased to exist. (29)

The founding period of the major black Greek organizations start in 1905 and lasted until 1930 with the "Great 8." During this period of time, four campuses served as birthplaces for black collegiate fraternalism, three of which were predominantly white institutions:

Cornell University - Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. 1906 (Alpha)

Indiana University - Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. 1911 (Kappa)

Butler University - Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. 1922 (S G Rho)

Howard University:

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. 1908 (AKA)

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. 1911 (Omega)

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. 1913 (Delta)

Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. 1914 (Sigma)

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. 1920 (Zeta)

On May 10, 1930, the constitution for the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was finalized at Howard University. The NPHC is the collective governing body of the eight organizations. The purpose of the council is to unite the black Greek sororities and fraternities and to promote its ideas of scholarship, service, and brother/sisterhood: which are the principles each organization is founded upon.

In 1963, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. (Iota) formed at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Md., thus adding the final organization to the NPHC and completing the "Divine 9." Black Greek-lettered organizations became a major interest and chapters rapidly began to charter across the country. Historically black colleges and universities began to charter them in the 40s

and 50s. Predominantly white institutions in the South began to charter them in the late 60s and 70s after integration would occur.

Before the presence of BGLOs at Ole Miss, some described the mood on campus as strange. In the university's 1972 yearbook an anonymous student wrote, "What we have here at Ole Miss is co-existence, not integration. The angry young blacks seem belligerent, suspicious and neither whites nor blacks promote friendship." Just ten years earlier, James Meredith became the first black student to successfully enroll at the university. Riots surrounding this moment in history resulted in an ongoing label of racism at the university. According to Dr. Thomas "Sparky" Reardon, following the 1968 death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, black students were emboldened on campus. Students wanted black athletes, professors, and barbers in the union barbershop. They challenged the university to change.

III. THE CHARTERING OF BGLOS AT THE UNIVERSITY

In 1974, Harold Reynolds became the first black Hall of Fame member. A columnist for the *Daily Mississippian*, Reynolds said that campus had become more palatable for black students but there weren't equal opportunities in the Greek system. WGLOs made up the only existing Greek council, and some predominantly white fraternities, such as Sigma Nu, were constitutionally bound to deny any black person who sought membership into the fraternity before 1968. James Hull, a spring '75 initiate of Omega, said that the perceptions of some WGLOs at the university in the, 70s were "elite, prejudice and bigoted." Many black students chastised Reynolds for wanting to charter BGLOs at the university, but Hull said the presence of the first black Greek organization helped bring cultures together. Reynolds went on to pursue the chartering of NPHC organizations at the university. With the help of Karl Smith, Jr., a member of Omega and a graduate student from Florida A&M University, he formed an interest group at Ole Miss.

Rust, Mississippi Valley State and Jackson State were all neighboring historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that helped in molding and mentoring those who eventually became charter members and taught them the culture and the principles of Omega. Reynolds became a charter member of the "Funky" Eta Zeta Chapter of Omega, which was the first BGLO at the university on July 31, 1973.

Eight charters followed to represent the full NPHC council at the university:

Theta Psi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. May 12, 1974

Lambda Sigma Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. November 14, 1974

Eta Beta Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. February 26, 1975

Tau Eta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. November 13, 1976

Nu Upsilon Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. March 20, 1978

Lambda Pi Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. April 16, 1983

Xi Zeta Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. October 28, 1994

Theta Iota Chapter of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. May 20, 2013

IV. THE PERCEPTIONS OF BGLOS AND ADMINISTRATION'S RESPONSE

The culture and customs of BGLOs are very different from the majority Greek culture at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Often times the culture of BGLO is seen as excessive and therefore threatening the image of what Greek life is at a PWI. Attitudes can be seen on social media outlets like Yik Yak. The number of posts peak at hundreds of anonymous students per day within a 10-mile radius surrounding the University of Mississippi. The status posts are mostly anonymous, but the comments usually address stepping, strolling and hopping on the union plaza in a provocative way. Not all comments are prejudiced. Some people comment of how “cool” stepping, strolling and hopping seems to be. Many WGLOs are incorporating stepping and strolling into their fundraiser events.

In 1991, under the leadership of Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Dr. Thomas Wallace, the university organized its first event that combined black and white Greek sororities and fraternities. *Afro Olympics* featured a number of competitive games and ended with a step show that included the predominantly white IFC, National Panhellenic Council (NPC) and NPHC organizations. Today, *Afro Olympics* no longer exists. It is unclear when the event ceased to continue. Dr. Wallace said the event was meant to create relationships with students who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity. Shunta A. Chevis, who became a Delta at the university in 1994, agreed that *Afro Olympics* helped unfold relationships that continued through the years. Students would have lunch together and support each other's events. Although some of the NPHC

members were hesitant to participate in the step show because they didn't want to share the culture or experience of stepping, hopping and strolling with the white sororities and fraternities, she said that the idea was positive and it did help in mixing Greek organizations.

V. PHYSICAL SPACE AT THE UNIVERSITY

At PWI's, many white fraternities and sororities rent antebellum style homes to house chapter meetings, members and social events. The university's fraternity and sorority rows bear many Greek letters but seldom those of the BGLOS. What distinguishes these organizations at a PWI are the different hand signs, calls, and colors even though they lack physical space. However, many HBCUs house "plots," which are a unique physical structure for BGLO's.

"A plot is a physical structure that symbolically represents the organization and appears in various forms. Some plots are made of concrete and or bricks with benches. Some have monuments engraved with the organizations symbols and history. Some plots consist of painted trees or sidewalks that bear the symbols linked to each organization. Plots have been seen mainly at historically black universities. Very few predominantly white institutions have plots. This may be due to the fact that these chapters only appeared on the campuses for the most part in the late 1960s and into the 1970s." (131)

Ole Miss does not have plots or any space that is uniquely designed for the black Greeks. According to Norris "EJ" Edney, black students are constantly reminded of what's not uniquely theirs, whether it is the Grove on game day or fraternity and sorority row. To compensate for space, black Greeks look forward to gathering during "Union Unplugged" and owning the union plaza for an hour of stepping, strolling, hopping, wearing their colors and letters, holding their hand signs and chanting. Since no campus markers represent black Greek sororities and fraternities, it is easy to assume that they don't exist.

Seeing this as a possible issue in recruitment, the administration has discussed ideas to bring physical structures to reflect BGLOs at the university.

Chancellor Dan Jones' 2014–2015 action plan proposed an area for black Greeks:

“Renderings are being developed to incorporate a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) garden between Northgate Drive and the new residential facility being constructed beside Crosby hall. This student-centered area will be a visible monument that represents the important history and critical campus engagement opportunities afforded by our historically black fraternities and sororities. The timeline for completion is uncertain at the early part of the planning phases, but our hope is to begin work after the residence hall opens in fall 2015.”

April 23, 2016 is scheduled for the groundbreaking of the Greek Garden. Although not to be compared to a plot, the garden is a start in creating a physical structure that uniquely belongs to BGLOs.

Currently, fraternity and sorority row houses white fraternities and sororities. Yet, there's an empty plot of land on fraternity row that once housed the Sigmas. Located in between the Phi Delta Theta and Pi Kappa Phi fraternities lies an empty plot of land where the members of the black fraternity expected to move into in 1988. “Chancellor Turner took an active role in the integration of fraternity row by working with the alumni and national office of Phi Beta Sigma and using the school's influence with local banks to assist in getting financing for the house. He said he saw it as a way to send a signal "that the movement toward equality was continuing." (The New York Times, *Fraternity Row Integrated at Ole Miss*, Oct. 16, 1988)

In Aug 1988 just days before the move-in someone burned down the fraternity house. Dr. Sparky Reardon recalls sitting in the union with ta group of Sigmas after the house had burned. Many of them heartbroken and explaining just how fearful their grandmothers were because they had enrolled at the university. Yet, they tried to look beyond the history only to become the target of a hate crime that until this day has not been solved. “After the fire, the chancellor's office and the IFC organized a drive to raise \$20,000 to help the Sigmas find an alternative house on fraternity row. An anonymous alumnus offered to underwrite a \$100,000 mortgage, and the school offered a \$6,000 reward for the arrest and prosecution of the arsonist. With the support of the university, the community and fellow Greek councils, they moved into another home on fraternity row two months later, becoming the first BGLO to integrate a fraternity row at a PWI in the nation. With great help from Dr. Wallace, the AKAs and the Deltas moved into faculty houses that were remodeled to house members, schedule chapter meetings and serve as a gathering place for alumni during homecoming events.

VI. THE PROCESS OF TELLING THIS STORY

I became a member of the Gamma Rho Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. at Jackson State University in Spring 2012. Although I am very familiar with the culture and customs of Greek life, my experience has been different. That's what made this story so compelling to me. I experienced black Greek life at an HBCU. The perceptions of black Greek culture are different at a PWI. For that reason, I decided not to use my voice or opinion in the film. Instead, I wanted to hear the experience of NPHC members at the university. During the latter stages of my research, eight of the nine organizations were active on campus. The AKAs were on "cease and desist" from activities and membership intake. This is a time when the chapter is at a halt due to a regional and/or national investigation of allegations of misconduct of members. They cannot resume their normal chapter duties, events or new membership intake until the investigation has been complete and the chapter is free of disciplinary action. The Kappas were returning from a national moratorium, a time period authorized by the fraternity's CEO and president to cease undergraduate and alumni membership intake until the membership process has been revised and or modified by selected qualified members of the fraternity, both undergraduate and graduate. The Iotas had a total of two members, one of whom was away for an internship.

Although some organizations were harder to film, I found solace in the fact that as Wallace said, "No matter which organization you were part of, you knew you had to stick together as African Americans in order to survive." Wallace also added that all black Greek organization's founding purposes are basically the same: sisterhood/brotherhood, scholarship and

service. Wallace became the first black Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at the university in 1990. He became a member of the Oxford graduate chapter, Eta Lambda Sigma, of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. in 1985. Wallace, much like Reardon, was an expert in the history and evolution of BGLOs at the university. These two men described the period between 1970 and 2000 as administrators in student affairs, a job that works closely with all Greek councils, for more than 15 years each.

I decided to create a documentary film because this story would be best told through video, photos, music, archives, and interviews showing the attitudes of members of the NPHC. Music plays a special role in the production of the documentary. In black Greek culture, we sing songs of struggle, pain, joy and pride, all in one verse. The evolution of the culture shows that in order to become a member, you are challenged mentally and physically. But once you made it over, for many, it was the greatest joy in life. Members sing songs particular to their organization and with meanings deeper than the listening ear can comprehend. This music dates back for centuries. We use them today in Greek shows, socials, and events.

The visibility of black Greeks in such places as the union plaza during school hours is met with many challenges. Connor Peacock, a sophomore member of the historically white fraternity, Pi Kappa Phi, said that in order to bridge cultural gaps the white fraternities should engage more with the members of BGLOs, something he hasn't experienced since becoming a member of the fraternity. "The change starts with me, going and asking questions about the culture. Trying not to accept people, I don't think that should be the norm," Peacock said. My goal with this documentary is to challenge the perceptions of black Greeks and provoke cultural engagement. I hope that once the students understand the importance of cultural exchange, they will challenge the department of fraternity and sorority life to create more opportunities for that.

Sure, we've had step shows, but I would like to see councils go deeper than that. I believe if we make partnerships in forums, community service, and brotherly/sisterly relations, then we can advance ourselves as agents for change. The Greek system has so much influence on campus. I can only imagine if all councils collectively were one strong force, what things they could do for students and the community.

VII. CONCLUSION

From examining the culture, customs and challenges of BGLOs, I would like to further my study. I am considering producing a video series that will further discuss these things in detail. There are many black Greek experts and authors, such as Rasheed Cromwell and Dr. Walter Kimbrough, who tour the nation speaking about black Greek life. There are currently no black females speaking about the sisterhood, let alone creating films about it. This may be a stretch, but I hope to use my video series, my research and my personal experience to one-day travel and speak to aspiring Greeks, present Greeks and alumni members about certain issues we face. The idea formed one random day on the union plaza. It matured in my research and grew through the footage I accumulated. I certainly hope this video will be used long after my time here at the university. I plan to submit my film to other schools and workshops in the near future to share my knowledge and my experience in hopes of helping others.

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VITA

Ashley F. G. Norwood

University, MS 38655
Meek School of Journalism and New Media
University of Mississippi
662-915-7146
meekschool@olemiss.edu

EDUCATION

M. A., Journalism, University of Mississippi, May 2016

Thesis: THE FLY IN THE BUTTERMILK:
THE HISTORY, PERCEPTIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF
BLACK GREEK-LETTERED ORGANIZATIONS AT
OLE MISS

B. A., English, Jackson State University, May 2014

PUBLICATIONS

Jackson Free Press, 2015
HottyToddy.com

“Man I’ll Never Forget: Hurricane Katrina Through the
Eyes of a child.”

Daily Mississippian, 2015

“What’s love got to do with it? Everything.”
“Horizons at the University of Mississippi”
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“#blacklivesmatter Oxford, MS”
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“Anastasia Hirsch “lived life to the fullest””

“Oxford 7th Annual Juneteenth Festival”
“Double Decker Bus 2015”
“First Annual Greek Swap at Ole Miss”