Cheng, Britina and Hunter Kane Final Update: People of Color in Greek Life Organizations

Our film ethnography will address people of color (PoCs) and their experiences in Greek life at Geneseo. This was inspired by a certain fraternity in which various people of color have dissociated (resigned their membership of the organization), expressing discomfort within the white cis-gendered heterosexual mass. Language is a bit over-the-top here and I don't think masses is a word in English. Organizations are made of the people who join, but if fundamentally exists they also can be defined in terms because of the people it excludes: they exclude. So, it is not necessarily the white-washed predominantly white crowds of Greek life that cause discomfort, but rather realizing those who create the negative space be more clear and precise. I think I know what you mean but I'm not sure. The list is often compelling: people of color, women who are victims of sexual assault, transfolk. This specific greek organization prides itself on being progressive and inclusive, pro-feminist, mixed-gender, and mixed-race. I'm lost. I though you were discussing an organization that has alienated people like this??, but the inherent structure of Greek life is exclusionary and hierarchical, which adds an additional layer to racial boundaries and does not accommodate or conform to all its members.

Because of these inherent problems, as we found from our film, members never have sense of a true egalitarian styled truly egalitarian organization and therefore suffer consequences for being seen as inferior, especially for people of color. This creates a separation of the members and produces a hierarchy of importance in the organization. On the contrary. In addition, "nonwhite members [of greek organizations] are haphazardly treated as complete and full members by their fraternal 'brothers' and 'sisters' while they are also faced with 'ostracism and criticism' from members of their own racial groups who may view their membership as a "sellout" (Hughey 2010:654, Thompson 2007:7). To members that are PoC, it seems as though they are torn in their choice to join their organization; where they are seen as a minority, and their race; where they are seen as an equal. "Developing and transmitting organizational forms that seek to operate according to progressive and feminist principles...can be seen as itself a kind of active political protest (Ostrander 1999: 640)." Although the organization of this "pro-feminist, mixed-gender, and mixed-race" greek organization can be seen as relatively progressive in relation to other greek organizations that are not, there are instances of cultural appropriation, sexual assault, and the ostracizing of its members of color. Ostrander (1999: 641) highlights that "it is possible to create this kind of solidarity, but most probably in the form of continued struggles over established patterns of subordination and active ongoing efforts to repeatedly resist and challenge them."

Our film employs footage from interviews we conducted that show our informants answering predetermined questions. We asked our participants to rephrase the question in their answer to keep our own voices out of the film. The question and answer structure helped keep a natural flow between each informant's response, one following the other.

A special aspect of our film is the testimony given by one of our informants that opens our film. His public testimony gets emotional and we see a physical, reflexive response from his body, as he chokes up recounting an experience of racism. He starts by declaring he is a member of Greek life as well. This footage is from the SUNY Geneseo’s walkout that took place on Monday November 16, 2015.

We wanted to film our participants at their respective organizations to capture an honest representation of their experience without the God-like hand of the directors involved. However, we figured this method may not prove effective as it is likely people would be more tactful with a camera around. For students who have experienced racial bias may be uncomfortable speaking about such. However, we are wary of being too selective and editing our film to moments we find relevant, or those which serve our own personal agenda. Therefore, we will be relying heavily on interviews. These individual stories will give an insider’s view to their thoughts and feelings on existing in heavily white communities that are built on brotherhood and sisterhood. We find that a non-narrative film style would work best for our ethnography film for we want our informants' experiences to speak for themselves. Our goal is to make a film that leads audiences to construct their own interpretation of the data in order to give the most objective stance for the film. The only time we intervened with the footage was to put slides in between cuts that presented the questions we asked our informants due to a lack of rephrasing of the question in our informants’ response.

The questions we asked our informants begin with simple general information and then get more complex, personal, and specific with each additional question. This was so that our informants would warm up to us and hopefully answer our questions honestly without feeling uncomfortable. The only time we skewed from the pre-determined list was depending on answers to previous questions. Changes to the structure were either due to our informants needing to further clarify a phrase or experience they spoke on or we thought of a question to further build upon a previous answer and found it mostly beneficial to do so. The questions are as follows:

- What organization do you affiliate with?
- When did you pledge? How long have you been with this organization?
- How involved would you say you are with the organization? (Are you in any positions, are you active, how much does it affect your social life /academic life?)
- How do you identify racially?
- Have you ever experienced any form of racism, prejudice, or bias due to racial differences?
- Do you identify as a PoC and do your brothers/sisters recognize you as one?
- How much is it discussed?
- Do you find it difficult to speak up about racial issues concerning your organization?
- Whose voices do you think are heard most? Who is most visible?
- Do you ever feel uncomfortable/ostracized because you spoke up about an issue?
- Do you ever feel like an ambassador for your race?
- Mixed races - do you ever feel like you straddle races?
- Do you think the structure of Greek life affects PoCs differently?
- Have you ever experienced/taken part in a party that employed cultural appropriation?

We asked these questions to figure out whether people felt isolated as people of color on a predominantly white campus. Do they feel like they fit into a certain schema? Do they ever feel ostracized by this very same community, and in what ways? We are also going to be wary of the way our questions will frame what the interviewee answers. We do not want to encourage them to answer in a certain way. We want to provide scaffolding questions in which we build upon our interviewees' own experiences, to shed light on what they say, not how we frame it. Filming this interview will allow us to study their body movements, their facial expressions, and the way they react to these questions. It will be telling of our (the director's, editor's) manipulation of questions and framing, and hopefully be a more 'objective' recount of their experiences.
The literature surrounding greek life often includes critiques on sexual assault, hazing, but rarely on race politics. As Matthew Hughey (2010: 653) writes, “Non-white members in White Greek Letter Organizations (WGLOs) are considered “transformative”, a successful end rather than a problematic beginning.”

Non-white members have to do much more in order to be perceived as a belonging member, which creates a paradox of participation. This shows that racism does not only exist in explicit laws such as segregation, or hurtful comments, but rather exist systematically. Racism also isn’t always a sweeping gesture. Microaggressions are the day-to-day little annoyances that people, in particular, people of color for, endure and build up over time. A prime example of this is wanting to touch "exotic hair" or when PoC are told "you don't talk black". Although these microaggressions may seem benign, the compilation of the day's microaggressions are enough to set anyone in a bad mood and set them in their appropriate 'place'.

After we screened the finished ethnography, we noticed a number of choices we would have made differently. First, we interviewed two members of the same fraternity, narrowing our scope of diversity. We also would have liked to interview more people, although we were limited by time constraints. We realize that the frame of our ethnography, people of color in greek life, suggests that we are focusing on those who are in Greek Life. However, that suggests we are interviewing only people who have chosen to be a part of this system. What about people of color who rushed, but did not get in? What about those who never rushed because they did not feel comfortable. What about those who left their organizations? These questions came to mind and we plan to explore them further in our own collegiate careers. There are some good point here but this seems like a hybrid of research companion to the film and the final reflexive statement.

Works Cited