

BEYONDTHISPLACE

DOCUMENTING THE VISUAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES ©

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Editor
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Greetings Ms. Waterman,

When I was 19 years old, my father gave me my first photography book with a note inside that said "Every photographer must have a copy of THIS work." It was a hardback copy of Moneta Sleet Jr.'s "Special Moments: In African American History 1955-1996." Sleet led me to Gordon Parks, who lead me to Roy DeCarava, Richard Avedon, Ansel Adams, and other phenomenal photographers. I was instantly hooked.

I have learned that any chance to practice this craft of photography is a tremendous opportunity and have dedicated a majority of my energy to becoming a better storyteller. I am currently studying at the University of Missouri where I am completing my Master of Art in Journalism degree. Partly motivated by my graduation requirements but sincerely rooted in my desire to help other journalist, I wrote an article dealing with a basic visual challenge that every photographer deals with daily: stereotypes.

In an early introduction to photography research I was asked to examine social and political dimensions of still photography in society. One day in class we discussed visual stereotyping. I have often wondered about the definition of visual stereotypes, where they came from and how to combat them particularly when they involved the Black community. I wondered if they were undeniable or inevitable. How could I photograph aspects of my own culture, one of the most stereotyped in the history of media, in a way that wouldn't be riddled with preconceived notions? How could

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someone completely unfamiliar to my culture photograph an aspect more accurately? As a Black photographer, I needed to find a way to get closer to representation of a visual subject rather than relying on stereotypes to connect with my potential audience. My solution was to use a research method called photo elicitation to help inform my work.

Using photographs to interview people has become a way for researchers and journalist to elicit better detail when trying to find out important aspects of social, political and cultural events. This article addresses issues surrounding stereotyping in media, talks about how I used interviews with photographs to inform my work and talks about my own revelations as a Black photographer during the development of my personal documentary project.

Overall, I hope that we can continue further dialogue about the possibility of this essay running in PDNedu. Please feel free to contact me at your convenience. I look forward to this potential opportunity to serve the greater journalism community while continuing my personal development as a photographer and student.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



Jarrad Henderson

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The Images Inside My Head

by Jarrad Henderson

Close your eyes and imagine eating an apple.

What did the apple look like as you were chomping away on it? What representation of 'apple' did you come up with? Was it a Granny Smith? Gala? I bet it was a big shiny apple like the one Snow White bit into in the Disney film. Bright Red. The concept of internal images is not something new. Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978) and Chuck Klosterman's book *Eating the Dinosaur* (2009) explore the concept of internal images. Mander wrote about the concept in the pre-Google society of 1978, stating that TV takes away people's freedom to have whatever thoughts they want. Even more relevant to this article was Mander's belief that images influence our thoughts.

Wait. Images? Photographs? Pictures?

Yes. According to Mander, these 'images inside your head' were either out of your own imagination or else they were created from media. This idea of pre-meditated imagination is eerily similar to a journalistic concept that photographers confront every time they photograph a subject: stereotyping.

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someone completely unfamiliar to my culture photograph an aspect more accurately? As a black photographer, I needed to find a way to get closer to representation of a visual subject rather than relying on stereotypes to connect with my potential audience.

It is nearly impossible to talk about representation without talking about stereotyping. When you think about stereotypes, you automatically have images that unveil themselves in your head. These types of images are the result of decades of embedding. Unfortunately, what we generally associate with the term stereotypes normally encompass negative characteristics, but they can also be neutral characteristics like the 'redness' of the apple you imagined. Why didn't you think of a green or yellow colored apple?

Klosterman continues by giving one of Mander's examples: "he asks the reader to imagine a basketball game in your head." Do that. Imagine the game in your head now. What do you see? Klosterman concludes "One can assume that virtually everyone in the United States had attended a live basketball game at some point in his or her life, and almost as many have played in a basketball game for real...I played organized basketball for thirteen years. So why is my first mental image of basketball game moment from game four of a Celtics-Lakers championship series I saw on CBS in 1984?" It was clear to me that these powerful associations would not be easy to overcome. How could I approach a story more accurately? My solution was to use a research method called photo elicitation to help better inform my project on a longstanding African American cultural, political and social institution.

Over the last two and a half years I have been exploring the visual history of African American fraternities and sororities. I knew I wanted to complete my master's research project to help inform a long-term project called "Beyond This Place". This photo project will tell stories of members of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs), the historical context of which they were developed and the contemporary challenges faced

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by their leadership. The subject of fraternities and sororities is unfamiliar to most people. Even more unfamiliar is the historical significance and history of black fraternities and sororities. I was extremely familiar with the culture, being an initiated member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., one of the nine organizations that comprises the Divine Nine, but needed a way to explore the topic to go beyond the general, popular perception of these organizations. By using photos to elicit responses during my interviews, I could pull relevant facts, questions and concerns to the forefront of the design of my project.

From the time a visual journalist is given an assignment images instantly flood their heads. As a photojournalist, I have often felt that my job is not to define but to display. Many professionals around the nation are challenged daily with creating artwork that is representative of a situation or person. These images can be viewed thousands or even millions of times. Being in this position is tough. There are numerous considerations when photographing a subject. What angle should I take the photo from? Which lens should I use? What type of light should I use? Photographers who work for publications often have their viewers in mind. So how does one interpret photographic situations accurately without introducing his or her own biases and projected stereotypes onto a visual subject? I had to deal with the same challenge, given the stereotypes that surround Black Greek Letter Organizations.

In my case when most people think about black fraternities and sororities, they think of the media associated with it first, just like in Klostermans's example. For me this means my subjects mention either or both of two movies: Spike Lee's film *School Daze* (1988) or Sylvain White's film *Stomp The Yard* (2007). Essentially I wanted to find out which external media source had the greatest influence on the internal images of my subject, and how those images or beliefs inspired people to behave a particular way.

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I set up interviews with eight college-aged black students, four were members of BGLOs and four were not. During my interviews, I showed a series of images and video clips to participants and had them talk about what they saw and what it meant to them. I found that many people gave me specific examples of events and people they had encountered who essentially introduced them to Black Greek culture. A good number of them had their first interactions with a family member but all agreed that this wasn't where their understanding of black Greek stereotypes came from. In fact, participants thought the movie *School Daze* provided the most iconic images of the culture in popular media, falling in line of the hypothesis of Mander. The images inside their heads were of Dean Big Brother Almighty, the dean of pledges for the fictional Gamma Phi Gamma Fraternity Incorporated, or Half-Pint, a pledge attempting to make it through 'Hell Week', as portrayed by filmmaker Spike Lee.

When it came to identifying the stereotypical traits of the organizations many turned to behavioral traits first. Because of this, many felt that the stereotypes of specific fraternities and sororities were a part of the actual character traits of members of these organizations in real life. For example, Spike Lee's film *School Daze* used the concept of fraternities to show viewers basic, yet effective, group identity traits that are familiar to people who were aware of fraternity men in the culture. His fictional fraternity, Gamma Phi Gamma drives the plot line as the viewer experiences the harsh realities of an early 80's pledge process, the 'dog' like behavior of the G Phi G organization, and the sexual promiscuity of fraternity men.

In my research these group traits were easily identified throughout the interview. One Greek participant, Justin McCain talked about the influence of these traits:

“ I think that when you join an organization, there are certain expectations and there are certain stereotypes that you are *expected* to hold. If you are a member of Kappa Alpha Psi, you are expected to become a pretty boy who gets all the

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girls. If you are an Alpha man you are expected to be distinguished. If you're an Omega man, you're expected to be someone who isn't afraid to be loud or rambunctious...Now is that true? In some cases yes. Is it true all of the time? No. Does that stop the stereotype from existing? No, because I have experienced it."

Another non-Greek participant, Bailey Anderson, echoed the previous sentiments stating that "...Black Greeks play a big part in their media representations of themselves, and I think it's important for organizations to put themselves at a higher standard." The assumption of identity then could be likened to the experiences of internal imagery. Overall, the people I interviewed thought that not only did the stereotypes exist but also they stated that the members themselves were subject to the images inside their own heads when learning how to 'act' like a member of a BGLO once initiated.

After conducting my research, I learned that most of the participants quickly responded about lack of 'service', brotherhood/sisterhood and the existence of intergenerational membership images. Where the images simply overlooked? I wasn't so sure. Lee's film didn't include any scene about BGLOs service to the community. By taking time to research what others who were or were not familiar with Black Greek culture, I found a key element that would make my project more holistic in its representation of BGLOs and an answer to combat general stereotypes of the culture.

Just as Klosterman's basketball example, the images conjured by the mind at the mention of Black Greeks came from media representation. Klosterman continued by saying that people can't differentiate between reality and fiction when it comes to internal images, citing that while we can explain the difference between the two stimuli, most times, we cannot manage the internal image any more than Klosterman could

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keep game four of the Celtics-Lakers Championship out of his mind's eye. While these stereotypes may not be realistic, they are what people build their impressions on.

News photographers, who face increasingly shrinking print space and resources, have to communicate messages quickly. If they are faced with the decision to photograph a step show or a community service event, many factors including timing, access and context play a role. While many will associate BGLOs with stepping, it may not have been the best way of communicating the representation of the fraternity or sorority members or of the culture itself. These decisions in the real world affect how people think internally about hundreds of years of historical achievement and significant contributions to the political, social and educational development of black America. For me the challenge was to better represent the culture by bringing emphasis to these little explored concepts.

After gathering all my information I was truly able to inform my work in a way that made it different from anything else currently on the discourse of black fraternities and sororities. This process helped keep the focus on the culture and not myself, allowing me to think less about which lenses I was using and more about the ideas I wanted to convey in the resulting images. I found the results to be satisfactory and was told the work presented a different degree of the culture not often seen. Ultimately, the lesson to journalist is simple: in this digital age, we must be careful what we choose to show and what we choose not to show. The images you present online and in print can very well become the images inside someone else's head...forever.

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