

Introduction

Black Greek “Racial Uplift”

In the popular imagination, black fraternities and sororities are caught between—to reference the ancient Greek mythology of Odysseus—the monster of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis. On the one hand, the films of *Animal House* (1978), *School Daze* (1988), *Stomp the Yard* (2007), and *Burning Sands* (2017) all contextualized and popularized historically black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs). Throughout televisual mediums, BGLOs are characterized as color-struck groups that embrace little more than identity politics and public “step-show” performances. Romanticized and exoticized, BGLOs seem to exist as little more than caricatures to be laughed at or as colorful entertainers for whites who know little of Greek life on the other side of the color line.

On the other hand, the past few years of actual news coverage of these organizations have not been kind. Every handful of months, so it seems, a hazing-related injury or death is reported. The Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity had two deaths in 2018, one at the University of California, Riverside and the other at Lincoln University, Missouri; the Northwestern University chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority saw one pledge, suffering with anxiety and depression, commit suicide in 2017. In 2019 a pledge of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity at Delaware State University died after crashing his car due to alleged sleep deprivation from hazing. In 2019 Omega Psi Phi fraternity ultimately halted all social and “pledge” activities in the wake of the collapse and death of a student who was a Division I football player at Georgia Tech. For many, death and violence are what define BGLOs.

However, these groups have a long and rich history of service, advocacy, resistance, and racial uplift. This story is the third way between that proverbial rock and hard place. The knowledge of what these

organizations have done—and continue to do—charts a path not to myth and mist, but toward the facts and functions of BGLOs. Consider that this story is now well over a century old. In October 2005, the National Pan-Hellenic Council hosted its national convention in Chicago. In doing so, the body that is the umbrella organization for the nine major BGLOs celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary. The event overlapped with another anniversary celebration that took place on November 19, 2005, at Cornell University. On that date, the first of these BGLOs began its centennial celebration at the place of its founding in 1906. Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity—brotherhood to the likes of Martin Luther King, Cornel West, Thurgood Marshall, Paul Robeson, and many others—began its yearlong celebration, featuring the publication of several in-house books, a traveling museum exhibit, and a PBS documentary. It also showcased the groundbreaking of the one-hundred-twenty million dollar Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., which was spearheaded by Alpha Phi Alpha. These events culminated in a centennial anniversary convention in July 2006 in Washington. In 2008, 2011, 2013, and 2014, Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, Omega Psi Phi fraternity, Delta Sigma Theta sorority, and Phi Beta Sigma fraternity, respectively, celebrated their centennials.

It is no accident that many of the best and brightest African American leaders of yesteryear and today have come from the ranks of these organizations—also known as the Divine Nine (fraternities—Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma, and Iota Phi Theta; sororities—Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho). BGLO members such as Garrett Morgan (inventor of the traffic light) and Dr. Mae Jemison (engineer and astronaut) charted new courses in science. Men and women like Earl B. Dickerson and Dorothy Height left an indelible mark on the areas of racial uplift and women's rights. Visionaries such as Mary McLeod Bethune (founder of Bethune-Cookman College) and Dr. Charles Wesley (historian and college president) were towering figures in education.

Born at the dawn of the twentieth century, BGLOs not only served to solidify bonds between African American college students but also had (and continue to have) a vision and sense of purpose: civic action,

community service, philanthropy, and high scholasticism. BGLOs were an integral part of what W. E. B. Du Bois of Alpha Phi Alpha termed “the talented tenth”—the top 10 percent of African Americans, who would serve as a cadre of educated, upper-class, motivated individuals and would acquire the professional credentials, skills, and economic (as well cultural) capital to assist the remaining 90 percent of the race with attaining socioeconomic equality. The founding impetus for BGLOs is intertwined with the history of collegiate literary societies, white college fraternities and sororities, black benevolent and secret societies, the black church, and the broader racial milieu that Phi Beta Sigma member Alain Leroy Locke coined as the “New Negro” ethos. Together, BGLOs’ collective history bespeaks fidelity to the overarching principles of racial uplift.

BGLOs have been influential in the African American community both historically and contemporarily. Unlike their white counterparts, BGLO members remain committed to and active in these organizations long after their college years. As such, BGLOs have served as civic as much as fraternal organizations. After a century, however, and despite being almost three million members strong, the public knows little about BGLOs beyond their high-energy step shows and periodic wrangling with hazing incidents.

And in just the past few years, scholars have begun to explore the role that black fraternal organizations have played in African Americans’ quest for civil rights and social equality. Yet, there has yet to emerge a narrative that takes on BGLOs’ racial uplift strategies and their lasting legacy of community service, civil rights, policy agendas, and philanthropic service. Accordingly, we have written *A Pledge with Purpose* to both fill this gap and compare these organizations not only with one another, but in relation to their own variations over time, as each of these organizations shifted tact toward differing racial uplift ends with variegated strategies. One of the challenges to doing this work, as we admit up front, is that the archives from which we have drawn our research are uneven across BGLOs. Some organizations have robust records, particularly when it comes to organizational periodicals. Others have limited archives in that regard. Also, even though each BGLO has a national history book, those texts are not even in their coverage of their respective organizations’ racial uplift

work. Hence, treatment within this book is not necessarily even across organizations.

Uplifting the Race: Through the Years

BGLOs are unique, important, and relevant social institutions, grounded in both the African and the American social and cultural exigencies. Even more, they and their members have served as significant forces in the struggle for social equality of people of African descent. In this book we explore the complexity of this racial uplift activism and agenda. *A Pledge with Purpose* charts the arc of African American experiences through the lens of BGLOs. Specifically, we advance a historical narrative that uncovers how BGLOs were shaped by, and labored to transform, the changing social, political, and cultural landscape of black America. By moving through varied historical eras toward the present, we center our analysis on the first eight BGLOs' signature social uplift programs and the variations across these black fraternities and sororities. BGLOs and their attendant national programs changed in their pace and intensity both over the years and in relation to one another. For example, BGLOs' early focus (1906–1929) was on promoting black access to higher education and strategies for success once students were enrolled. However, these programs manifested differently from organization to organization. While fraternities like Alpha Phi Alpha and Omega Psi Phi concentrated their energies on the reeducation and social ties of the black already elite in the northeastern United States, Phi Beta Sigma and Zeta Phi Beta expanded south to draw their membership from and institute their educational programs amid a decidedly black working and middle class. Similarly, Delta Sigma Theta recruited black women from the U.S. South to move to the West (particularly California) to gain employment as teachers. Comparatively, when the civil rights era began (1941–1963), BGLOs were at the forefront of the battle for de jure equality. Yet each organization had a slightly different picture of how de facto equality would be achieved. While some organizations centered their energies on lawsuits and accompanying social science evidence to sway the courts, others labored to engage in voter registration, in the establishment of international chapters in Africa and the

West Indies that were intimately connected with decolonization, or in local cooperative programs with doctors and civil rights organizations to eliminate health disparities in areas like the Mississippi Delta.

What Is Racial Uplift?

In the following chapters we examine how each of the first eight BGLOs engaged in “racial uplift” praxis in six separate yet sometimes overlapping areas:

1. Civil activism (civil and human rights litigation)
2. Civic education (informing African Americans about their civil duties, responsibilities, and rights, especially as pertaining to enfranchisement and public office)
3. Public policy (largely federal and state-level prodding to produce or practice civil and human rights procedures and legal prosecution)
4. Philanthropy (fund-raising for scholarships and/or specific people/areas in need)
5. Community service (mentoring and informal teaching)
6. Community organizing (recruiting for direct action, e.g., boycotting or civil disobedience)

A Pledge with Purpose thereby serves as a critical barometer for, and reflection of, both the collective African American racial uplift struggle and the heterogeneous, highly variable, and sometimes antagonistic strategies of black Americans in their great (and unfinished) march toward freedom.

In so doing, we reveal some important insights. For instance, not all organizations were equally engaged in all these areas at the same time. And many of these organizations’ commitment to one or more of the above six areas certainly waxed and waned over time. Moreover, members of some groups took up areas of racial uplift when their organizations went in differing directions. These insights all gesture toward important organizational questions: Why did organizations change or keep their tact? Why did certain organizational ideals appeal in certain practices? Did members work with and/or against their organizations’

foci? And finally, to what extent did BGLOs structure their members' racial uplift activism in relation to the larger racial zeitgeist? On top of these, some unpleasant questions (especially for members and/or fans of BGLOs) are raised: Did "racial uplift" exclude those not in the middle or upper classes of black life? Did black fraternities traffic in or at least fail to confront much of the sexism and patriarchy that pushed their sorority colleagues to the margins of racial uplift activism? These questions and more are explored in the following chapters.