


BIG T-SHIRTS AND RUNNING SHORTS: A FEMALE UNIFORM AND SOUTHERN
WOMANHOOD ON THE OLE MISS CAMPUS

by
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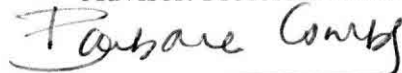
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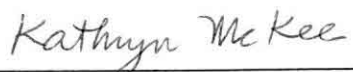
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ABSTRACT

ABBY ABIDE: Big T-shirts and Running Shorts: A Female Uniform and Southern Womanhood on the Ole Miss Campus
(Under the direction of Darren Grem)

This thesis attempts to understand why white female sorority members wear oversized t-shirts as a “uniform” to their classes and how this outfit affects the construction of white southern womanhood on the Ole Miss campus. In this exploration, I have interview male and female, black and white, undergraduates. I also used an online survey that I separated by sex. I have found that oversized t-shirts are related to ideas of social status, sexuality, class, constructions of ideas about the female body, and southern identity with in the Greek community. These ideas intensely affect the daily lives of Ole Miss students and how they construct their social world.

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Big T-shirts and Running Shorts: A Female Uniform and Southern Womanhood on the

Ole Miss Campus

Abby Abide

Anyone who walks onto the University of Mississippi's campus for the first time can see that there is an unofficial uniform for white female students. This uniform consists of a large t-shirt and Nike shorts or leggings, depending on the weather. The most noticeable aspect of these outfits is the oversized t-shirt. In a college town that has a reputation for "southern belles" who are "husband-hunting" or only there for their "MRS. degree," it is strange that so many of these young women wear baggy shirts to class so often. This thesis will try to understand and analyze the complexities that lead college-age women to wear oversized shirts every day, and what it means for the current state of southern identity, sexuality, and race on the Ole Miss campus.

First, I argue that big t-shirts are closely related to how students construct ideas about the white female body, especially in regards to sexual purity. Second, I argue that big t-shirts work as a social marker between non-Greeks and Greeks, which are often divided racially. Finally, I argue that big t-shirts are a southern phenomenon. For the most part, it is confined to universities in the South, suggesting that, even though it sometimes goes against conventional southern womanhood, perhaps this trend is a sign of a "new" southern woman on campus.

I am a member of a Panhellenic sorority, and I have found being a part of a sorority was extremely beneficial in writing this thesis. Members of the Greek community were more likely to be candid and honest with me when I interviewed them,

because I am an “insider.” I also had a better sense of where my research might take me and could relate with a lot of the people I interviewed because I am a part of the culture I am studying.

In doing this research, I have mostly relied on in-person interviews with undergraduate students. To select the students that I used, I first started with my group of friends and then recruited people that they knew through snowball sampling. I interviewed 39 women (33 current female students, 6 alumnae of the university), and 6 male students. In some cases, I typed transcripts of conversations while they were happening; in other cases, I recorded conversations and then later transcribed them. I also used an online survey. To recruit students for this, I sent out an email to members of Panhellenic sororities and Interfraternal Council fraternities. I separated the two surveys by sex, and I have cited the findings from them as Male/Female Survey Results. In each survey, I collected data based on student attitudes about themselves and the trend of wearing big t-shirts on campus. For historical context, I looked through the on-campus yearbook, *The Ole Miss*, to figure out when this trend began and to theorize why. To prevent any harm to subjects I interviewed, I have used pseudonyms.

Chapter 1

The Culture and History Behind the Shirt

Rise of the Big Shirt

The big t-shirt phenomenon is a relatively recent trend on campus. In the middle of the twentieth century, both male and female Ole Miss students stressed physical appearance. Historian Charles Eagles writes, “Ole Miss coeds dressed up, but in ways too flashy for people accustomed to the more relaxed styles of northern colleges. [...] More than other state colleges, and far more than many liberal arts colleges, the university exemplified the important social function performed by higher education. It served as a social and cultural institution even more than an academic one.”¹ Because Ole Miss was known for its students to be so involved in the social aspect of college, dressing up has been prioritized for decades.

Styles relaxed in the 1970s, especially as countercultural fashion made its way onto campus. In the 1974-1975 yearbook, for instance, *The Ole Miss*, sorority members wore dresses and wide legged dress pants, and some even wore blazers. A few members were dressed more casually, wearing plaid bell-bottoms and tank tops.² In other photos, female students attending classes and walking around campus were similarly dressed.³ Linda, who was a freshman in 1974 remembered, “My freshman year, we wore wrap

¹ Charles Eagles, *The Price of Defiance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009) 16.

² *The Ole Miss*, 1975, 220-278

³ *Ibid.* 14, 41, 373.

around skirts with a t-shirts and then a handkerchief in our hair and Mary Janes. Everything had a monogram in the middle. Out at night we wore lowrider blue jeans with a mid-drift top. We showed a lot of skin. Our blue jeans were blue, and they had orange stitching on them. We would either wear that or a sundress. We dressed up for class every day. We wore make-up and did our hair all of the time.”⁴ By 1977, her junior year, styles had changed. “We wore starched button downs with khakis and Wallabees. At night, we would wear a plaid button down shirt and khakis and a velvet blazer. You might wear jeans to class on a Friday, but no one would have ever worn sweats or warm ups,” she continued.⁵ The 1984-1985 yearbook featured co-eds with big hair, and yearbook writers declared that “‘Prep’ was in.”⁶ By 1995, oversized t-shirts started to make appearances in the Greek section of the yearbook. Sorority members sometimes were dressed in typical “90s” fashion, wearing sweatshirts, light wash jeans with fitted t-shirts tucked in, and plaid shirts. For class, however, the oversized t-shirt was ubiquitous.⁷

Jessica, a student from 1994-1998 recalled, “For every day to class, we wore a swap shirt, size extra-large no matter what size you were. With that, everyone wore these cheap, tight, black pants that flared at the bottom that we would buy at Goody’s in the Oxford Mall and running shoes. When it was cold, we wore a huge Patagonia fleece over the whole ensemble.”⁸ Fashion changed yet again in the next decade. According to Ashley, who graduated in 2006, “When I was in school at Ole Miss, people always wore

⁴ Interview by author, February 25, 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Ole Miss*, 1985, 106.

⁷ *The Ole Miss*, 1995, 29, 31, 34, 52, 155, 156, 215, 217, 244.

⁸ Interview by author, October 20, 2013. A “swap shirt” refers to a shirt listing the date and location of a “swap” or “mixer,” a social function between a fraternity and a sorority.

jeans or Nike shorts with a sorority shirt and Rainbows or Chacos. Most people wore make-up to class, and only a few people wore shirts that were oversized.”⁹ Amanda, who was a freshman in 2007, stated, “I think [big t-shirts] were a thing when I first attended Ole Miss. I didn’t order small T’s after I pledged [in 2007]. But I think they got bigger my sophomore year. Freshman year I was ordering Mediums and sophomore years I was ordering Larges.”¹⁰ Heather, a freshman in 2009, noted, “By the time I was a freshman, everyone was wearing oversized shirts. It was a huge deal by then.”¹¹

The yearbook supports Heather’s recollections. In the 2005-2006 yearbook, there are no oversized t-shirts featured. Only an article about sorority members power-walking in the Student Life section features a picture of two Delta Gammas in fitted t-shirts and shorts.¹² In keeping with cultural expectations regarding “high class” dress, the 2006-2007 yearbook noted, “At Ole Miss, we dress to impress. [...] The adherence to tradition pervades every aspect of student life, and fashion is no exception. At Ole Miss, three words can be used to describe the fashion tradition most often seen on campus: New England prep.”¹³ T-shirts appeared in the pages and were slightly looser, but many of the women wore them with jeans.¹⁴ In 2007-2008, the first Nike shorts make an appearance on sorority bid day and at rush practices, and female students appear in the yearbook wearing a mix of Nike shorts and jeans with moderately sized shirts.¹⁵

⁹ Interview by author, October 15, 2013.

¹⁰ Interview by author, October 16, 2013.

¹¹ Interview by author, February 23, 2014.

¹² *The Ole Miss*, 2006, 41.

¹³ *The Ole Miss*, 2007, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 268, 305.

¹⁵ *The Ole Miss*, 2008, 288, 291.

In the 2008-2009 yearbook, a majority of sorority members are wearing big t-shirts. There is a full page picture of female students wearing oversized t-shirts, Nike shorts and tennis shoes walking at the Panhellenic Cancer Awareness Research and Eradication (CARE) Walk, a pre-rush event where potential new members and all active sorority members walk around campus to get to know each other better and raise money for cancer research.¹⁶

The yearbook also includes an article titled, “The 7 Deadly Fashion Sins.” The writer, Caitlin Wilkerson, notes that, “T-shirts are an essential part of every Ole Miss student’s wardrobe” but that high school t-shirts are not acceptable.¹⁷ Only shirts promoting clubs, events, or a person’s sorority or fraternity are advisable, otherwise, as student Richard McKay observed, “You will automatically be labeled as a freshman.”¹⁸ The final fashion sin mentioned is “shacker attire.” A shacker is a person (usually female) who spends the night after a one-night-stand and then has to walk home the next morning in one of the t-shirts of the man with whom she slept. Wilkerson writes, “Another very common phenomenon on campus is to see a girl sitting in class wearing an oversized t-shirt with skinny jeans and patent leather black pumps.”¹⁹ Wilkerson quotes student Elizabeth Howard, who stated, “It is never appropriate to go out in public in shacker clothes. Ever. You might as well shout from the rooftops your experiences from the night before. What happened to the days of keeping some sort of privacy? Let’s keep it classy, ladies.”²⁰

¹⁶ *The Ole Miss*, 2009, 338.

¹⁷ *The Ole Miss*, 2009, 51

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Historical Context for the Shirt

The oversized t-shirt is a product of the history and environment of the University of Mississippi. The University of Mississippi, more commonly known as “Ole Miss,” opened its doors in 1848.²¹ Located in Oxford, Mississippi, the school has been steeped in “Old South” social mores since it opened. Some students and professors owned slaves on the campus, and the famous Lyceum was likely built by slave labor.²² When the Civil War broke out, members from the all-male student body quickly enlisted in the Confederate army, nicknaming their company the University Greys. Buildings on campus served as hospitals for the wounded during the war.²³ In the postbellum era, many students and faculty adopted the Lost Cause myth, honoring soldiers who died in the Civil War. In 1948, members of the States Rights Democratic Party, often known as “Dixiecrats,” used the Confederate flag to campaign on campus. From this moment until the 1990s, Confederate flags filled the Vaught-Hemingway Stadium for every Saturday home game.²⁴

But perhaps more than its “Old South” fixations, Ole Miss is famous for the riots that broke out on campus during the integration of the university and enrollment of James Meredith. Starting with Meredith, African American students began to enroll and became

²¹ Nadine Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss* (New York: The Free Press, 1997) 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

active members of the university's student body.²⁵ In the 1990s, African American students campaigned for the removal of the official mascot Colonel Reb because of his image as a slave-owning planter, often dressed in a Confederate uniform. Since Colonel Reb's removal in 2003, the university administration, led first by Chancellor Robert Khayat, then Dr. Daniel Jones, has tried to distance itself albeit not fully from some of its more offensive southern symbols. As a result, Ole Miss is a place where white southerners contest and reaffirm their identity, often in the public spotlight or through private social institutions, such as the many Greek organizations on campus.

Ole Miss's fraternities and sororities have a long history on campus. The university began admitting women in 1882. Chi Omega, the university's first sorority, appeared on campus in 1889. Four years later, the university built a dormitory for women. Before that, most female students were from Lafayette County and lived at home.²⁶ Fraternities and sororities were banned at Ole Miss in 1912 through state legislation. Populist congressmen attacked Greek organizations for "being exclusive, undemocratic, and promoting unsavory behavior."²⁷ Greek organizations returned to campus in 1926 and afterward, grew into powerful social institutions on campus.²⁸ By the 1984-1985 school year, Greek students dominated the university. The yearbook noted in

²⁵ Ibid., 85, 129-160.

²⁶ Alan Cabaniss, *The University of Mississippi: Its First Hundred Years* (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1971) 92.

²⁷ Craig L. Torbenson ed. "From the Beginning" in *Brothers and Sisters: Diversity in College Fraternities and Sororities*, ed. Craig L. Torbenson and Gregory S. Parks (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 32.

²⁸ Cabaniss, *The University of Mississippi*, 136

an article on Greek Week that 83 percent of the student body was in a fraternity or sorority.²⁹

Especially in sororities, a notable culture of beauty appeared at an early date. Students, both male and female, first held a contest to select who had the most beauty in 1909. By 1918, the yearbook included a section called the “Parade of Beauties,” featuring photographs of attractive women chosen by the students.³⁰ By the late 1950s, Ole Miss’s female students had gained a national reputation for their beauty and beauty culture. In 1958, senior Mary Ann Mobley was the first Miss Mississippi to win Miss America. The next year, Mobley crowned another Miss Mississippi, Lynda Lee Mead, Miss America. The two women were Chi Omega sorority sisters. Shortly after, a Jackson columnist wrote, “Mississippi may be last in a lot of things, but we can cite to the world that we are first in womanhood!”³¹ Today, the majority of the Parade of Beauties contestants are women nominated and entered by their sorority. Sorority members vote on who is the most beautiful from each pledge class to maximize their chances of having a winning member. In this way, sorority members regulate beauty among members and the broader student body.

Recruitment, colloquially known as “rush,” at the University of Mississippi is “a proving ground of competitive femininity cloaked in the guise of gracious hospitality and collegiate spirit.”³² This week long process to receive a bid from a sorority is “a scrutiny

²⁹ *The Ole Miss*, 1985, 38.

³⁰ David G. Sansing, *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 160.

³¹ Eagles, *The Price of Defiance*, 14.

³² Elizabeth Boyd, “Sister Act: Sorority Rush as Feminine Performance” *Southern Cultures* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1999), 58.

session in which women are assigned a social value based on looks status, and feminine competency.”³³ According to Elizabeth Boyd, “Rush is a daunting social obstacle course wherever enacted, but nowhere are the expectations higher, the standards more stringent, or the consequences so crucial as in the South.”³⁴ Boyd asserts that the University of Mississippi takes this dynamic to an extreme. She writes, “[A]t Ole Miss, the annual performance represents a pinnacle of sorts, an apex of feminine enactment with its own regional meanings, yardsticks, and habits.”³⁵ In order to have a successful recruitment, a potential new member must perform a “fairly specific rendition of womanhood[. R]ush momentarily resurrects the Southern Lady --- strong yet demure, chaste but fertile, ethereal yet grounded, knowing but silent --- in all her contradictory mythological splendor. In the process, the regional feminine ideals are maintained, class and race structures are reaffirmed, and the Old South exists ephemerally in the New.”³⁶ Women who are not from the South often have a difficult time going through recruitment because they are not prepared for the pageantry of southern recruitment. Since they cannot play the part of the “southern lady” effectively, and they have less social connections to active sorority members than others who are from Mississippi or the surrounding region, they are often relegated to “lower tier” sororities. In some cases, “top tier” sororities will accept only those who are able to successfully meet these regional, along with many other, requirements.³⁷

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cheryl Rose Nelson, “From Student to ‘Sorority Girl’: Gender, Class and Presentation of Self in Formal Sorority Recruitment” (master’s thesis, University of Mississippi, 2011) 28-31.

Ironically, for as much energy is put toward such performances of white “southern” identity, the student population on campus is demographically similar to many other Southern public universities. For the 2012-2013 school year, there were over 14,620 undergraduate students enrolled on the Oxford campus. Of these, 76.2 percent identified as white, and 15.8 percent were African American. Undergraduates were 53.2 percent female, 46.8 percent male. Almost 62 percent of undergraduates enrolled in Oxford and the regional campuses were from the state of Mississippi.³⁸ African American enrollment is currently not at the percentage proportionate to Mississippi’s black population (as of the 2010 census, African Americans made up 37 percent of Mississippi’s residents).³⁹ Mississippi State University, Ole Miss’s rival, has just under 15,993 undergraduate students. Male students make up 52.6 percent and females make up 47.4 percent of undergraduates. African Americans are 20.9 percent of the undergraduate population.⁴⁰ Thus, in comparison to Mississippi State, Ole Miss has more females and a smaller African American community.

Still, despite its demographic similarity to other flagship universities, Greek membership outpaces other large state schools in the region. As of 2011-2012, 47 percent of male freshmen joined fraternities and 31 percent of all male undergraduates were members. Fifty-two percent of female freshmen joined sororities, and 36 percent of the overall female undergraduate community was in a sorority.⁴¹ At the University of

³⁸ University of Mississippi Website, Institutional Research and Assessment, http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/university_planning/institutional_research/index.html

³⁹ Mississippi 2010 Census Results, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28000.html>

⁴⁰ Mississippi State University Website, Student Enrollment Profile, http://www.ir.msstate.edu/enroll_profile13.pdf

⁴¹ University of Mississippi Website, Institutional Research and Assessment

Alabama, 28.2 percent of male freshmen joined fraternities and 22.8 percent of male undergraduates were active members. Out of female freshmen, 43.3 percent joined and 33 percent of female students were members.⁴² At the University of Georgia, 28 percent of undergraduate females and 21 percent of undergraduate males were members of a sorority or fraternity.⁴³ The reason percentage drop off from freshman year versus overall undergraduates is because many students will pledge for the first year to make friends and then decide later that the time consumption and financial commitment are too demanding. Some pledges in fraternities will drop because of hazing. Also, grade point average (GPA) requirements keep some pledges from ever being initiated and sometimes lead to active members' dismissal. In comparison to other SEC schools where Greek involvement is high, Ole Miss' fraternity and sorority involvement is higher.

Ole Miss is also known for its intensely competitive and fluid recruitment period. This is not coincidental. The university allows rush after the refund period. That is so the university will not lose tuition money from students who want to leave the university if or when they do not receive a bid to the sorority they wanted. Unlike on other college campuses, including other southern state schools, Greek organizations on campus are expanding, possibly because Ole Miss's enrollment has grown exponentially in the past five years and the Greek organizations have stayed competitive with demographic and social trends. The Interfraternal Council added Chi Psi and Phi Kappa Theta to colonize chapters on campus for the 2013 recruitment. In 2013, the Panhellenic sorority Alpha

⁴² University of Alabama Website, Common Date Set 2012-2013, <http://oira.ua.edu/d/content/reports/2012-2013-common-data-set>

⁴³ University of Georgia Website, Fact Book 2012, http://oir.uga.edu/images/FB_Covers/FactBook2012Web.pdf

Delta Pi returned to campus and Alpha Phi will be joining in 2014. Panhellenic sororities voted to add these new chapters to reduce chapter sizes across the board. At present, some chapters list over 400 members.⁴⁴

Gender Assumptions

At Ole Miss, there are negative stereotypes that encircle each female sorority member as she attends classes and interacts with her fellow students, especially with male students. One of the most common stereotypes is a female student is on campus and in classes just to find a husband. This assumption is the remnant of a culture that emphasized that a middle- to upper-class white woman's only purpose is to get married, have children, and tend to her husband's achievements. In her analysis of the 1950s, historian Wini Breines writes, "A girl did not have to make something of herself, her biology was reason enough for her existence, she would be wife and mother. If she wished to achieve outside her family, she was often discouraged, even punished."⁴⁵ Since the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s, women have had increasing freedom to work outside of the home, although some feelings about what a woman can, could, or should do remained. For instance, in the 1960s, the student newspaper *The Mississippian* made regular announcements of engagements and marriages in a "To the Alter" column,

⁴⁴ University of Mississippi Panhellenic Website, <http://dos.orgsync.com/org/umgreeks/nprecruitment>.

⁴⁵ Wini Breines, "The 'Other' Fifties," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz et. al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 383.

showing how important it was to students to find their lifelong partner at college.⁴⁶

During this time, wrote journalist Curtis Wilkie, “Ole Miss functioned as a . . . finishing school for the young women who would marry the elite and preside over their mansions.”⁴⁷

Today, the stereotype of the domesticated, marriage-obsessed female undergrad remain prevalent. An overwhelming 93 percent of surveyed male students said that Ole Miss female students are “here for their MRS. Degree” or “husband-hunting.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, many male responses noted that big t-shirts often played into the idea that many female students have aspirations that are family, not career, oriented. One survey response said, “Most of them do wear big t-shirts. It is more of the way they present themselves in general; however the big t-shirt is a large factor in that.”⁴⁹ Another male responded, “[They are] girls that date below their standards for financial security. Typically identifiable as a girl wearing an oversized t-shirt/tank top.”⁵⁰ While many stated that they do wear big t-shirts, some were careful to distinguish that not all students who do so are looking for a husband. One said, “They do wear big t-shirts. But obviously not all girls that wear big t-shirts are enrolled in MRS.-seeking programs.”⁵¹

Several male respondents disagreed. “I don’t think,” noted one, “a girl’s preferable shirt size is reflective of how high or low her career aspirations are.”⁵²

⁴⁶ Eagles, *The Price of Defiance*, 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Male survey results.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Another respondent stated, “I think there are girls at Ole Miss who are mainly focused on finding marriage dressed in all styles.”⁵³ Since big t-shirts are not solidly tied to young women who are looking for a husband, it is possible that, because big t-shirts are a prominent marker of a sorority girl, stereotypes about sorority members inform this assumption. Women who join sororities are often stereotyped as ditzy, shallow, and materialistic. Because there are so many sorority members on campus and these women are easily identifiable by their oversized t-shirts, it is possible that the stereotypes about sorority members in general have led to the popular idea that there are many women looking to get “a ring by spring.”

Many respondents agreed that these types of women are in “easy majors,” “majors that are generally insubstantial to the real world and the job market,” “a useless or next-to useless major” and “don’t care about their classes.”⁵⁴ Of course, how the sorority members interact with fraternity members also plays a role in “confirming” the common stereotype. One respondent stated, “They seem to always try to be around fraternity houses.”⁵⁵ Another described them, saying, “[They are] beautiful and like to hang out at the frats.”⁵⁶ It also seems that these women are looking for a particular type of man. One respondent said these women are “always at a fraternity house with the guys that have the most money or are the most attractive.”⁵⁷ Another observed, “[They] will often continue or terminate conversation with you based on what fraternity you are in.”⁵⁸

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

Thus, at Ole Miss, college aged men perceive that women who are looking for a husband in college focus only on students who will be able to provide financial security through his family's wealth, connections, status, and stereotypes that come with the fraternity he pledged.

Interestingly enough, average sorority GPAs complicate the stereotype of the ditzy or disengaged sorority member. The Panhellenic overall GPA average is a 3.05 out of 4.00. The average for all women on the Ole Miss campus is a 2.94. Both averages are higher than the averages for members of Interfraternal Council fraternities (2.87), all men on the Oxford campus (2.63), and the average for all undergraduates (2.80).⁵⁹ Thus, it seems that Panhellenic sorority members do care about their grades and are intelligent enough to have the highest averages out of the basic demographic groups.

Being aware of these male perceptions and stereotypes of the female population on campus is important to fully understand the context in which these women are forming their identity when they chose what to wear each day, so too are other perceptions and stereotypes. Each sorority also has its own stereotype attached to it. Sorority member Sophia said,

Everyone knows that the sororities are broken up into three tiers. Top tier sororities are the ones that have been on campus the longest, get the best rushees, and have the most money. Middle tier sororities are the ones who are close, but not quite there yet. The girls might be missing one of those requirements as far as money, being from the South or might be a little too weird but overall they're pretty normal. Bottom tier sororities are made up of the girls that no one wanted. Their chapters are a lot smaller and a lot of the members are weird.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ University of Mississippi Fraternity/Sorority Academic Report Fall 2013

⁶⁰ Interview with author, December 4, 2013

Sorority members are thus sorted into categories where their value is based upon which Greek organization they join. Out of the top sororities, there is Sorority A where, according to Sarah, “everyone is from Jackson. They’re ‘granola,’ meaning that they are modern hippies. A lot of them are hipsters and think that they’re super unique, even though they’re just another girl from Jackson.”⁶¹ A senior, Brittany, said, “They often wear flannel and combat boots, it sets them apart from other sorority girls, but they still wear the big shirts.”⁶² Another top tier sorority, Sorority B, is “majority wealthy Mississippi girls. Some of them are snobby and they really like to party,” said junior Samantha.⁶³ Stephanie, a senior sorority member, said that the two other top tier sororities, Sorority C and Sorority D, are “insanely competitive with each other. They both know they’re right above the middle tier so they fight with each other not to be on the bottom.”⁶⁴ Emily, a sophomore said, “Everyone knows [Sorority D members] are the girls who are just a little bit weird. I guess you could say they’re quirky. [Sorority C members] can be so rude and stuck up, but they have money and are pretty.”⁶⁵ A mid-tier sorority, Sorority M, is “all pageant girls. When I think of that sorority all I can think about is the color pink. They’re a bunch of divas.”⁶⁶ Sorority N is another middle tier sorority, said freshman Elizabeth, that is “known for ‘drugs and sluts,’ they are the craziest partiers on this campus.”⁶⁷ Another sorority member, Jennifer, said, “Some are

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

cool, but some are seriously psycho.”⁶⁸ The stereotypes of the three bottom tier sororities suggest they are missing several desirable qualities. Brittany said one of the bottom tier sororities, Sorority X, has “girls that are mostly bigger, a lot of them are sweet and smart, but some can be catty.”⁶⁹ Samantha said, Sorority Y is “weird and trashy.”⁷⁰ Sarah asserted, “They definitely get around.”⁷¹ Widely recognized as the worst sorority on campus, Sorority Z, gets “the leftovers.” Jennifer describes this sorority as “a split house, they’re either really weird or have a really bad reputation.”⁷² The newest sorority, joined in 2013, does not have a stereotype because the chapter has not been on campus long enough for any rumors to spread and preconceptions to form.

Such stereotypes are so well known on campus that both males and females in the Greek system can recite them with very little effort. They have been posted anonymously on the internet multiple times, and regardless of relative meaning, almost all of the stereotypes have varying degrees of negative connotation to them. They each suggest publicly or privately different degrees of “unacceptable” womanhood. Whether or not there is any truth to the stereotypes, whatever letters a girl has on her shirt immediately tag negative or positive meaning to her.

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Interview by author, November 21, 2013.

Chapter 2

Wearing the Shirt

Social Status

Today, the practice of wearing oversized t-shirts is engrained in Ole Miss's culture. Students who wear fitted t-shirts are out of place, especially when surrounded by students who are a part of the Greek community. That is because a t-shirt is an important marker of social standing, especially because one out of three students at Ole Miss is in a fraternity or sorority.⁷³ Female freshmen stand out on the first day of classes because they are dressed formally, in an attempt to impress their peers. After the first week of classes, however, many freshman female students call home to tell their mothers that they need large t-shirts if they want to fit in, whether sent from home or bought in stores in Oxford. If going through recruitment, female students know that older sorority members will be scrutinizing and judging them, making the decision of whether they are someone that would fit in with their sorority. According to Sarah, a junior in a sorority, "When I see a girl who is wearing a small t-shirt, I think she is weird. I automatically think she's not in a sorority. That's just my opinion."⁷⁴ Thus, a generic item of clothing has become a marker of social identity and status on campus especially since members of white sororities on campus are the most likely to wear large t-shirts. Ninety percent of white

⁷³ Summer Wigley, "Breaking From Tradition," *The Daily Mississippian*, October 12, 2012, pg. 1.

⁷⁴ Interview by author. September 22, 2012.

female survey respondents said that they wear big t-shirts four or more days of the week.⁷⁵ Sixty-three percent said they automatically assumed that any girl they saw in a big-shirt was in a sorority.⁷⁶

Most of the oversized Greek t-shirts on campus are associated with a certain philanthropic or, more often, a social event. T-shirts act to preserve a memory of each function every year. Each “swap,” a party with members of one sorority and one fraternity, has an accompanying t-shirt sold with it, relating the theme, location, and date. It also has the letters of the sorority and fraternity on it, showing which sorority and fraternity members socialized with each other. Because budgets are limited, most sororities only have social events with a select few of the fraternities and vice versa. Tiffany, a senior, said, “I usually only buy the shirts for the swaps or other social events that I attended because if I hadn’t gone to it, I don’t have that memory, so there’s no reason for me to have the shirt to remember it.”⁷⁷

For date parties and formals, the person who is the member of the sorority or fraternity that is hosting the party will often order a shirt for his or her date. Megan, a senior sorority officer, stated, “Yeah, I usually order my date a shirt. I mean, if I go to a fraternity formal, I would want him to order me one.”⁷⁸ Another senior, Lauren, stated, “I only order my dates shirts if I really liked them or we’re really good friends. Not everyone gets one.”⁷⁹ Julia, a senior sorority member explained,

It depends on how much fun I had with the person. If I don’t have fun with you, I’m not going to waste my money buying you a shirt. One guy that I took to a

⁷⁵ Female survey results

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Interview by author, February 21, 2014.

⁷⁸ Interview by author, November 19, 2013.

⁷⁹ Interview by author, November 19, 2013.

formal asked me to buy him a shirt, but I didn't really have fun with him. The order date had already passed so I couldn't give him one even if I wanted to. He offered to pay me for my shirt so that he could have one to wear. I said no. Also, I don't want someone who might go out and do something crazy that I wouldn't want associated with my sorority's name because that makes us look bad. It's the same thing if a girl gets too drunk in the Grove and has a sorority sticker on, one of her sisters is obligated to take it off so no one will know what her affiliation is. This keeps her from projecting a bad image on the sorority. If there was a guy who was very wild and having too much fun, I do not want him to show up to a party wearing my sorority's letters because then it looks like we're friends with him and by extension approve of his behavior.⁸⁰

Sorority and fraternity shirts have complex layers of status attached to them. They can be a sign as to what other fraternities or sororities have decided is who is "cool" enough to spend part of a limited budget on a social function together. Wearing a shirt from a function can show that a person attended the function and has been included by that fraternity or sorority. Finally, wearing the letters of another fraternity or sorority works as a stamp of approval on that person, and this stamp is desired by both Greek males and females, especially for top and mid-tier sororities. During each of these moments, in t-shirt buying, giving, and wearing, undergraduates are describing signify a kind of low- to high-stakes performance. Wearing Greek letters makes students feel that what they do will not only reflect on themselves, but also the organization whose letters they are wearing. In the Greek system, a fraternity or sorority's reputation is highly prized because it makes the difference in where they rank in status among other Greek organizations. This affects who gets the best pledges (new members), who gets to have

⁸⁰ Interview by author, December 7, 2013. "The Grove" is the area on campus where Ole Miss fans tailgate before football games. A sorority member will often wear a sticker that says her sorority "loves the Rebs!" e.g., "Tri Delta loves the Rebs!" or "Kappa Delta loves the Rebs!"

parties with the “best” sororities or fraternities, and who is seen as “cool” and who is seen as “weird.”

Visions of the Body: Male and Female Perspectives

The oversized t-shirt necessarily stirs the conversation about how students on campus construct images of the female body. For female students, body image is often loaded with significance because of social and peer pressure to look as attractive and thin as possible. As historian Stephanie Camp has put it about enslaved female bodies, “The body [...] is at once the most personal, intimate thing that people possess and the most public.”⁸¹ Moreover, as writer Pearl Binder noted, “Since what [people] wear is in closest personal contact to their bodies, affecting themselves directly and also seen by others a part of themselves, dress plays a vital role in their lives.”⁸² Beginning in the 1920s, cosmetic ads encouraged women to think of themselves as making deliberate performances at every moment, putting forth “the idea that the eye constantly appraised women’s appearances. Women were thus urged to transform the spectacle of themselves into self-conscious performances.”⁸³ In other words, what women choose to wear every day is not random; rather, it is a self-conscious decision that reflects the society and culture around them.

⁸¹ Stephanie Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861,” *Journal of Southern History* Vol 68, No. 3 (Aug 2002) p 538.

⁸² Pearl Binder, *Dressing Up, Dressing Down*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986) 1.

⁸³ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, Inc, 1998) 142.

Ole Miss's t-shirt culture also enhances and conflicts with regional notions of gender identity. In other words, it complements and counters what historian Anne Firor Scott identified decades ago as the epitome of historical southern white "womanhood." According to Scott, "[The antebellum southern woman] was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful."⁸⁴ In one sense, oddly enough, the large t-shirts are modest; they barely show any feminine curves, which does confirm on facet of the "ideal" southern white woman. Despite this, they are short enough so that it reveals most of the leg, but long enough so that they cover up accompanying Nike shorts. As a sorority member tweeted to her 432 followers, "I think I'm wearing the worlds largest shirt... 2xl comfort colors. Am I wearing shorts? You don't know."⁸⁵ If an outfit raises the question, "Is that girl even wearing shorts?" the traditional white southern woman would most likely not approve. When a woman is wearing a shirt with nothing on the bottom it signifies a kind of certain sexual immodesty that is "inappropriate" for public display, at least by the standards of the past and, to an extent, today.

During the warmest months at Ole Miss, many female students trade in their oversized t-shirts for oversized tank tops. These are very revealing. Armholes show almost all of a girl's sports bra underneath, while others reveal the sides of her torso and ribcage. As Scott would likely argue, this is in direct opposition to the modesty regarding one's body that an ideal southern white woman ostensibly should have. (Not incidentally, this idea of purity in the South is connected to whiteness, especially in the idea that

⁸⁴ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) 4.

⁸⁵ Twitter post from October 11, 2012.

young, white women need protection. This combination of race and southern womanhood will be examined later in this thesis.)

Many students believe that the big t-shirt does not project an image of beauty or grace. According to Nicole a sorority member, “I try to have at least a little makeup on to compensate for dressing like a slob to class.”⁸⁶ While this might be an example of a white southern woman trying to make up for not “dressing up,” many do not do as Nicole does. Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed said they do not wear daytime make-up most days of the week.⁸⁷ Based on the fact that most sorority members wear t-shirts during the day, one can conclude that there is an overlap in wearing big t-shirts and not wearing make-up. Kayla, who is not in a sorority, stated, “Sometimes I feel weird if I wear make-up to class. I’m not talking about fake eyelashes or anything intense. If I wear make-up *and* my hair looks nice, I think to myself, ‘I look too good to go to class.’”⁸⁸ Chelsea, a junior sorority member said, “When I go home or go see my boyfriend [who does not go to Ole Miss], I wear make-up and one of my two t-shirts that actually fit. When I wear a big t-shirt to class, it’s acceptable, but if I wear it at home or with my boyfriend, I feel sloppy.”⁸⁹ This suggests that, at least for Chelsea, the phenomenon of large t-shirts is limited to campus life. She does not feel comfortable wearing this outside of the Oxford area or with her boyfriend because of her fears that he or others will not find it appealing or acceptable. Outside of Oxford, these women feel the need to conform to a different opinion of what is an appropriate display of feminine beauty.

⁸⁶ Interview by author, October 28, 2012.

⁸⁷ Female survey results

⁸⁸ Interview by author, October 28, 2012.

⁸⁹ Interview by author, September 24, 2012.

Despite how big t-shirts contradict traditional displays of southern white femininity, 53 percent of female students surveyed said they do consider themselves “southern belles.”⁹⁰ This number might be lower than expected because the exponentially growing population of out-of-state students on the campus, especially if those students are coming from regions other than the South. Nevertheless, it is a majority. And, as one freshman in a sorority, Rachel, stated, “Since this is an Ole Miss thing, I feel even more like a southern belle when I wear my big t-shirt.”⁹¹

Female students at Ole Miss, both in sororities and unaffiliated, are more likely to dress up on game days to tailgate in the Grove. Many women consider dressing up for football games as an expression of their southern identity. This display is in direct contrast to the extreme casual wear for what students wear to class. Senior Anna said, “Out of all of the moments I’ve spent at Ole Miss, the time I feel the most Southern is when I’m tailgating in the Grove with my sundress and heels. It’s something that is only some of the SEC [Southeastern Conference] schools do. Football matters in the South, and being in the Grove is one of the biggest social times of the year.”⁹²

Because t-shirts are the outfit of choice for everyday casual wear, how female students feel about their looks and whether they play into their ideas of looking “pretty” is significant. Of those surveyed, 55 percent said they feel pretty when they wear big t-shirts.⁹³ In an open-ended response of the survey, several expressed feelings that wearing a big t-shirt allowed them to feel more secure in their bodies because “it hides my curves

⁹⁰ Female survey results

⁹¹ Interview by author, October 28, 2012.

⁹² Interview by author, March 7, 2014.

⁹³ Female survey results

and parts of my body that I don't like, especially my hips."⁹⁴ Another respondent said, "[I feel] comfortable and confident because I don't have to worry about wearing anything really tight or sucking in or anything like that."⁹⁵ Yet another respondent noted that when she wears a big shirt, "I don't have to worry about bloating or sucking in. I can just live."⁹⁶

Alan DeSantis has noted that sorority culture often leads to competitions between members as to who can be the prettiest and, by extension, the thinnest. He writes, "Almost unanimously the [sorority members I interviewed] told of the anxiety of being isolated in a population that is uniformly cute, thin, and white."⁹⁷ A sorority member he interviewed, Brooke, said, "It's the comparison that gets you all the time. Everyone you're around is thinner, prettier, and they are all trying to get prettier and thinner all the time. It's like a race that I'll never win."⁹⁸ Senior Sophie said, "One of the best things about big t-shirts is that even if you gain weight, all of your clothes still fit you. Leggings stretch, Nike shorts have an elastic waistband, and the shirts are still big. This is great for college because a lot of people put on the Freshman Fifteen. It's harder to tell when a girl has gained weight when she's got a huge shirt on."⁹⁹ In a way, then, perhaps sorority women at Ole Miss have found one way to escape the near constant pressure of being thin in their daily lives by covering their bodies in oversized shirts. When each female's

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ DeSantis, *Inside Greek U.*, 118.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Interview with author, February 24, 2014. The Freshman Fifteen refers to the idea that each college student gains fifteen pounds during his or her freshman year.

body is engulfed in an oversized t-shirt, it is more difficult to determine the shape of the body underneath.

Other students noted that the pull of the southern, white female ideal remains powerful. Yet, one respondent also noted, “I feel like I look like a boy and not attractive or feminine; however, it is ‘the style’ at this school.”¹⁰⁰ For her, t-shirts are masculine and unattractive. Based on this response, it seems that she does not enjoy wearing large t-shirts at all, but because it is the norm on campus, she feels that she is required to wear them to avoid being considered someone who is not participating in “the style” of her peers. In this way, the t-shirt is constricting to some women, similar to the social expectations of an antebellum southern woman as described by Scott.¹⁰¹ Social pressure from members of the Greek community also makes many women conform to wearing an oversized t-shirt. This can be seen in many of the open-ended responses in the female survey. Most of the respondents said they do not feel attractive in big t-shirts and mentioned wanting to “fit in.” One respondent explained, “They’re comfortable, they cover everything, and they’re what everyone else is wearing. You don’t have to worry about sticking out or looking weird when you wear one.”¹⁰² One female responded, “If I were to wear another size, I would draw attention to myself.”¹⁰³ Kayla added, “It’s like you have to have this balance of hair, make-up, and clothing. You can’t look too nice when you go to class, otherwise you stand out. And people will comment on it, saying, ‘What are you so dressed up for?’ It’s not, ‘Oh you look good.’ It’s, ‘Why do you look

¹⁰⁰ Female survey results

¹⁰¹ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 50, 57.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

good?”¹⁰⁴ Comments like this tell any girl who is dressed nicely for class that she needs to explain herself and give a reason for looking nice. Similar pressures might be the reason that Chelsea feels conflicted when deciding whether or not to wear a big t-shirt outside of Oxford. As one male survey response noted,

I see sororities as places where strong groupthink inspires mass conformity. This is often why the big t-shirt thing seems universal. Yet I believe the shirts come from insecurity, which all college students have to some degree. People are concerned with their appearance but enjoy the opportunity to dress 'comfortably,' or sloppy to tell you the truth, when they know that their group participates thus they are not alienated. The sorority uniform gives security to girls who feel such a high pressure on appearances. Like Uggs a few years ago, girls use big t-shirts based on a strange need for comfort because they are often so uncomfortable with the judging pressure often found at Ole Miss. A big t-shirt tries to say 'don't judge me' but is worn with confidence because of the assumption that sorority participation would get approval despite how anyone is judged.¹⁰⁵

In a way, the big t-shirts are a kind of “safety blanket” in that those who wear them feel socially secure in their place: wearing big t-shirts reassures a girl that she fits in and is like her peers. This is especially ironic considering that white women who had the social and economic standing to join a sorority in the mid- to late-twentieth century wore make-up, dressed in expensive clothes, and fixed their hair in a certain way for these same reasons. Of course, not every girl on the Ole Miss campus feels that there is a constricting pressure to wear big t-shirts. As one respondent noted, “I feel confident [when I wear big t-shirts] in the sense that I don't particularly care or worry about what other people think about how I look that day. If I decide to dress up, I'm more conscientious of my appearance.”¹⁰⁶ Big t-shirts give her a sense of freedom; in wearing

¹⁰⁴ Interview by author, October 28, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Male survey results.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

the more casual option of an oversized t-shirt, she feels exempt from pressures to look “put together” and, thus, feels empowered.

Most female college students attempt exude more feminine beauty when they go out to the bars or fraternity houses at night. The same is true at Ole Miss. Junior Taylor said, “I think a lot of girls don’t dress nice during the day because when they do dress up at night, the comparison makes them look even better. It’s kind of like the ‘makeover effect’ you might see in movies.”¹⁰⁷ Danielle, a sophomore sorority member agreed, “What I wear to class is entirely different from what I wear when I go out at night mostly because I want to look cute when I see boys and then because I want to look good in my Facebook pictures.”¹⁰⁸ This makes sense because this is the time when most Greek students are drinking heavily, and the chance of “going home with someone” is the greatest. Also, many take pictures that will be uploaded to social media networks such as Facebook or Instagram. Being a part of the generation that grew up with Facebook through high school, many want their social media profiles to be what they consider an attractive reflection of themselves: someone who is going out, having fun with her friends, and enjoying the college experience, yet another projection and performance.

Male Responses to the Shirt

Growing up an in a patriarchal society taught a southern belle to be a submissive woman “whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey and occasionally amuse her

¹⁰⁷ Interview by author, November 29, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Interviewed by author, October 31, 2012.

husband, to bring up his children and manage his household.”¹⁰⁹ An “ideal” white southern woman’s identity before the Civil War and after was fixated on pleasing her husband. This expectation of women remained through the twentieth century. Although many middle-class women began to leave the home and go to work in the early Cold War years, the assumption still remained that women’s “essential purpose” was to be in the home, working to please her husband through her labors and appearance.¹¹⁰

Given the lingering power of this ideal on campus, how exactly do male students view the “Ole Miss uniform”? Fifty-two percent of surveyed males said that women who wear big t-shirts are attractive. Because this was a very close margin, it seems that overall the male opinion is split. One response said, ¹¹¹“The girls? Yes. The style? No.”¹¹² Another said, “It really depends on the how attractive the girl is.”¹¹³ John, a former fraternity president, viewed the t-shirt in context with the tiered Greek system, “[For girls, wearing a big t-shirt] makes them look like they want to be like everyone else. At Ole Miss, girls who wear big t-shirts are definitely more attractive because sorority girls are inherently prettier than those who are not in sororities. You have to look good or be a legacy to get in a real sorority.”¹¹⁴

It seems that the t-shirt itself is not what makes a student attractive; rather, because it is the marker of a “sorority girl,” in that signals to males that a student might

¹⁰⁹ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 4.

¹¹⁰ Susan M. Hartmann, “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal” in *Not June Cleaver*, 90.

¹¹¹ Male survey results

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Interview by author, September 24, 2012.

be appealing. It also implies that sororities look for certain types of women. As DeSantis writes, “Elite sororities are ideally searching for young women who are cute, nonaggressive, sexually conservative, studious and nurturing.”¹¹⁵ DeSantis argues that because sororities and fraternities are “gendered clubs” where gender differences and “roles” are re-affirmed, those who do not conform to traditional ideas about gender, acting “too androgynous or ambivalent in their gendered performances are denied entrance.”¹¹⁶ Finally, the fact that the fraternity member asserts that a girl must have looks or family connections to get in a “real sorority” shows the ties between hierarchy within the Greek community and, by extension, who is considered a “real” woman.

Outside social rankings and relative impressions, the t-shirt does have an effect on a girl’s level of assumed attractiveness, at least according to male respondents. A sophomore in a fraternity, Michael, said, “I think it’s attractive if it’s done right. Once I saw a girl who was very small wearing a XXXL t-shirt. It was way too big. At that point it just looks gross.”¹¹⁷ This shows that, at least for some males, there is a line drawn as to exactly how oversized a t-shirt can be acceptable. He continued, “Since no one in my hometown ever wears big t-shirts, I initially thought they were very strange, but when I got home for Christmas break, I found myself thinking that the girls in t-shirts that fit looked trashy. I feel like Ole Miss girls look modest in their big t-shirts when they’re done right, which is classy.”¹¹⁸ Being at Ole Miss changed Michael’s perceptions of what an “attractive” woman is and how she should casually dress. Another survey

¹¹⁵ DeSantis, *Inside Greek U.*, 39

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19, 27

¹¹⁷ Interview by author, November 26, 2012.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

response related, “It depends on their overall attire and if they’ve put on some makeup or not. If it looks like they just rolled out of bed and threw whatever was there on, then no, I don’t [think they’re attractive]. But if they actually look like they meant to wear the shirt and everything, then [it’s attractive].”¹¹⁹ In other words, it is not just the t-shirt that makes the outfit, but rather the “whole package.” Christopher, a freshman, stated, “If a girl wears a big t-shirt, she has to do it with the Nike shorts or leggings. If it’s with anything else, like Bermuda shorts, then it doesn’t look right.”¹²⁰

Another freshman, Matthew, shared, “I don’t like really slutty girls who wear a bunch of make-up and get dressed up every day. I like real girls who know who they are and don’t feel like they have to get dressed up versus those who feel like they have to be what men want them to be.”¹²¹ It is interesting that Matthew equates “wearing a bunch of make-up and getting dressed up every day” with promiscuity. (This harkens back to the late nineteenth century when women who wore make-up were considered to be prostitutes or looking for attention.¹²²) But in the current context, Matthew implies that formal fashion the big t-shirt phenomenon is tied to on-campus hook-up culture. Overall, then, while wearing big t-shirts may be the result of social pressure or even a one-night-stand, certain students can see it as an attractive sign of “confidence” and not caring about what others think.

Still, other males find the oversized t-shirt to be unattractive and borderline “offensive.” The *Daily Mississippian* ran an opinion article written by law student Cory

119 Male survey results.

120 Interview by author, November 26, 2012.

¹²¹ Interview by author. November 3, 2012.

¹²² Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 26-27.

Farraez entitled “Oversized Shirts, Leggings, and Colored Nikes,” where Farraez criticizes the entire female student population on campus for wearing articles of clothing such as an “oversized shirt or sweatshirt worn in dress-like fashion with \$9.99 leggings and neon-colored Nikes or Uggs.” Farraez writes, “Can we get one thing straight? That does not look good. You, yes, you, do not look good wearing this.” He writes that if a student is going to class or walking through the Grove in this outfit that “I would hope you have more respect for yourself and for others” and implores “the fashionable among you [to] start a trend of self-respect. Tell your peers to think of others when looking in the mirror--pants are only a hanger away.”¹²³ In other words, Farraez equates a lack of feminine dress to mean a lack of self-respect and respect for others.

T-shirts and Sexuality: The “Shacker” Shirt

White southerners have historically connected womanhood with sexual purity. In *Judgment and Grace in Dixie*, historian Charles Reagan Wilson shows how the beauty culture of the white South works alongside the predominately Protestant religion of the Bible Belt. To understand this, “one must see the beauty queen in the South as an embodiment of the southern civil religion.”¹²⁴ This association of southern women and beauty queens has been put into terms of morality and pureness. In a way, suggests Wilson, southerners also consider white southern beauty queens a kind of saint since they

¹²³ Cory Farraez, “Oversized Shirts, Leggings, and Colored Nikes,” *The Daily Mississippian*, November 18, 2013.

¹²⁴ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) 145.

are the epitome of the “southern woman.”¹²⁵ Given that Ole Miss has had a history of beauty queens, it is perhaps to be expected pageants’ culture and “ideals” play a certain role in campus.

And yet, Ole Miss female students who wear big t-shirts run counter to two of the ideals surrounding pageant participants and morality. First, as already shown, they do not exude the traditional “beauty queen” look. Second, for many, the idea of chastity has been mostly discarded in comparison to past standards. Scholars and journalists have started using the phrase “hook-up culture” to describe the idea that sex can be casual and meaningless for both men and women. Many scholars have observed that many college campuses have a strong hook-up culture. Interestingly, according to Lisa Wade, the 14 percent of students who are most actively participating in hook-up culture (hooking-up more than 10 times in their four years) are more likely than others to be “white, wealthy, heterosexual, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive.” They party more because they are confident that they will finish college easily, have more of a safety net due to family wealth, and feel they will work on their careers for several years before settling down.¹²⁶ Wade’s description of the people who participate heavily in hookup culture is similar to those who are the most likely to be accepted by and members of the Greek community at the University of Mississippi.

A substantial piece evidence that supports the idea that big t-shirts are tied to hook-up culture is the Ole Miss trend of the “shacker shirt.” According to sorority

¹²⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹²⁶ Lisa Wade, “Hookup culture: for the white and wealthy,” Slate.com 19 July 2013. http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/07/hookup_culture_for_the_white_wealthy_and_beautiful.html

member, Courtney, “A shacker shirt is a shirt that you get from a guy after a long night out because you don’t want to go home in your clothes you wore last night.”¹²⁷ Fifty-five percent of surveyed female students said that they have kept a male’s t-shirt after staying the night with him.¹²⁸ What might have started off as a young woman’s attempt to hide the fact that she is not as “pure” as she is supposed to be --- according to the pageant or belle “ideal” --- also doubles as a marker to students on campus that she did not make it home the night before. Seventy-five percent of surveyed males said that they have let a girl keep a shacker shirt, but 67 percent said that they had never kept a girl’s shirt.¹²⁹ From the data and practice of exchange, it seems that the shacker shirt is mostly a male to female transaction. It is worth noting, though, that because these women are ordering shirts in sizes that are overly big on them, it does make it easier for a male to take one of her shirts because it will actually fit him. It is also possible that male students do not feel the need to take a shirt after staying at a girl’s residence because the clothes that males wear out to bars at night are not that different from what they wear on a daily basis or to class. Additionally, there is much less stigma attached to a male “shacker” than a female “shacker,” so it is a low risk situation for him to be caught in last night’s clothes.¹³⁰

Junior Sophie described her experience of wearing a shacker shirt, “Whenever I come back to my apartment after staying with a guy, I walk as fast as I can. I don’t want

¹²⁷ Interview by author, October 30, 2012.

¹²⁸ Female survey results

¹²⁹ Male survey results

¹³⁰ Bruce Lunceford, “The Walk of Shame: A Normative Description,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 64, no. 4 (October 2008): 319 -- goes to 329 <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.umiss.lib.olemiss.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,uid&db=aph&AN=36911470&site=eds-live>

anyone seeing me carrying my heels in his big shirt and athletic shorts. It's really obvious that I didn't make it home the night before. But I will wear the shirt later; it's not a big deal then."¹³¹ Sarah related, "This morning as I was walking into the [sorority] house, I saw one of our junior members walking up in heels, jeans and a t-shirt, carrying the top she had worn the night before. She told me she was so embarrassed and that she hated doing this. Since she lived at the house, everyone in the kitchen could see her walking in and judge her for staying the night."¹³² Julia said, "One time I came back to my place the morning after in my clothes from last night, and I could tell my friends were judging me, so I told them I had just come from church."¹³³ Sophie said, "The best thing to do when you go out is wear jeans with flats or flat boots on the bottom. That with a shacker shirt, and no one has any idea that you spent the night out."¹³⁴ As per the belle or pageant ideal and social expectations in the Greek community, sorority members are expected to maintain a level of purity in order to keep up the sorority's "reputation." "We definitely don't want to be known as the house full of shackers," Victoria, a senior member noted.¹³⁵ This is supported by sociologists Rachel Allison and Barbara Risman's research on male and female attitudes toward those who "hook-up a lot." While Allison and Risman found that women are more likely to have egalitarian conservative values regarding both men and women who hook-up a lot, in contrast, "Compared to their non-sorority affiliated peers, sorority women have 46% increased odds of losing respect for

¹³¹ Interview by author, December 4, 2012.

¹³² Interview by author, February 14, 2014.

¹³³ Interview by author, March 6, 2014.

¹³⁴ Interview by author, January 29, 2014.

¹³⁵ Interview by author, February 13, 2014.

everyone and 53% increased odds of losing respect for men only, compared to no one. Sorority affiliation, then, is linked to somewhat more conservative sexual attitudes” and expectations.¹³⁶

At the same time, wearing a shacker shirt with leggings or Nike shorts makes it impossible to tell if a girl is a shacker or not at night or even during the day. Additionally, when a girl is not wearing a guy’s shirt as an *actual* shacker, the stigma that surrounds it has been removed. Furthermore, a guy’s fraternity shirt fits seamlessly in with all of her other oversized t-shirts, adding to her pile of shirts. Some of these shirts are actually hers while some are a kind of “trophy” from a hookup. The posts on the popular website Total Sorority Move (TSM) supports this, “Shack shirt or it didn’t happen. TSM.” and “Been there, done that, got the shack shirt. TSM.”¹³⁷ This shows that while there can be shame and embarrassment associated with a shacker shirt, some women consider it to be an accomplishment to have many shirts because it shows that she is sexually desired by her male counterparts. One of the female survey responses stated that when she is wearing a big t-shirt, she feels “confident, especially when it’s a shacker shirt I picked up on the weekend.”¹³⁸ This rejection of shame based on hooking up can also be seen in the fact that some women have replaced the phrase “walk of shame” which describes the walk a shacker takes back home the morning after staying the night with a man, with a new phrase, the “stride of pride.” Brett Lunceford has argued that the

¹³⁶ Rachel Allison and Barbara J. Risman, “A double standard for ‘Hooking Up’: How far have we come toward gender equality?” *Social Science Research* 42, no. 5. 1199

¹³⁷ @totalsratmove (2013, November 15) (2013, August) [Twitter post] Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/totalsratmove>.

¹³⁸ Female survey responses

phrase “walk of shame” actually “functions to discipline female sexual practice by reinforcing gender stereotypes and punishing women who transgress socially constructed norms.”¹³⁹ Because of this, some women are ending the shame and replacing it with pride. In short, this signifies that a small but growing number of young women are no longer ashamed of having sex “like a man” and participating in hook up culture.

Many believe that the shacker shirt is the reason for the trend of wearing big t-shirts at Ole Miss. A junior in a sorority, Melissa said, “I think that the two could be related since a lot of people borrow people’s shirt. I know a bunch of people will trade sorority shirts for fraternity shirts. It’s kind of a status thing because you’re ‘in’ with that fraternity, meaning that you’re good enough friends with one of the guys that you can wear his shirt.”¹⁴⁰ According to Julia,

Girls at Ole Miss strive to be liked by fraternity guys. If you know them well enough to get their shirt you’re obviously liked enough. Some girls consider it an achievement to be in attendance in a fraternity function, especially one of the more extravagant ones like Kappa Alpha’s Old South. The shirt is proof that they went to the function. When you’re wearing a guy’s shirt, it shows everyone that you’re friends with fraternity guys. This can send the message to other guys that you’re cool enough to hang out with or ask to a function.¹⁴¹

T-shirts are also a way for fraternity men to “mark their territory” when it comes to sorority members. One male survey response said that “If a girl is hot she gets a good shacker shirt... aka good press for the frat.”¹⁴² By having attractive women wearing their

¹³⁹ Bruce Lunceford, “The Walk of Shame: A Normative Description,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 64, no. 4 (October 2008): 319, <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.umiss.lib.olemiss.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,uid&db=aph&AN=36911470&site=eds-live>

¹⁴⁰ Interview by author, October 30, 2012.

¹⁴¹ Interview by author, November 18, 2013.

¹⁴² Ibid.

shirts, it implies that these women approve of and endorse the fraternity, to the point that she has possibly slept with one of the members. This is echoed in another response: “[What shirt she gets] depends on if I like the shirt or not and if I think she’s hot enough to represent my fraternity’s letters.”¹⁴³ To these fraternity members, having women wear their shacker shirts, implying that they slept with them, spins their image in a positive way. This reinforces the idea that men are rewarded for their sexual achievements. Indeed, as DeSantis has argued, for fraternity brothers “the ideal masculinity is hypersexual, promiscuous, and heterosexual.”¹⁴⁴ Sororities, by contrast value chastity to a degree, although such ideals rarely square with reality.

T-shirts also signal other forms of performative competition and pride.

Fraternities are almost always in competition with other. The territorial conflict that can exist can be seen in Sophie’s experience, “I was at a rush party for my boyfriend’s fraternity and I happened to have on my sorority shirt that also had another fraternity’s letters on it. One of the fraternity members came up to me and asked me to change into a shirt with their letters on it since there would be rushees there.”¹⁴⁵ At these rush parties, fraternities are project a clear message to freshmen: “If you join this fraternity you will get girls like those who are wearing our shirts.” The use of attractive women as a “rush tool” is widespread in the Greek community. A junior in a fraternity shares a part of his rush experience:

Some fraternities will use their sweetheart [a Panhellenic sorority member that the fraternity votes on as their favorite] to entice rushees. The sweetheart of the fraternity used to be able to attend the first round of rush, but this past year they

143 Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ DeSantis, *Inside Greek U.*, 44.

¹⁴⁵ Interview by author, November 26, 2012.

changed the rules so that it's not allowed anymore. At our fraternity house, the sweetheart stood right at the front door and gave rushees hugs, so she was the first thing they saw. Most of the sweethearts would dress in tight clothes. Some of the houses I went to even had their sweetheart giving lap dances to the freshmen. That's how they knew they were getting a bid to that fraternity.¹⁴⁶

As this student reveals, each fraternity operates differently in the ways that they use woman as an incentive to join their organization. The extreme example above shows how far that it had gone, at least until the governing body over fraternities decided to end the practice of allowing sweethearts to participate in rush in 2012.

Insiders and Outsiders

For the most part, it is more common to see women in the non-Greek community wearing smaller t-shirts or even outfits that are dressier than the standard t-shirts and shorts. Is this because non-Greeks do not have as much pressure on them to wear these uniforms? According to Kayla, a junior who went through rush as a freshman but did not join a sorority, not necessarily. She said,

Even though I'm not Greek, as a freshman there was still pressure to wear the big shirts. You don't want to stand out. I did wear oversized t-shirts for the first two years here. Today, I don't wear them because my boyfriend at home doesn't like it. I know that people are going to make assumptions about me one way or another. At the end of the day, you tolerate that or do exactly what everyone else is doing.¹⁴⁷

The pressure that she experienced may have been because she went through rush. But it also continued after she chose not to join a sorority. Regarding the assumptions that

¹⁴⁶ Interview by author, November 25, 2012.

¹⁴⁷ Interview by author, October 28, 2012.

others might have about her, Kayla said, “There’s the mentality on this campus that if you’re not in a sorority then you must have some sort of flaw. For those who are in sororities, they’ve obviously found something attractive and valuable in you, and if you’re not in one, there’s something wrong with you.”¹⁴⁸

Michelle is an out-of-state student who decided not to go through recruitment because no one in her family had been Greek and she did not know much about sorority life. Moreover, “I was kind of scared of being judged by other people’s actions, being profiled based on what sorority I decided to join.”¹⁴⁹ Although she did not know much about Greek life, she was aware that each sorority on campus has its own stereotype attached to it and wanted to avoid it. She explained her initial response to big t-shirts, “At first I made fun of the girls who wore big t-shirts but then I started to feel pressure to wear them since it was everywhere.”¹⁵⁰ As far as her decision not to wear big t-shirts, she said, “I just don’t think it’s appropriate to wear to class. I want to look professional so that my professors will respect me. I also would never wear one of those oversized tank tops because they’re so revealing, especially to a class with a male professor. That’s just awkward for everyone.”¹⁵¹ Finding her place in the university also helped Michelle become more secure in her decision to not follow the trend. She said, “It was really a lot better once I got to know more people who did not wear big t-shirts, like my friend Kelsey. After seeing her dressed up for class every day, I wanted to look nice, too.”¹⁵²

Kelsey is in a sorority, but unlike most of her sisters, she does not wear t-shirts

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Interview by author, November 29, 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

most days of the week. She explained why, “I was in a class with mostly upperclassman and I was dressed nice for a project. My professor remarked that our class dressed so much nicer than her other, larger classes. At that moment I realized that some of my professors actually noticed and cared about how their students dressed for their class.”¹⁵³ She continued, “I feel that when I’m dressed nice, it’s easier to talk to my professor if I am struggling or something because I know that, unfortunately, there are certain stigmas that exist about sororities. Of course, I think each girl should wear what is most comfortable for her, whether that be a t-shirt or a nice sweater. This is just what I’m most confident and comfortable in.”¹⁵⁴

In some cases, because the trend of wearing big t-shirts is so recent, there also is a generation gap between older and younger women. A senior, Hannah related,

One of my friend’s mom is the epitome of a southern woman. She wears lipstick and make-up every day and won’t leave the house without it. She gets so mad at my friend when she wears big t-shirts. She tells her that her clothes need to be ‘tight enough to show that she’s a woman but loose enough to show that she’s a lady.’ She makes sure that her daughter’s hair is a certain cut and color and tells her that she looks like a boy whenever she has on a big t-shirt and no make-up.¹⁵⁵

Hannah continued, “My mom isn’t like that at all, though. I’m from Texas so maybe it’s a little different. In fact she has even started to wear her t-shirts a little looser sometimes. She wears what me and my sisters wear a lot. But she always has her hair and makeup done when she does it. It’s different from when I’m wearing a big t-shirt.”¹⁵⁶ Rebecca, who has competed in Miss Mississippi pageants multiple times, stated, “My mom is the

¹⁵³ Interview by author, November 30, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Interview by author, October 14, 2013

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

type where she has taught me how to fix my hair and my make-up. She's not pushy saying 'Oh you look horrible,' but she's taught me that it's not an option to come out of the house not looking presentable."¹⁵⁷

Employees for Greek organizations, most much older than members, also notice and evaluate the "uniform." Linda is a housemother for a sorority on the Ole Miss campus. (This means that she is employed by the chapter and is responsible to it and the house corporation, a group of alumni who make decisions as to how the budget for the house is spent. Her job is to manage the kitchen and staff and create a safe environment for sorority members in the house.) Linda began working at the sorority house in 2008. "When I first started working here," she remembered, "I saw the girls in big t-shirts and I thought to myself, 'No wonder they don't have any dates and aren't going out with boys every night.' I just didn't understand the outfits at all."¹⁵⁸ Although now Linda is used to the big t-shirt look, she retains qualms about it. She said, "A lot of girls I don't even know if they have cute figures under that big shirt."¹⁵⁹ She also noted the difference in day wear from night wear,

All the sorority girls go from one extreme to another. One of the complaints with the housemother before me was that she would never know the members well enough to say hello if she saw them outside of the house. I thought I wouldn't have a problem with that, but my girls don't look the same at night as they do in the day. You go from a big t-shirt to the Vegas look.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Interview by author, October 14, 2013.

¹⁵⁸ Interview by author, February 25, 2014.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

In response, Linda generally advises sorority members to wear lipstick: “I just think lipstick makes everyone look better. Red, especially, since it signifies power. It gives everyone just a bit of self-confidence.”¹⁶¹

Today, however, Linda herself has started to wear some of the workout attire that she initially thought was unacceptable. Like the mothers of members at home, some older women renegotiate what is acceptable to wear based on what their daughters wear, while others have tightly held onto the more traditional style of dress.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Race, Economics, and the Ole Miss Uniform

The T-shirt and Color

At Ole Miss, the big t-shirt trend is mostly confined to white female students, fitting into a Greek sorority system that is largely divided by race. Panhellenic sororities on campus are historically white, with only a few sororities breaking that tradition. Recent efforts have pushed against the tendency toward racial homogeneity, but strong incentives remain in play for recruitment and membership. “People are not recruited based on immutable characteristics, such as race. For white and black students, it’s difficult to go to an organization where you don’t see someone who is reflective of yourself there. Some of it is based on individual tradition and preferences,” noted past Panhellenic council member Michelle Horvath.¹⁶² To be sure, cross-racial events have occurred, intending to break down racial walls via social events. In 2012, the first “super swap”—a social function where two fraternities and two sororities participate—happened involving both black and white fraternities and sororities. But instead of encouraging actual integration and “encourag[ing] diversity” this public ritual resulted in little follow up.¹⁶³ “Integration” and “diversity” remain the exception, not the rule of Greek life on campus.

¹⁶² Wigley, “Breaking From Tradition,” *The Daily Mississippian*. October 12, 2012.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

On occasion, African-American students have tried to cross color lines and join Panhellenic sororities. One African-American woman in the Panhellenic sorority system is a junior, Katherine. Because of Panhellenic recruitment rules, potential new members who have above a 3.0 GPA are guaranteed a bid to a house, even if every sorority cuts them (with the exception of those who “suicide,” meaning they say they will refuse a bid from one or more sororities). Only sororities who do not meet 164 “quota,” (a number set by Panhellenic as the minimum number of new members to which a sorority must offer a bid) have to give out bids to members they previously cut. Known as “snap bids,” these bids are usually only given out by lower-tier sororities because they are the most likely to not meet quota. This is what happened to Katherine. Reflecting on her experience, she noted:

I think it’s a complicated issue that really only members of each house understand, because there are so many factors that go into it. Obviously, you have a large number of girls going through recruitment, and there are a limited number of slots. It’s understood that people are going to get cut. [But with African Americans] the question comes about: Did you even have a chance to begin with? There are quite a few alumni that are involved who have a huge influence on the recruitment process. And you have certain voting techniques [within the sororities] that can give a minority with a prejudiced view more power. I know there are some chapters where if one person speaks out against a “possible new member,” they need over two thirds of the chapter to override that one vote. I think on this campus, understandably, and in some cases its justified, there’s a question of whether or not a certain house would not even give a bid to an African-American new member but that they would not even be open to or consider it. I think it’s something that can be worked on. I have guy friends who said that they would have wanted to go through white fraternity recruitment but they felt that the fraternities would not be open to them.¹⁶⁵

Katherine’s experience is common and reveals how most of the sororities on campus end up being almost entirely white. While the Panhellenic organization says that

¹⁶⁴ Interview by author, January 30, 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Interview by author, October 30, 2012.

it is “colorblind,” it is ultimately up to the sororities to decide whom they want to offer a bid to join. This is in keeping with national trends. DeSantis explains, “To be classified as cool and normal by [...] the white Greek system in general, African American students must be black in skin color only. That is, to have any chance of acceptance, they must talk white, dress white, act white, have no black friends, reject black culture and tradition and be light skinned. And even then, the possibility of rejection remains disturbingly high, especially at universities in the Deep South.”¹⁶⁶ Many students do not think of themselves as openly racist; neither do they openly support the rejection of a person of color. But as Deborah E. Whaley notes, racial exclusion happens in the Greek system because “for many members of these white fraternities and sororities, their whiteness is the invisible norm.”¹⁶⁷

Rolling Stone's Evan Right saw such dynamic first hand while researching practices at other universities, “The Greek system is a sort of apartheid, enabling children from predominately white, upper middle class enclaves to safely attend a messily diverse university...without having to mix with those who are different. Presumably, a sorority is a place where a young woman can be ‘lavaliered’ by a fraternity boy, and they can move on to form their own family in a predominantly white, upper middle class.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, the Greek system is also a place where students make little to no effort to find people who are similar to or different from themselves. In this way, Greek students inhabit creates a

¹⁶⁶ DeSantis, *Inside Greek U.*, 23-24

¹⁶⁷ Deborah E. Whaley, “Links, Legacies, and Letters: A Cultural History of Black Greek-letter Organizations” in *Brothers and Sisters: Diversity in College Fraternities and Sororities*, 46.

¹⁶⁸ Evan Right, “Sister Act: Deep Inside the Secret Life of Sorority Girls at Ohio State University,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, October 14, 1999.

social world where any anxiety about interracial interaction and dating is removed. This is echoed in DeSantis's interview with fraternity members, where DeSantis asks why giving a bid to a black student would be bad for the fraternity. One of the fraternity members responded, "The sororities won't socialize with you. No date parties. And, hell, no overnight formals." Another member added, "They are just as bad as we are. Mommy and daddy would not like it if little Susie was fraternizing with black men."¹⁶⁹ Such dynamics became exceedingly clear recently in Alabama. In 2013, at the University of Alabama, sorority members tried to allow a black female student pledge but could not because alumni members threatened to cut funding. The decision to exclude potential members based on race can even be out of the chapters' hands. A similar incident happened at Ole Miss in 2010, but it garnered no national attention. Laura, an African-American who graduated in 2013, went through rush as a sophomore. While she was able to return to three houses after the first round of rush, she was later cut from two of those three houses. "I received a phone call from some of the girls from the two houses that had not asked me back and they informed me that their alumni had said to cut me as they weren't ready for a black girl yet," she recalled. "Obviously, I was in shock."¹⁷⁰ Laura did pledge the mid-tier sorority that asked her back for the third round. But because the sorority was not a lower-tier sorority forced to pledge Laura through a snap bid, posts on an anonymous website called her and her sorority "the laughing stock of Ole Miss."¹⁷¹

The lack of integration in the Greek system helps to explain why only white females tend to wear big t-shirts, as it is the hallmark of an Ole Miss Panhellenic sorority

¹⁶⁹ DeSantis, *Inside Greek U.*, 23.

¹⁷⁰ Interview by author, March 3, 2014.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

member. But the decision not to wear t-shirts also might have to do with the construction of a black Greek identity intended to counter white formulations. As Beverly Tatum has noted, African-Americans develop a racial identity that is in opposition to the dominance and centrality of whiteness in American culture at large. Especially at universities that are historically majority white, African-American students are more likely to face moments of racial tension, discrimination, and feelings of alienation.¹⁷² Thus, as a marginalized group, many African Americans may try to distance themselves from “dressing white” and instead, form an identity where they can create a positive meaning for blackness.¹⁷³

The issue of white privilege may also play a part in determining who does or does not wear big t-shirts. In “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh notes that, for herself as a white woman, she “can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of [her] race.”¹⁷⁴ This can be expanded to make sense of the situation at Ole Miss. White sorority members are able to dress sloppily because they are secure in their position on campus. For African American women, choices regarding what to wear are not as simple, as they find themselves still fighting generalization stigmas that are centuries old and still common today.

Still, some black students do wear the uniform. For instance, Katherine says that she wears oversized t-shirts three to four times a week, but she recognizes that she is one

¹⁷² Beverly Tatum, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together?” and Other Conversations About Race*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997) 77-78.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷⁴ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” from “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” 1988.

of the few African Americans to do so.¹⁷⁵ This might be because she is in a white sorority; hence, she feels more pressure to wear big shirts like her sorority sisters. When asked about why it is mostly whites wearing oversized t-shirts, Katherine offered, “The Greek culture system is where I think the big t-shirt phenomenon started, and most of them are white. It makes sense that it would be mostly white girls wearing them then.”¹⁷⁶ Another African-American sophomore, Alexandra, said, “The black community at Ole Miss is like a microcosm. This is because Ole Miss' racial history makes it not the first choice for many black students. Those who do end up attending Ole Miss are usually more financially secure, so that might be why they dress nicer.”¹⁷⁷ Jacob, an African American senior added, “I think for black girls, the way they dress is more about reflecting their own individuality, when for white girls, it’s all about being a part of the group, their friends in their sorority.”¹⁷⁸ While this may be true for non-affiliated African-American women, for those who chose to join historically black sororities in the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) do face different pressures to conform as well, albeit to different “standards” of dress.

It is also crucial to note the other fundamental differences between the white and black Greek systems that affect one’s decision to not wear a big t-shirt. African-Americans joining National Pan-Hellenic Council organizations are required conform to dress codes. Moreover, there are major differences between Panhellenic and African Americans’ rush process and sorority involvement. For instance, the time in between

¹⁷⁵ Interview by author, October 30, 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Interview by author, November 30, 2012.

¹⁷⁸ Interview by author, February 25, 2014.

enrollment and rush for historically black fraternities and sororities is significantly longer. While Panhellenic and Interfraternal Council organizations allow students to rush their first semester, Alexandra, a junior member of National Pan-Hellenic Council Sorority K noted,

Very rarely will a freshman be eligible to join a [National Pan-Hellenic Council] organization, because you have to have a certain number of [academic] hours. For instance, I had to be a sophomore by hours in order to join [Sorority K], which means I needed 30 hours. The point of the whole year is since you're a minority student and our retention rates are low for minority students, we want to make sure that they are able to handle school before taking on another big commitment, especially since it is lifelong. When you are a member, you're a member for life, paying dues, going to events, and doing community service with them for the rest of your life."¹⁷⁹

Because joining a National Pan-Hellenic Council organization means more than membership for four years, these organizations take special care to look for students who have the maturity to make a long-term commitment. Perhaps, this maturity equates to being able to move past the pressure to dress like white students, incentivizing more mature or formal fashion on a daily basis.

Furthermore, while Panhellenic rush attire ranges from t-shirts to formal attire, National Pan-Hellenic Council rush is clearly about looking professional. Alexandra said, "For rush, you are in business casual and you are interviewed in front of everyone else who is trying to rush that sorority. There is this idea that there are eyes on you all the time. Especially at Ole Miss, where there are so few black people where it's very very easy for us to be visible to one another."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Interview with author, March 4, 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Black sororities also have separate stereotypes in play regarding dress, social rank, and membership. According to Alexandra, National Pan-Hellenic Council stereotypes are even more standardized and universal than for white organizations. No matter what school the chapter is at, or even if it is a graduate chapter, the stereotype is the same.¹⁸¹ As a result, new members often base their decision on the well-known stereotype and end up perpetuating it. For instance, Jacob's mother is a member of a Sorority K, so he grew up learning about the sorority's culture. He explained, "There are stereotypes for each of the black sororities just like the white ones. For example, [Sorority K] is known as the classy letters. If you're a [member of Sorority K] you're supposed to be a pretty girl. They have a slogan that says, 'Pretty girls wear 20 pearls.' They strive to be the epitome of grace, class, and womanhood, so they tell their members that they should carry themselves that way. You will always see [Sorority K members] wearing heels and dressed up more."¹⁸² While many sororities, both black and white, mention teaching members to be an embodiment of "ideal" womanhood as a part of their purpose, for Sorority K members this translates into pride in appearance, and thus, more formal dress.

There are other expectations for how Alexandra should dress and other black sorority members should dress, "I just always try to have clothes on. I didn't realize this until after I joined, but there are girls who really want to be a [member of Sorority K] really badly. Some girls have asked me if I think they dress well enough or if I think their hair is nice enough for them to be [in Sorority K], but I have shaved my head, have four

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Interview by author, February 25, 2014.

tattoos and piercings.”¹⁸³ While there are ideas that members of Sorority K need to look a certain way, Alexandra has not let that entirely change what she does with her body in terms of hair and body modification. Still, she did mention that pressures remain strong:

We’re not allowed to do [Sorority K] things if we look a mess. I think it’s like that with a lot of sororities though. They tell us, ‘If you look rough, just don’t wear your letters.’ Since I have pledged, I’m a lot more careful about what I wear because appearances do matter. They matter for everyone, of course, but they especially matter for [Sorority K] because of the stereotype for my sorority. [...] It’s not about being able to look like you can afford to shop at J. Crew every day. It’s about holding yourself well. [...] I have a serious debate with myself all the time about wearing sweatpants out in public. I think, ‘If I were a nobody I definitely could, but I’m not, I’m [a member of Sorority K].’¹⁸⁴

Thus, because historically black sororities keep their members from wearing the “sloppy” t-shirt, they are not inclined to do so.

Additionally, National Pan-Hellenic Council sororities also often have stricter dress codes for social, philanthropic, or public events. Alexandra said, “One of the ways that NPHC organizations judge each other is by who can ‘run the yard.’ When you see black Greeks out in front of the Student Union at ‘Union Unplugged,’ that’s when you can see a sorority’s strolls. That’s being on the yard. For our chapter, we aren’t supposed to strut or stroll unless we wear our heels.”¹⁸⁵ (Strolling is a public performance where a sorority shows their dancing abilities and sorority “personality.”) On Probate Day, where new members announce that they will be joining the sorority, new members generally dress wearing hot pink blouses, white pants, green sun hats, high heels and pearls. This is in stark contrast to the oversized bid day jerseys that Panhellenic new members wear on the day they accept their membership bid. Jacob noted that at times members have to

¹⁸³ Interview by author, March 4, 2014.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

wear what members of Sorority K call “uninterrupted white. This means that they have to literally wear white everything: white dress, skirt or suit, white stockings, white shoes, and pearls.”¹⁸⁶ Ironically, these formal, stricter dress codes identify more with the visual of a “southern belle” who participates in beauty culture and wears more formal dress than an oversized t-shirt. Hence, today, black sorority women aesthetically suggest --- and often fit --- the southern lady “ideal” just as much as, if not more than, white sorority members.

The Economics of the T-shirt

Race is not the only determiner of difference when it comes to big t-shirts and sorority life. T-shirts are central to the economics of a sorority. Sororities look for women who are upper-middle class so that the sorority will be kept financially stable through “paid members” dues. Such dues also ensure that each sorority will maintain an exclusive reputation and “elite” status. Hence, only those with financial resources above and beyond the average Ole Miss student can participate in Greek t-shirt culture.

Annual dues for one sorority are slightly over \$3,000 for those who do not live in the house and slightly under \$6,000 for those who do. For some sororities, these dues includes the cost of shirts, but if members want shirts for social events, they must pay additional fees. Short sleeve shirts are usually \$12 and long sleeve shirts are \$15. Senior Anna said, “Freshman year I went crazy on t-shirts because I was so excited to wear them. I spent around \$250 that year. The years following that I’ve spent around \$200

¹⁸⁶ Interview by author, February 25, 2014.

each year. After looking at all of my statements, I've found that I spent around \$750 on all of my t-shirts in my three and a half years in college, but some of those are for my boyfriend."¹⁸⁷ Sarah, another senior, said, "I've spent a little over \$550 on my shirts since I've been in college. Some years I spent up to \$220, but others I only spent around \$100. I didn't need to buy a bunch of shirts freshman year because older members gave me around 30 shirts as gifts on bid day."¹⁸⁸

Because members have spent so much money on these t-shirts, many are concerned with what they will do with the shirts after graduation. Senior Tiffany said,

I'll be here for a fifth year to finish my degree, but I won't be wearing any sorority shirts next year. I just think I would feel uncomfortable wearing them because I won't be an active member any more. I don't know what to do with them though because I've spent so much money on them. I can't give them away to charity because random people don't need to be wearing my letters, and they do have some sentimental value. I've thought about making a t-shirt quilt so that I'll have it forever. Whatever the case, I'll be asking my parents for an early Christmas present: non-sorority shirts.¹⁸⁹

Many members chose to hand down their t-shirts to pledges on bid day because members constantly buy new shirts. Some even save a few of their shirts or sweaters in the hopes that, one day, they will have a daughter who will join the sorority.

Some sororities have annual budgets reaching \$1,000,000 coming from member dues. For some sororities, part of this budget is spent on t-shirts for members to wear to functions so that they will appear to be a cohesive group. These events include bid day, philanthropic events, chapter retreats, and rounds of rush. When shirts for members come

¹⁸⁷ Interview by author, February 21, 2014.

¹⁸⁸ Interview by author, February 21, 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Interview by author, February 21, 2014.

out of the sorority's budget, the sorority will often order a batch of shirts that are majority larges with a few mediums and extra-larges.

Shelby is a former licensing chairman for her sorority, meaning that she was responsible for designing, ordering and distributing t-shirts. Shelby said that she ordered the sizes based on what size each member normally would order. She stated, "I would have to go through older order sheets and add up the numbers for each size to figure it out when we would order shirts out of the budget. It was always just a few mediums, mostly larges and extra-larges. There were no differences in price when I would order them mostly larges versus ordering a bunch of different sizes."¹⁹⁰

Generally, sororities order shirts based on what the members will wear; thus, demand determines an order. Often the demand for size large shirts is higher than the supply the sorority orders. Tiffany, a senior sorority member, noted, "The sizes are first come first pick. If you don't get there quick enough, all that's left are the mediums."¹⁹¹ One of the issues with this practice is that some members will take more than one shirt to either give to a boyfriend or to save for a bid day present or a present for their "little sis." This often leads to some members not receiving the shirts that they have paid for, or at the very least, receiving a shirt in the wrong size. In other sororities, members must pay an additional fee for such batch ordered shirts. According to Tiffany, her sorority charged an additional \$90 fee for the year's required shirts on top of her annual dues. "Even if you don't want the shirts," she stated, "you're still paying for it whether you like it or not."¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Interview with author, February 26, 2014.

¹⁹¹ Interview by author, February 21, 2014.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Members sign up for the shirts through the sorority or buy them directly through a t-shirt supplier's website. According to Claire, a former vice president of finance, when the t-shirt orders go through the sorority, the sorority will pay with a check up-front after members have marked down how many shirts they want and in which sizes. After bills are sent out to members, the sorority is reimbursed by the members paying through online billing. Claire said, "Sometimes it becomes a problem because people don't pay their bills, so the sorority has to take a loss on it. We can send a collection agency to try to get the money back, but we aren't likely to do that when it's \$20 in t-shirts that are never paid. We usually only end up doing that when a person didn't pay any of their dues from the semester."¹⁹³ She continued, "It's especially bad for the people that we terminate or those who drop out of the sorority. They almost always have t-shirt bills that they never end up paying. There's not much we can really do to punish them because they're no longer in the sorority."¹⁹⁴ At the same time, there are also shirts that have been paid for and are never picked up. In general, after a certain date, the sorority can sell these at a discounted price to try to make up for any money lost through unpaid bills.

Ultimately, the business of big t-shirts can be hard on students and the sorority's finances. Because having a lot of big t-shirts are a sign of social, racial or even sexual standing in the Greek community, many women continue to buy these t-shirts, even when they will not be wearing them next year. Senior Anna said, "Since junior year, I've told myself that I need to stop buying these shirts because my parents are spending so much money on them. I wouldn't even order a shirt initially, but then the shirts would come in,

¹⁹³ Interview by author, March 3, 2014.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

and everyone would be wearing it. I would feel so left out. The shirt was just so cute, I would always go buy the shirt when they sold the leftovers. I barely even have room to fit them in my two drawers that are just for t-shirts”¹⁹⁵

As graduation looms, it becomes apparent that social norms outside Ole Miss make little room for the sorority girl uniform. At the start of her senior year, Alexis tweeted, “I need to start collecting non sorority t-shirts. It's going to be a sad day when it's no longer acceptable to wear them every day #senior.”¹⁹⁶ Another senior, Anna added, “I mean I’ll save some of them to wear around the house or to work out in, but I don’t need 70 t-shirts for that.”¹⁹⁷ Thus, after graduation, many sorority members are stuck with dozens of useless t-shirts on which they have spent large amounts of their money or their parents’ money.

The T-shirt South

The big t-shirt trend is not confined to the Ole Miss campus. While it is impossible to determine which campus started the trend, it is obvious that it has spread all over the South. According to students at Mississippi State University and the University of Southern Mississippi, sorority members on the campuses wear big t-shirts just as often as Ole Miss students do. The oversized t-shirt has also appeared at Millsaps College, the University of Georgia, Clemson University, the University of Arkansas, Auburn University, the University of Texas--Austin, Texas Tech University, Texas Christian

¹⁹⁵ Interview by author, March 7, 2014.

¹⁹⁶ Tweet from August 6, 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Interview by author, March 7, 2014.

University, and Louisiana State University. At the University of Alabama, one student visiting the school noted that the big t-shirt trend is even more pronounced, with sorority members wearing shirts noticeably even larger than the typical Ole Miss shirt. Students at the University of Tennessee have recently joined the big t-shirt trend. Alyssa, a senior at Ole Miss who is from Tennessee, recalled, “When I visited the school as a high school senior [in 2009], they were mostly wearing fitted shirts. They weren’t wearing larger than one size up until a year or two ago [2011 or 2012].”¹⁹⁸ According to a senior who initially attended Ole Miss and then transferred, some schools like the University of South Alabama are participating in the trend but with shirts that “aren’t as big as Ole Miss’s.”¹⁹⁹

Additionally, some high school students have started to take part in the trend. Heather, who graduated in 2013, noted, “All of the high school girls in my hometown wear big t-shirts now. I see them at the gym and shopping. I even saw a high school girl at church in a big t-shirt and Nike shorts.”²⁰⁰ Rachel, who is from Mississippi, noticed a similar trend in her hometown, “A couple of my friends in high school who were also going to Ole Miss noticed that everyone up there wore big t-shirts, so we started wearing it when we were in high school. The administration at my high school ended up telling us that we couldn’t wear that because wearing ‘leggings as pants’ was not allowed.”²⁰¹

Although the oversized shirt has spread to high schools, there are still several colleges that have not picked up the big t-shirt fad. Schools such as Tulane, Florida State,

¹⁹⁸ Interview by author, November 18, 2013.

¹⁹⁹ Interview by author, February 24, 2014.

²⁰⁰ Interview by author, February 23, 2014.

²⁰¹ Interview by author, February 23, 2014.

Georgia Tech, and Southern Methodist University do not participate in the big t-shirt trend. A sophomore at Tulane, Maria related,

Girls in general here do not wear big t-shirts. Only the girls that were originally from very southern places did. I came to school with so many big t-shirts and now mostly only wear them to bed or to run because people would always tell me that my clothes were too big for me. Mostly girls wear a wide variety of clothes here. I don't think most people even own t-shirts, definitely not the big ones. Their sororities here have t-shirts, but most of them are v-neck and they will wear them with skirts and boots or jeans and a sweater.²⁰²

Maria has an older sister who is in a sorority at Ole Miss; hence, she assumed that wearing big t-shirts was the norm for any girl going to college. But she also found that this was not necessarily true for her school. Universities that are private, smaller in overall size, and have a smaller Greek scene are less likely to have students who wear big t-shirts. Additionally, schools that are in the Midwest, Northeast, or West Coast are also more likely to have sorority members who do not wear oversized shirts.

Conclusion

For the young women at Ole Miss, the decision of whether to wear an oversized t-shirt every day has become less of a free choice. Instead, it is at once a socially-prescribed and policed ritual, expectation, and habit. Dozens of interviews reveal that women on the Ole Miss campus shape their social assumptions, perceptions, and identity through the big t-shirt phenomenon. This is intensely connected to the sorority and fraternity culture on the Ole Miss campus, and especially to ideas regarding social status

²⁰² Interview by author, November 18, 2013.

sexuality, and race. For these reasons, it is fair to say that while the oversized t-shirt may be a passing fad, but what it reveals about social relations on and off campus is not.

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