

Hazing the Other: The “Brotherhood” We Never Rushed

Lydia Jin

Abstract: This paper argues that fraternity hazing functions as a microcosm of patriarchal oppression, revealing the mechanisms through which systems of domination reproduce themselves. Beginning with an analysis of institutional definitions of hazing, I demonstrate that their inadequacy reflects oppression’s inherent resistance to localization as discrete, punishable acts. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep’s concept of liminality and feminist critiques of consent, particularly Catharine MacKinnon’s analysis of coerced consent under conditions of power imbalance, I establish that hazing operates through a coercive social contract in which subordinates must consent to violation as the price of belonging. Employing Dianne Taylor’s Foucaultian analysis of humiliation and Sanjay Palshikar’s conception of humiliation as communication across power boundaries, I argue that “New Member Education” teaches pledges that subordinate members are unworthy of freedom, which is the same lesson women receive through patriarchal socialization. The paper traces structural parallels between the pledge’s predicament and women’s navigation of marriage, workplace harassment, and normative femininity: in each case, subjects face a double bind of submitting to degradation or forfeiting access to economic and social power. Engaging Åsa Burman’s work on structural power, I examine how intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender compound within Greek life. I conclude that anti-hazing policies necessarily fail because they treat structural oppression as isolated incidents. Fraternities serve as training grounds where young men learn the contractual logic of domination they will later deploy in broader society. Recognizing hazing as structural rather than incidental demands that reform efforts address the exclusionary foundations of Greek life, not merely the symptoms of its hierarchy.

Since 1970, there has been at least one hazing-related death on a college campus each year.¹ In a case against two Florida A&M University students who beat Kappa Alpha Psi initiate Marcus Jones to the point of needing surgery, Honorable Judge Kathleen Dekker is quoted

¹ Elizabeth Allan and Mary Madden, *National Study of Student Hazing, Hazing in View: Students at Risk*, 2006 – 2008.

as saying: “I want to save the victims who will quietly go along because they want to belong.”² We gawk at headlines when initiation rituals lead to hospitalizations or death. We think of the victim’s families, and how they must feel having sent their child to college, only for them to die at the hands of careless college students with an invincibility complex on a power trip. It is even more disorienting when their deaths are ruled accidental, despite clear evidence that something more sinister was at play.

The concept of hazing is much older than college fraternities and dates back to Plato’s Academy, when boys were observed practicing pennialism, a system of mild oppression and torment practiced upon first-year students. The military is known for hazing, as well as many athletic and social groups. Although less likely to adopt traditional hazing practices, sororities cannot be exempt from the discussion either. Defenders of hazing will scoff at its adversaries, alleging that critics are simply bitter for not gaining acceptance into a club exclusive enough to be hazed. They insist that hazing promotes stronger bonds between initiates—a necessary evil for the pledges and an irreplaceable part of the fun for senior members of the community.³ The cycle of abuse seems impossible to break and as the practice lives on, hazers gain more entitlement to their actions through aging traditions.

Hazing may seem like an isolated case of misplaced power and torment, but it serves as a microcosm and therefore a perfect case study of large-scale oppression. This paper focuses on predominantly White fraternities and their relationship to patriarchal power, though the analysis illuminates other oppressive structures. Hazing relies on a coerced rite of passage that weaponizes humiliation, strips bodily autonomy, and forces participants to prove their worth through self-sacrificial submission. College fraternities serve as the training ground where young men learn and internalize the contractual logic of oppression. Patterns of behavior that resemble hazing appear in many contexts both covertly and overtly, suggesting that urgent attention should be paid to its proliferation and harmful effects. Addressing the problem of oppression requires careful analysis of its concentrated, smaller-scale forms. Fraternities teach young men that belonging is earned through submission, that past suffering entitles future cruelty, and that tradition renders these lessons uncontestable. I aim to examine how they teach the logic of the patriarchy itself.

The purpose of this paper is in no way meant to minimize the harm the victims of hazing face in its localized form. I instead wish to highlight its prevalence in more covert contexts and show how it directly mirrors the oppression we hope to eliminate. Hazing in Greek life exploits power differences and reinforces them to perpetuate the cycle of abuse. Fraternities and sororities are historically exclusionary institutions, which calls into question the value of their traditions and practices. The selection process for inclusion into the group is entirely based on perceptions of social power, which provides a clear gateway for oppressive behaviors such as hazing. Members are taught to accept, normalize, and perpetuate the oppression of subordinated groups.

2 “Frat Brothers Get 2 Years for Assault,” *CBS News*, January 30, 2007, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/frat-brothers-get-2-years-for-assault/>.

3 It is interesting to note that Dartmouth College states in their Office of Greek life Handbook: “The term pledge is no longer used as it has the connotation of servitude or obedience.” Yet, due to the fact that new members do serve and obey as part of hazing, I deem it appropriate to use in the context of this paper. Hazers often give tasks to hazingees, from silly (e.g. “send brother X a weather report every day” or “serve brother X dinner at the dining hall”) to serious (e.g. “eat as many burritos until you vomit on your brothers” or “endure this hot poker brand on your skin”). The fact that hazingees comply is sufficient to show that they are serving and obeying their ‘pledgemasters.’

1. What Is Hazing? The Problem of Definition

1.1 Historical Context and Rites of Passage

Before we can understand hazing as a microcosm of oppression, we must confront the reality that the current definitions of hazing do not capture how hazing persists in reality. This definitional failure reveals something essential about the nature of oppression itself.

Hazing symbolizes a membership change from newcomer and outsider to member and teammate through a process akin to a rite of passage. The term ‘rite of passage’ was first coined by Arnold van Gennep, who describes a process of “separation, transition, and incorporation” that is observed by many cultures, often in religious and spiritual contexts, to mark important transition periods in one’s life.⁴ According to van Gennep, the function of a rite of passage is to signify a change in social standing, making it easy to identify rights and obligations between various members within a society. Repeated over generations, it helps maintain the norms and social hierarchies within the society. Van Gennep’s groundbreaking concept is the stage of liminality: a period during which a member is “betwixt and between” statuses. The parallels between van Gennep’s framework and fraternity hazing as a rite of passage is obvious. The pledgship period is when potential new members (PNMs) have accepted a bid, but have not yet been formally initiated into the group, despite their official membership recognized by the college or institution that the fraternity is affiliated with. This clearly puts them in van Gennep’s liminal stage, between the statuses of outsider and member.

1.2 Institutional Definitions and Their Inadequacies

It may be tempting to assume that we have now successfully determined a time frame within which hazing can occur. Yet, upon careful reading of the definitions provided by hazing policies in institutional handbooks, we see that this assumption is unfounded. While public conceptions of hazing indicate that it occurs during the liminal pledgship period, official definitions of hazing do not provide any time frame requirements.

The Department of Defense in 1997 defined hazing as follows:

Hazing is defined as any conduct whereby a military member or members, regardless of service or rank, without proper authority cause another military member or members, regardless of service or rank, to suffer or be exposed to any activity which is cruel, abusive, humiliating, oppressive, demeaning, or harmful. Soliciting or coercing another to perpetrate any such activity is also considered hazing. Hazing need not involve physical contact among or between military members; it can be verbal or psychological in nature. Actual or implied consent to acts of hazing does not limit the culpability of the perpetrator.⁵

Here, the Department of Defense has not provided any guidelines for when hazing might occur, nor for who might inflict it on whom. They do not even make clear whether there is a meaningful difference between an act of hazing and a petty insult. It would be senseless to consider every uncontested verbal insult as hazing, though this could plausibly fit within the definition.

4 Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (Librairie Félix Alcan, 1909).

5 Kirsten M. Keller et al. “Defining Hazing,” in *Hazing in the U.S. Armed Forces: Recommendations for Hazing Prevention Policy and Practice* (RAND Corporation, 2015), 5-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt19jcgpb.8>.

Turning back to college fraternities, where hazing gets its infamous reputation in popular culture, we hope for neater boundaries. Dartmouth College builds on New Hampshire’s statutory definition and considers an act to be hazing if it is a “condition of initiation into, admission into, continued membership in or association with any organization.”⁶ Once again, we have no reason to assume that hazing must occur in a specific liminal period. Dartmouth’s policy similarly indicates that any member at any time could be hazed, now with the added condition that a victim’s lack of conformity should indicate a risk of losing membership in the group.

The definition implies that the “risk of losing membership” is associated with the risk of losing official membership, but I posit that being socially isolated, feeling uninvited, or othered by the group is effectively equal to losing official membership status. This should not be controversial, since van Gennep’s liminal stage and the pledgship period shows that there exists an in-between stage where members can be in a state other than part of the in-group, even if their official affiliation is with the group. Therefore, any future mention of membership within this paper should be taken to mean both official membership and unofficial social inclusion.

What could be considered necessary for “continued membership in or association with” the organization is largely up for interpretation. Organizations are always at liberty to state post facto that nobody’s membership was truly at risk and that participation in any activity was entirely optional. Even in the case where someone says ‘do this or you are out’ or ‘you are being hazed,’ it can be unclear whether these declarations are meant to be taken seriously or ironically.

In July 2024, Dartmouth student Won Jang drowned in the Connecticut River due to hazing. One fraternity member even wrote in a group chat that night: “Hazing is off to a phenomenal start.”⁷ Still, the Hanover Police Department ruled Jang’s death an accident.⁸ When nothing, not even consequences as permanent and traumatic as death with explicit, written acknowledgement of hazing is strong enough evidence to satisfy legal standards for institutional accountability, we must confront our dire inadequacy in understanding the matter at hand. This legal failure reflects the conceptual inadequacy of treating hazing as a discrete act rather than a structural one.

In both the Department of Defense’s and in Dartmouth College’s definition of hazing, the range of activities that could constitute as part of a hazing act is extremely broad. What one considers “cruel, abusive, humiliating, oppressive, demeaning, or harmful” can vary. A simple insult may suffice if directed at a particularly sensitive individual. Yet an insult is not enough for a hazing conviction. So, what is enough?

How does hazing differ from bullying? Bullying, while also not without its ambiguities, can be more easily identified from the victim’s point of view. If person B claims to be bullied by person A, one need only to observe A’s behavior to verify B’s case.⁹ B’s acknowledgement

6 For a full definition of Dartmouth’s hazing policy, see Dartmouth College, “Hazing Policy,” *Policies*, June 20, 2025, <https://policies.dartmouth.edu/policy/hazing-policy>. In this section, I am drawing on only a small section of the policy to illustrate that its timeframe boundaries are vague. The full policy still does not provide adequate definition, the reasons for which will become clear in further sections of this paper.

7 Susan Zalkind, “Greek Tragedy: A Drowning at Dartmouth College,” *Boston Magazine*, April 7, 2025, <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2025/04/06/dartmouth-college-fraternity-culture-student-death/>.

8 The Dartmouth Senior Staff, “Won Jang’s Death Ruled Accidental by Police,” *The Dartmouth*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2024/09/won-jangs-death-ruled-accidental-by-police>.

9 By “observe,” I mean in a God’s-eye-view sense. Of course, A could easily conceal their bullying to human onlookers. In knowing A’s true behavior towards B, we can verify that bullying is taking place. A’s bullying of B is empirically verifiable, even if it may not always be easy to do.

that they are being harmed is part of the evidence that they are being harmed. Bullying is non-consensual. Hazing, on the other hand, must be consensual, even if that consent is not explicit. In the next section, I expand on how consent is required for hazing. Can someone be faulted for bullying if their victim has consented to it? If someone offered to pinch me every day and I let them, is the pincher morally reprehensible?

2. The Mechanics of Hazing as Oppression

2.1 Power Imbalances and Consent

The inadequacy of these definitions points us towards seeing hazing as a power structure sustained by coerced consent. To understand this, I examine how hazing resembles rape, another act cloaked in the language of consent.

Within feminist literature, conversations about consent have focused on physical freedom or resistance of women in and out of sexual contexts. Rape was considered an act of violence that restricted the physical freedom of the victim. Moreover, women were physically constrained in moving through society in nonsexual contexts out of fear of rape. According to Susan Rae Peterson, “what is wrong with rape is primarily its restriction of the freedom of bodily movement for women.”¹⁰ Further, she says that “rape effectively keeps women in their places; indeed, because many women fear being raped, they remain much more stationary and sedentary than men.” This proposition goes further than the common law that defined rape, which stated that nonconsensual sex occurred when a woman had physically resisted to sex, or was physically constrained in a way that she could not resist sex.¹¹ Yet it still had to be acknowledged that nonconsensual sex is a violation even when it does not involve physical resistance. The focus then shifted to consent in general, not only as a demonstration of physical compliance or resistance.

Some feminists questioned the validity of consent in general within the patriarchal structures of society. One argument is that where there exist clear power imbalances, consent cannot be uncoerced, and thus cannot be granted. This is recognized by several instances of the law, such as in relationships between teachers and students, therapists and patients, and adults and children. In cases like these, the power dynamic “is such that consent might not easily be refused.”¹² Catherine MacKinnon famously took this notion to show that in a male-dominated society, sex between a man and a woman is always fraught with power imbalances, which makes it doubtful that a woman can autonomously consent to sex. Readers and many critics of MacKinnon misinterpret her words to mean that “all sex is rape.”¹³ While this particular controversy is not the focus of this paper, the point that mixing power and consent creates muddy boundaries is salient.

The definitions of hazing that I have presented have stated that any member, “regardless of service or rank” in the case of the military, may be both perpetrators and victims of

10 Susan Rae Peterson, “Coercion and Rape: The State as a Male Protection Racket,” in *Feminism and Philosophy*, ed. Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English, Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1977, 366.

11 See, e.g., *Rusk v. State*, 406 A.2d 624 (Md. Ct. Spec. App. 1979), rev’d, 424 A.2d 720 (Md. 1981).

12 A teacher-student case; *State v. McKenzie-Adams*, 915 A.2d 822, 836 (Conn. 2007), overruled on other grounds by *State v. Payne*, 34 A.3d 370 (Conn. 2012), and a lieutenant colonel-private first-class case; *Loomis v. United States*, 68 Fed. Cl. 503, 519 (2005).

13 Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin instead aimed to show that consent is not a stable enough foundation to ground rape theory in.

the crime. Several examples illustrate this point. Being coerced into hazing another member may itself constitute a form of hazing, as there is evidence to suggest that hazing others also produces both negative short- and long-term psychological effects.¹⁴ This indicates that not all hazers find pleasure in committing the act, but are doing so to conform to the group's norms and practices. A member who refuses to haze others may not be expelled from the group explicitly, but as they continue to refuse to conform to the norms associated with their membership, they may become socially isolated and effectively excluded. As I have already stated, effective exclusion from the group in this way is practically equal to having membership from the group explicitly revoked. Thus, their membership being at risk means that some hazers may be considered as being hazed themselves by others in their cohort.

While a member could haze another member of the same age, rank, or cohort, hazing necessarily involves a power imbalance which is easily overlooked by the wording given in standard definitions. This imbalance may not present itself through official titles or positions, but through implicit dynamics such as ones based in racial, sexual, or cultural norms. Furthermore, social structures between members of a cohort play important roles in providing indirect forms of power to certain members of the group. Åsa Burman's work in social ontology highlights how social structures can equip agents with positive or negative structural power.¹⁵ For fraternities and sororities, racial exclusion is baked into many of their traditional practices and attitudes. Thus, racial differences can effect structural power between members in the same cohort. Additionally, things like wealth, attractiveness, family background, college majors, or general social perception can significantly alter the power dynamics within a cohort to varying degrees. With this in mind, it is easy to see how those with significant social power, such as a wealthy, tall, White male athlete may dominate another member in the same cohort who is a non-wealthy, short, Asian NARP.¹⁶ The more powerful can coerce the less powerful to participate in a dangerous activity through fear that non-conformity will cause him to lose membership, explicitly or otherwise, in the group.

2.2 Intersecting Oppressions and Structural Power

These intersecting oppressions compound within Greek life in ways that require careful attention. A Black woman in a historically White sorority faces both the hazing structure and racist microaggressions that function as continuous, informal hazing. Her 'choice' to remain is even more constrained, as leaving means losing not just social power but one of few institutional paths to professional networks in a White-dominated economy. Greek organizations were founded on exclusionary principles of race, class, and gender. Historically Black Greek Letter Organizations arose precisely because Black students were excluded from White Greek life. The intersectional dimensions of Greek life oppression deserve fuller treatment than this paper's scope allows, but they must also be acknowledged as constitutive to how hazing functions.

2.3 Coerced Consent and the Contractual Structure

Hazing involves a form of voluntary submission. However, as in the case of rape, coerced consent is not consent. Part of what makes coerced consent in rape so insidious is that

14 Hank Nuwer, *Hazing: Destroying Young Lives*, Indiana University Press, 2018.

15 Åsa Burman, *Nonideal Social Ontology*, Oxford University Press, 2023, 221.

16 NARP: Dartmouth slang for Non-Athletic Regular Person. See <https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/folklorearchive/narp/>.

the victim is coerced into saying yes not to sex, but to rape. Similarly, in cases of hazing, where the victims must perform some activity that may or may not be directly harmful, they are saying yes not to the activity, but to being hazed. While rape victims can also be violated without any consent, coerced consent is present in all cases of hazing, which makes hazing difficult to identify. Hazing requires its victims to consent to being violated, which must be considered a violation in itself. This form of coerced consent is what gives hazing its character in the broadest sense. Defining it this way opens the doors to seeing its prevalence in society at large.

The contractual structure that hazing invokes means that hazing necessarily involves consent from its victim. Simply put, if a member does not wish to be hazed, they will exit the group. This could mean that they exit officially or unofficially, through being socially isolated or excluded from the in-group. By continuing their membership in the group, they are indicating their consent to be hazed. Though their true desire is not the activity of hazing, but inclusion in the group, since inclusion in the group requires being hazed, they have no choice but to consent. Thus, their consent is coerced. Michael Cholbi argues that hazing includes a contractual arrangement, and this "need not be explicitly stated in order for a quid pro quo arrangement to be in force."¹⁷ Cholbi notes that "a reasonable person would, in the context, recognize that her complying with the intended harm is a condition of her full inclusion in the group or organization."¹⁸ In other words, hazing is a coercive social contract where the price of full membership is consent to being harmed.

3. Humiliation as Education

3.1 The Nature of Humiliation

Having established hazing as oppression sustained by coerced consent across power differentials, we can now examine what this oppression teaches its victims.

Many confuse coerced consent in this context with some masochistic tendency—perhaps the victims actually enjoy being hazed, which is why they agree to it in the first place. Sanjay Palshikar excludes masochism from his discussion of humiliation, just as I will here.¹⁹ Since the majority of activities involved in hazing rituals subject victims either to immediate or long-term physical and psychological harms, and the fact that most victims would not voluntarily engage in them outside of the context of obtaining membership in the group, it is reasonable to assume that victims are not gaining pleasure from hazing rituals, and thus not engaging in masochism, but are being subjected to humiliation.

Dianna Taylor discusses humiliation as a disruption of the Foucaultian view of the self.²⁰ Michel Foucault focuses on the interconnectedness of a relationship with oneself and that of the external world. We cannot separate ourselves from others or their treatment of us; a person's sense of self is a constant hermeneutics across these relationships. An act of humiliation "threatens to completely foreclose those capacities" and "has the potential to fix the self in an abject relation in which it is displayed before itself merely as a negation, as not only

17 Michael J. Cholbi, "On Hazing," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2009): 143–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40441523>, 144.

18 Cholbi, "On Hazing," 145.

19 Sanjay Palshikar, "Understanding Humiliation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 51 (2005): 5428–32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4417556>.

20 Dianna Taylor, "Humiliation as a Harm of Sexual Violence: Feminist versus Neoliberal Perspectives," *Hypatia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 434–50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45153703>.

unworthy but indeed incapable of freedom.”²¹ Palshikar asserts that humiliation is a form of communication across power boundaries and cannot, by definition, be one-sided.²² While it is debated whether the perpetrator of humiliation sees the victim as human or non-human, there is consensus that the victim sees themselves as humiliated.²³

3.2 “New Member Education”

Hazing is often colloquially clothed under the term ‘New Member Education,’ or NME. But what, exactly, are new members being educated on? Perhaps they are forced to recite facts about the organization,²⁴ or learn the names of their fellow pledges. Their ‘education’ may be seen as a way of bonding with other members of the group, particularly the cohort of victims; friendships and solidarity often mitigate the pain that insults wreak.²⁵ Yet diluting the harms through camaraderie also works as kindling for the fire, as hazers view the harm they have inflicted in the moment as less than it actually is. Moreover, it circumvents any confrontation of long-term harms to an individual, or ripple effect harms that these individuals may then inflict on future cohorts.

In return for acceptance into the group, pledges of a fraternity must first acknowledge their position as lowest in the pecking order, having no influence or agency within the domain of the organization. Combining Palshikar’s notion of humiliation as communication across power lines and Taylor’s analysis of humiliation and how it affects the self, I assert that the education received in NME is that *subordinate members of a society are not worthy of freedom*. By freedom, I mean the ability to define and interpret oneself within the context of others as one sees fit, as opposed to as someone in a higher position of power sees fit. Pledges recognize their subordinate status with the knowledge that retaliation results in being outcast from the society altogether. The decision not to retaliate, as Palshikar puts it, “means that the situation is not seen as confronting us with a momentous choice, it means that the history-making potential of ‘humiliation’ is not explored.”²⁶ As future generations enter the system, the “momentous choice” and “history-making potential” grows further and further from view, and eventually, it becomes accepted that ‘this is just how it’s done.’

3.3 *The Parallel to Women’s Socialization*

This education in subordination is not unique to fraternities. Women receive the same curriculum, administered through different institutions with different rituals, but with parallel underlying logic.

Women learn through countless mediums that we are not worthy of defining ourselves on our own terms, but only as men define us. We know that if we do not conform to the patriarchal standards of womanhood, then we cannot thrive in the society that has been built through teaching that same lesson, time and time again. As bell hooks argues in *The Will to Change*, patriarchy demands that women perform subordination as the price of economic survival and

21 Taylor, “Humiliation as a Harm of Sexual Violence,” 440.

22 Palshikar, “Understanding Humiliation,” 5431.

23 Taylor discusses these two views held by Avishai Margalit and Lisa Guenther. Margalit argues that the perpetrator sees the person as human, but treats them as non-human, while Guenther argues that the perpetrator sees the person as non-human, and treats them as such. Both agree that the victim sees themselves as humiliated.

24 As Eduardo Saverin does when joining a finals club at Harvard in *The Social Network* (2010).

25 Palshikar, “Understanding Humiliation,” 5429.

26 Palshikar, “Understanding Humiliation,” 5431

social belonging, which is precisely the contractual logic of hazing.²⁷ Women’s health research is chronically underfunded and women, and even female mice, were excluded from clinical trials until 1993.²⁸ Matters of our existence, as members of the low, is “beneath concern” for society.

4. Hazing as Microcosm of Patriarchal Oppression

4.1 *The Contractual Nature of Women’s Oppression*

In the patriarchy, women are coerced into a contractual arrangement in which they submit to oppressive norms and practices in exchange for economic, legal, and social security. The workplace ‘initiation’ women face includes enduring sexual harassment as ‘just how it is,’ performing emotional labor to prove they’re ‘team players,’ and tolerating interruptions and idea-theft to maintain their seat at the table. Like fraternity pledges, professional women face a choice: to submit to degradation or lose access to power. The #MeToo movement revealed how women across industries had ‘consented’ to harassment for decades—not because they wanted to, but because refusing meant career death. Harvey Weinstein’s assistants knew they were being humiliated; they also knew that objecting meant blacklisting.

Marriage historically functions as another contractual form of this arrangement. In her book, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, Louise Perry writes that marriage “has historically been used as a vehicle for the control of women by men,” but that women should marry anyway because there is no better system.²⁹ Marriage functions as a vehicle for protection for women, particularly if they have children. Marriage has a “taming effect” on men, and “a society composed of tamed men is a better society to live in, for men, for women and for children.”³⁰ Women who refuse marriage face economic precarity in a system designed to punish non-compliance. I do not mean to say that every woman must enter a heterosexual marriage in order to thrive in society. However, there is strong reason to think that doing so comes with undeniable benefits, despite the institution of marriage being simultaneously oppressive. Other institutions demonstrate a similar contradiction, such as normative femininity itself. In exchange for protection and inclusion in greater society, women must conform to systems that fuel their own subordination.

These parallels aim to show the similarities between the oppression of women in the patriarchy and of hazing victims in college fraternities. These two structures are clearly related because their dynamics broadly function in the same ways. In both cases, continued access to status, security, and membership depends on the willingness to endure practices that reinforce one’s own subordination.

4.2 *Bonding Through Shared Trauma*

Defenders of hazing often insist that it brings members of the group closer emotionally. Psychologically, there is some basis for this claim. The severity-affiliation-attraction hypothesis suggests that the more suffering individuals endure for the purpose of an objective, the more they are forced to resolve the cognitive dissonance of why they are in that position, and the more value they place on that objective.³¹ In this case, the objective is being recognized as part

27 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, Washington Square Press, 2004.

28 Bridget Balch, “Why We Know so Little about Women’s Health,” *Association of American Medical Colleges*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.aamc.org/news/why-we-know-so-little-about-women-s-health>.

29 Louise Perry, *The Case against the Sexual Revolution*, Polity, 2022, 184.

30 Perry, *The Case against the Sexual Revolution*, 182.

31 Jason M. Silveira and Michael W. Hudson, “Hazing in the College Marching Band,” *Journal of Re-*

of the in-group. On this view, hazing promotes group bonding through shared trauma; pledges endure suffering together and later reinterpret that suffering as proof of loyalty and depth of connection to the group.³² Additionally, as mentioned earlier, friendship can lessen the pain of trauma. Thus, hazing victims form bonds with each other in order to weaken their suffering.

However, while bonds formed through suffering can be powerful, an attempt to forge these connections cannot be a reasonable justification to inflict harm. Native people do not thank colonizers, slaves do not thank enslavers, and women do not thank men for the strength or value of their respective communities, culture, and camaraderie. Instead, they find power in sharing their individual identities and who they become alongside their trauma, not because of it. As I have stated in previous writing, we take power away from the system when we choose to prioritize our individuality over who the system forces us to become.³³

Proponents might object that voluntary military service also involves hardship that bonds soldiers, yet we don't condemn basic training as hazing. The distinction lies in purpose, equality, and structural position. Military training's hardships serve external objectives such as combat readiness and are imposed equally on all recruits by the institution itself, not by those who recently endured the same treatment seeking to reassert dominance. Hazing serves only the internal objective of maintaining hierarchy and is imposed by those with arbitrary social power over those without it. It is oppression for oppression's sake, dressed up as tradition. Yet even this distinction should give us pause—military hazing does occur, and military culture trains men in domination and violence in ways feminist scholars have extensively documented.³⁴ The military-fraternity parallel may be closer than the objection suggests, both serving as masculinity-training institutions that prepare men for lives of dominance.

4.3 Why This Matters: From Fraternity to Society

The fraternity system trains young men not just to accept hierarchy, but to glorify it, finding pleasure and meaning in their power over others, and to view submission from others as their due. These men then carry this training into boardrooms, courtrooms, and bedrooms. They have learned that love, loyalty, and belonging are proven through submission to humiliation. They have learned that their own past suffering entitles them to inflict future suffering. They have learned that tradition justifies cruelty, that consent can be manufactured through coercion, and that questioning the system means exclusion from power. In short, they have learned to be patriarchs. And women, whether or not we ever rushed a sorority, have been pledging to their brotherhood our entire lives.

5. The Moral and Practical Failure

5.1 Why Anti-Hazing Policies Fail

Hazing has been outlawed in 44 of the 50 states, and in the District of Columbia.³⁵

search in Music Education 63, no. 1 (2015): 5–27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43900277>.

32 Keller et al. suggest that humiliation may also cause negative attitudes towards the group. The data is inconclusive, so my aim in this section is to make a case against those who believe that humiliation is a necessary component of group bonding.

33 Lydia Jin, "Jin: The Price of Our Community: Paying with Your Life," *The Dartmouth*, May 6, 2025, <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2025/05/jin-the-price-of-our-community>.

34 Maya Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 81–93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24591032>.

35 "States with Anti-Hazing Laws | StopHazing | Hazing Prevention Resource," *StopHazing*, n.d., <https://>

On the surface, we see a moral obligation to protect our youth from the harms of hazing. Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" helps clarify what exactly makes hazing morally wrong. Hazing combines exploitation (extracting emotional/physical labor from subordinates), marginalization (threatening exclusion), powerlessness (stripping agency), cultural imperialism (defining pledges' reality for them), and violence (psychological and physical harm).³⁶ Hazing is exceptional in being corrupt from the outset, since its constitutive aim is to compel those hazed into a subordinate posture incompatible with their status as the rational coequal of those who haze them.

The reason definitions of hazing are so broad and thus effectively useless is that they attempt to localize a problem that cannot be localized. A policy that outlaws hazing is really reaching for something deeper that has been bound with human suffering for as long as society has existed: oppression itself. If we are to address the issue of hazing, we must eliminate the social contexts that facilitate it. We cannot prevent hazing through attempting to define it as distinct from what it truly is. Fraternities and sororities inherently exclude others based on social power, and where there is exclusion based on social power, there will always be the oppression of less powerful groups.

Anti-hazing policies fail because they treat hazing as a discrete act rather than a systemic structure. Universities prohibit 'forcing someone to consume alcohol' but cannot prohibit the social architecture that makes refusal costly. They cannot ban the power differentials that make interactions between members coercive. The problem isn't the specific act; it's the system that makes the act rational for both perpetrator and victim. Until we address exclusionary institutions built on social power differentiation, we are merely treating the symptoms instead of curing the disease.

6. Conclusion

Hazing in fraternities is a concentrated display of the same logic that structures patriarchy and other large-scale oppressions: coerced consent under conditions of unequal power, ritualized humiliation as "education," contractual arrangements, and a double bind that forces the oppressed to either submit or be cast out. By training members to accept humiliation as the price of belonging, hazing rehearses and reproduces the very patterns of domination that shape our broader social world. The definitional uncertainty of hazing comes from oppression's inherent resistance to clean boundaries precisely because of its foundations in social relations rather than isolated incidents.

This analysis has focused on predominantly White fraternities where young men learn to be patriarchs, but the implications extend further. The contractual logic of "consent to subordination or be excluded" operates implicitly in any structure where there exists a power hierarchy. Recognizing hazing as structural means recognizing that reform will never be sufficient. We cannot make Greek life safe while preserving its exclusionary foundations any more than we can make patriarchy safe while preserving male dominance. The question is not how to define hazing more precisely, but whether we are willing to abolish the institutions that require its logic to function.

stophazing.org/policy/state-laws/.

36 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 1990.

Works Cited

- Allan, Elizabeth, and Mary Madden. *National Study of Student Hazing: Hazing in View: Students at Risk*. 2006–2008.
- Balch, Bridget. “Why We Know So Little about Women’s Health.” *Association of American Medical Colleges*. March 26, 2024. <https://www.aamc.org/news/why-we-know-so-little-about-women-s-health>.
- Burman, Åsa. *Nonideal Social Ontology*. Oxford University Press, 2023.
- Cholbi, Michael J. “On Hazing.” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2009): 143–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40441523>.
- Dartmouth College. “Hazing Policy.” *Policies*. June 20, 2025. <https://policies.dartmouth.edu/policy/hazing-policy>.
- Eichler, Maya. “Militarized Masculinities in International Relations.” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 81–93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591032>.
- “Frat Brothers Get 2 Years for Assault.” *CBS News*. January 30, 2007. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/frat-brothers-get-2-years-for-assault/>.
- hooks, bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Washington Square Press, 2004.
- Jin, Lydia. “Jin: The Price of Our Community: Paying with Your Life.” *The Dartmouth*. May 6, 2025. <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2025/05/jin-the-price-of-our-community>.
- Keller, Kirsten M., Miriam Matthews, Kimberly Curry Hall, William Marcellino, Jacqueline A. Mauro, and Nelson Lim. “Defining Hazing.” In *Hazing in the U.S. Armed Forces: Recommendations for Hazing Prevention Policy and Practice*, 5–22. RAND Corporation, 2015. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt19jcgpb.8>.
- Nuwer, Hank. *Hazing: Destroying Young Lives*. Indiana University Press, 2018.
- Palshikar, Sanjay. “Understanding Humiliation.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 51 (2005): 5428–32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4417556>.
- Perry, Louise. *The Case against the Sexual Revolution*. Polity, 2022.
- Peterson, Susan Rae. “Coercion and Rape: The State as a Male Protection Racket.” In *Feminism and Philosophy*, edited by Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English. Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1977.
- Silveira, Jason M., and Michael W. Hudson. “Hazing in the College Marching Band.” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 63, no. 1 (2015): 5–27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43900277>.
- “States with Anti-Hazing Laws | StopHazing | Hazing Prevention Resource.” *StopHazing*. n.d. <https://stophazing.org/policy/state-laws/>.
- Taylor, Dianna. “Humiliation as a Harm of Sexual Violence: Feminist versus Neoliberal Perspectives.” *Hypatia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 434–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45153703>.
- The Dartmouth Senior Staff. “Won Jang’s Death Ruled Accidental by Police.” *The Dartmouth*, September 19, 2024. <https://www.thedartmouth.com/article/2024/09/won-jangs-death-ruled-accidental-by-police>.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. *Les Rites de Passage*. Librairie Félix Alcan, 1909.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Zalkind, Susan. “Greek Tragedy: A Drowning at Dartmouth College.” *Boston Magazine*. April 7, 2025. <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2025/04/06/dartmouth-college-fraternity-culture-student-death/>.