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Sorority Rush as Lust

Dean Scheibel and Megan Desmond

A five-star girl,¹ a major hottie named Dani Hunter,² walks into a class I'm taking.³ She is tall and blond, with almond-shaped eyes, and

¹ Campus sororities use numerical rating systems to rank-order and “score” prospective new members (aka “rushees”). One sorority uses the five points of a star to represent different qualities, including education and scholarship, personal development, activities and honors, character, and interests and talents. A “five-star” rushee embodies the qualities of an ideal member. The term “girl” is routinely used by current sorority members when referring to each other. See Barbara J. Risman, “College Women and Sororities: The Social Construction and Reaffirmation of Gender Roles,” *Urban Life* 11, 251.

² The names of all individuals and sororities in this essay have been changed.

³ The author is using a particular “voice” to represent the narrator, who is a “sorority girl.” Realist depictions of cultural realms may be problematic to represent the world of the “other.” In particular, the use of the sorority voice allows me to express an excited and dramatic quality that is difficult within traditional scholarly writing. See Paula Saukko, “Voice, Discourse, and Space: Competing/Combining Methodologies in Cultural Studies,” in *Cultural Studies: A Research Volume, Volume 3*, ed. Norman K. Denzin (Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, 1998), 75-96. The adoption of this voice is consistent with the idea of “lust,” in that I have, arguably, developed a feverish craving to represent the world of sorority rush in a writing style that approaches the experiences of the people I study. More specifically, I want to move beyond the insertion of the other as sliced-and-diced-chunk-o-data sandwiched in support of esoteric theorizing. I want readers to move beyond mere appreciation, and to experience something that is more immediate, more emotional. See John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 131-136. Although I have some experience in conducting ethnographic research on sororities, this study uses a voice not typically heard in traditional research reports. Dean Scheibel, “Faking Identity in Clubland: The Communicative Performance of ‘Fake ID.’” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 12, 160-175; Dean Scheibel, Katie Gibson, and Carrie Anderson, “Practicing ‘Sorority Rush’: Mockery and the Dramatistic Rehearsing of Organizational Conversations,” *Communication Studies* 53, 219-233. In using this

bright even teeth. Her face is flawless, every pore and freckle perfectly placed. She's wearing an emerald-colored dress that fits her like the skin on a peach. She moves like a dancer, which we later find out she is. I love her and hate her all in the same moment. Along with the fifty other mortals sitting in the room, I am shocked silent listening to the sound of our collective sighs of resignation. Everyone watches Dani as she snakes through the class, down an aisle, and sits in the second row. I'm watching as girls from Omega Zeta, Delta Phi, Theta Gamma, and the other sororities covet Dani and talk with their eyes. This is fever. This is lust.⁴

Omega Zeta (My sorority! The best!) lusts for Dani Hunter because she'll help show this campus that we are the sorority with the hottest girls. And we have to fight to get those girls. Last year, Omega Zeta's main rival, Delta Phi, schemed well and took two girls who should have been ours.⁵ One was a professional cheerleader and

voice, I collaborated with a former student, Megan Desmond, who had been a member of a campus sorority; in editing my work, Megan provided a number of phrases, which I used *verbatim*. I have sought to emphasize the voice of the other, which is maintained in the body of the text; however, the "notes" section of this paper is consistent with traditional forms of scholarship.

⁴ Previous theorists have argued that traditional articulations of the traditional seven deadly sins are patriarchal in origin. As such, the sins represent men's central values that are actually honored and rewarded. The present study is a re-imagining to the extent that lust is viewed as not only a social construction, but is organizational rather than individual. For discussions of lust see Ken Bazyn, *The Seven Perennial Sins and Their Offspring* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 120-129; Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1952); Anthony Campolo, *Seven Deadly Sins* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), 32-53; Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Mary Dale, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978), 175-190; Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973), 138-141; Pamela C. Regan and Ellen Berscheid, *Lust: What We Know About Human Sexual Desire* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).

⁵ See Risman, 236-238. Although there is some rivalry and competition among the sororities on the campus where I teach (Loyola Marymount University), there is somewhat less hierarchic stratification in terms of the distribution of "attractive" girls among the various sororities. Beyond the fact that there is not a "Greek Row,"

the other danced in an Aerosmith music video. That means that this year, those same two girls are going to be used as bait to help Delta Phi recruit other prime girls. God, I know that sounds shallow; but that is, in fact, part of what we all badly want. We want put-together, classy, attractive girls.⁶ Looks are not all we want, but anybody who says looks don't count in the Greek world is totally, like, *wrong*.

So Dani Hunter is *really* important to Omega Zeta. When people see our Greek letters sewn across her little baby black-cotton-and-rhinestone sorority t-shirt, they will be knocked-out.⁷ They will associate Dani, our five-star fantasy, with the Omega Zeta sorority, and they will think, "Omega Zeta must be the best!" And people will be seeing her for the next three years. So we'll continue our hottie lineage! A dynasty of hotties! But first, we need to *get* her.

I don't really think I have to talk much about the competition that goes on with sororities. Everyone knows that is pretty much the underlying fact in everything we do—to be better, then the best—to shine above all the others in everything. This whole thing about who is the best sorority is something that all sororities compete for every year. We fight for it during Greek Week.⁸ We fight for the highest

or "sorority houses," girls from different sororities often room together, or may room with non-Greek women. However, each sorority typically has a number of off-campus houses where the occupants may all be from a single sorority. Such houses may take on specialized functions for the sorority, such as meeting to "pre-party" before a sorority event.

⁶ The terms "put-together," "classy," and "attractive," are words that surface repeatedly during interviews. My sense is that these words reflect a disinclination to over-emphasize sheer physical beauty. Although sororities desire physically attractive "girls," they are hesitant and/or embarrassed to be too obvious in terms of this "lust."

⁷ The black-cotton-and-rhinestone t-shirt is worn by all members of a particular sorority. A chapter has shirts that are worn by each member of that chapter. Each chapter has chapter-wide shirts. Additionally, individual members may also design their own unique clothing items, especially sweatshirts. Both t-shirts and sweatshirts are ubiquitous on campus. A local business specializes in Greek-related items.

⁸ "Greek Week" is comprised of a series of events, including sports contents and "talent shows."

grade point average.⁹ We fight to see who can sing the loudest.¹⁰ We fight for who dates the cutest guys.¹¹ We are lusting for reputation, and for being the best sorority with the hottest girls on campus.¹² This is not something we broadcast for general campus consumption,

⁹ During Greek awards ceremonies held each year, awards are given to the sorority and fraternity with the highest grade point average.

¹⁰ There are various types of songs sung by sororities. “Chants” are a particular type of sorority song that is used as a competitive discourse when sororities directly confront each other at Greek sporting events. In such situations, loudness is a central concern. However, loudness is not always important.

¹¹ This study is reproducing the heteronormative rhetoric of sororities. The existence of a national gay fraternity runs counter to the heteronormativity within the Greek world. See King-To Yeung and Mindy Stompler, “Gay and Greek: The Identity Paradox of Gay Fraternities,” *Social Problems*, 47, 134-152; Joyce McCarl Nielsen, Glenda Walden, and Charlotte A. Kunkel, “Gendered Heteronormativity: Empirical Illustrations in Everyday Life” *Sociological Quarterly*, 41, 283-296. I have found no discussions of gay/lesbian sororities in the literature. Moreover, Greek world heteronormativity is such that discussions of gay and lesbian topics/issues may be threatening to the “homosociality” through which fraternities and sororities exist. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 121.

¹² The lust about reputation goes beyond the campus level. The handling of reputations in the Greek world is multifaceted. For example, one sorority’s rush manual admonishes its members, “DO NOT criticize other fraternities/sororities” when talking with rushees. Conversely, chapters of one nationally affiliated sorority have their reputations questioned with the sonic transformation of their name, Alpha Phi, to “all for free,” which posits an ethos of being too easily sexually available. This epithet is not taken to be true, but rather, is understood as evidence that sororities do “talk trash”. However, the heteronormative rhetoric of the Greek world makes it difficult to identify the origins of the epithet, which may be from either (or both) fraternities or sororities.

Given the concern about a sorority’s reputation, I have been curious about the girls’ reactions to MTV’s reality TV show, “Sorority Life.” Sorority girls routinely denigrate the show, which depicts a particular sorority. I have attended eight days of “rush rehearsal” at two different sororities. While attending the rush rehearsals, I audiotaped one sorority’s intense discussion concerning the “ethics” of publicly discussing rushees. In contrast, the “Sorority Life” episodes I viewed showed no such qualms; in fact, the public “trashing” of rushees seemed to be the *sine qua non* of the show. My sense is that members of sororities question the legitimacy of the sorority’s status on “Sorority Life” (several sorority members have told me that the sorority is not a “national” Panhellenic sorority). In this sense, “Sorority Life” may be viewed as a threat to their collective reputation.

because they probably know it anyway. But among the Greeks, it's pretty much a way of life.

Listen, you probably think I'm being something of a drama queen, going on and on about lust. However, you would be wrong if you think I'm overstating the case. I was reading this book (yes, we read!) that said that lust is a "denial of death."¹³ Well sororities do die! One bad year of recruitment (aka "rush") and your sorority's identity is totally ruined.¹⁴ Which means the next year's rush will probably be

¹³ Campolo discusses lust as "a denial of death" in sexual terms. See Campolo, 43-47. See also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973). The present Greek world of sororities is not so far removed from the ancient Greek world, where Epicurus linked death and lust. The "blind lust" with which "people pursue an immortality of reputation" is also an attempt to secure a "continued existence," and is an instantiation of the denial of death, which is linked to the fear of death. See Martha A. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 198. The "death" of sororities is real; the sorority's membership dwindles, and the campus chapter of a sorority ceases to exist. Conversely, the fear of death in the Greek world is "also mixed with a sure and certain hope, the hope of reincarnation." See Jane Ellen Harrison, *Epilogomena to the Study of Greek Religion and Themis* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1962), 290. In this sense, each year of rush may be viewed as a reproductive reincarnation in which new members replace those who have left.

¹⁴ Rush focuses on the interaction between members of sororities and rushees. The central purpose of rush is to recruit new members into the sorority to replace those who are graduating, thus insuring that the campus chapter of the sorority continues to exist. See Scheibel, Gibson, and Anderson. See also Joachim Knuf, "Where Cultures Meet: Ritual Code and Organizational Boundary Management," *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 23, 109-138; Susan Mongell and Alvin E. Roth, "Sorority Rush as a Two-Sided Matching Mechanism," *American Economic Review*, 81, 441-465; Risman; Karen Rohrbauck Stout, "The Exclusionary Nature of the Organizational Socialization Process: An Examination of Sorority Membership." Presented at Western States Communication Association, Long Beach, CA, March, 2002; Vendela Vida, *Girls on the Verge: Debutante Dips, Drive-bys, and Other Initiations* (New York: St.Martin's Griffin, 1999), 3-39.

In this study, rush is viewed performatively, as a "moral equivalent of lust." Stanford M. Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil* (Dix Hills, NY: General Hall, Inc., 1989), 101-102. Further, rush is understood from a Burkeian dramatic perspective. During sorority rush, we see the competition for hierarchic supremacy among sororities and the rank-ordering of prospective new members; we see the mystery between current sorority members and prospective new

shit; and the year after that will only be worse, and soon your sorority may be dead and gone. So the idea is that in lusting after Dani Hunter, Omega Zeta can deny death yet once again.

Well actually, Omega Zeta needs to do a lot more than lust *after* Dani. The only way we can possess the fair Dani Hunter is if the lust is reciprocated. One-way lust is just frustrating, and doesn't get anybody off, so to speak. So we need to make Dani lust after Omega Zeta like we lust after her. We need to get to the point of *mutual lust*.

We will meet these girls during a week of way overrated rush parties.¹⁵ We actually sing songs to the rushees, make little speeches, do crafts together, and share dessert.¹⁶ The first two nights are real

members; and in sororities' "inherit[ed] status," in their ranking and judging of prospective new members, the guilt that is "inevitable in social relations." The guilt in turn requires purification. Rushees—who may also reject sororities—become the scapegoats; through this, sororities can atone for their guilt by substituting the role of vicarious atonement." See Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 278-279; Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 406. While the "courtship" of rushees is a way to "transcend . . . social estrangement," courtship also reproduces the conditions of rush. See Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 208.

The origins of the term "rush" are not definitive, although it is probably related "to the slang for courting a girl by heaping insistent and numerous favors upon her." C. S. Johnson, *Fraternalities in Our Colleges* (New York: National Interfraternity Foundation, 1972), 254. This is consistent with an implication of urgency and swift movement toward judgment. The metaphor of "rush" continues to dominate, despite the desires of sororities' national organizations to replace the term with "recruitment." Additionally, the experience of rush also connotes a euphoric pandemonium; during a recent interview, one sorority member used the phrase "adrenalin rush" when discussing the "high," again, suggesting a metaphorically elevated state. Cumulatively, the metaphor "give[s] simplicity and order to an otherwise unclarified complexity." See Kenneth Burke, *Counterstatement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 154.

¹⁵ "Rush parties" are the main event of sorority recruitment that is regulated and controlled in numerous ways.

¹⁶ As I note above, there is a wide variety of sorority songs. Some are designated as "rush songs." Further, there are significant differences in terms of which songs are sung on the different nights of rush. That is, while the songs sung on the first night of rush are characterized by sorority members as "upbeat" and "peppy," the songs

upbeat and peppy, and we try to impress the rushees that Omega Zeta is a “fun” sorority, and let me tell you, we *so* are! But during the last party (“Pref” or “Preference Night”), we are trying to create a feeling of intimacy, true sisterhood, and friendship.¹⁷

The two hundred or so rushees have to go to all the sorority parties, not just Omega Zeta’s parties. They go in groups of forty or so. For the half-dozen sororities, that means hosting five 45-minute parties each night; and after each party, a number of small groups in each sorority “score” the girls. Midway through the series of parties, the sororities and the rushees narrow down the possibilities by mutually selecting the others in which they are interested, while also ruling out (aka “cutting”) others. The hardest part is when a rushee isn’t “asked back” by a sorority that she really wanted to join. We’re talking crying; we’re talking anguish.

During all these parties, we engage the rushees in conversations, and try to get to know them, and also try to get them to know us. Obviously, the conversations we have with the rushees are *way* superficial. I mean, it’s hard to get to know somebody on the basis of a few short conversations. “Hi, what’s your name?” “What’s your major, Dani?” “What year are you?” “Where do you live?” We’re not talking deep here, but we do get a sense of the girls’ character. Are the rushees just asking questions about drinking and guys? *Not* a good sign.¹⁸

sung on the last night of rush tend to be more “solemn” and geared for greater “intimacy.”

¹⁷ In addition to serving as the name of the last in the sequence of parties, the term “preference” is used in relation to the “preferential bidding system,” which is the algorithm “used to process the rank-orderings submitted by students and sororities.” See Susan Mongell and Alvin E. Roth, “Sorority Rush as a Two-Sided Matching Mechanism,” *American Economic Review*, 81, 441-465.

¹⁸ Sororities often explicitly use these questions—often in a cluster—to characterize the superficiality of conversations between rushees and current members. However, sororities are very concerned about the nature of rush party conversations, and their respective “rush manuals” often include sections listing “conversational do’s and don’ts” (e.g., “DO listen not only with your ears, but with your eyes, heart and mind” and “DO NOT interrupt, gossip, lie, argue” [*Omega Zeta Rush Manual*, 2002, 12]).

Anyway, we try to get as many members of Omega Zeta to meet each rushee as possible, so that we can vote on them, and decide who gests a “bid ” and asked to become one of us. Hopefully we make intelligent selections, and we all live happily ever after.

But that doesn’t always happen and every year some girls in the sorority and some rushees are pissed—they are angry—they think we liked them the whole time and then we ditched them cold and hard. Sometimes issues arise. For example, a member of a sorority may have a personal problem with a particular rushee. Say the rushee had sex with the sorority member’s boyfriend. I guarantee that rushee will not get a bid from that sorority. *Total* deal-breaker. Hey, our sisters come first.¹⁹

So the rushees figure it out, they figure us out, that we just bullshit our way through the nights as much as they do. It’s sad, but it has to happen and it happens every year. Which is why nobody in the Greek world particularly likes rush; but we all understand that rush is a necessary evil.

Without rush, sororities would not attract new members, and without new members, sororities will die. The Greek world will simply cease to exist. So each sorority is totally concerned with making sure they continue to exist in the world. With each year of rush, each sorority replenishes its family with “sisters.” And during rush, when we sing and talk with the rushees, we are offering a family relationship.²⁰ Will you be my sister, Dani? Be one of us. Please choose Omega Zeta.

Our greatest fear is that Dani Hunter will actually reject us. Maybe Dani’s greatest fear is that we will reject her. It is hard to know these things with any certainty. Omega Zeta has done everything we could to show Dani that we are interested in her. And Dani has done everything she could to show us that she has an

¹⁹ The situation where a prospective member has had or has possibly engaged in sex with a boyfriend of a current sorority member is used by sorority members to legitimate the act of “blackballing” the prospective member. Blackballing becomes warranted because the sorority’s credo of “honoring our sisters” implicitly favors current members over prospective members. Stout, 35.

²⁰ The metaphor of “sisters” implicates a familial or “blood” relationship. See Scheibel, Gibson, and Anderson.

interest in us. But even though it is all on the surface, we have romanced and courted each other well.²¹ Mutual lust has been created. And yet.

Lots of girls in the sororities say that rush is like dating: you go out to a few parties, you make eye contact, you start talking and all of a sudden you are either swept off your feet or you are making a fast escape to the bathroom. It is like courtship, and we are courting these highly sought after potential new members. The whole thing is kind of romantic, y'know, courting these beautiful girls. So when we are romancing these five-star girls, a sorority girl may develop a "rush crush," on a particular rushee.²² It's sort of weird; it's like the rushees are hot Sigma Nu guys, except that they're, like, *girls*.

Rush is pretty much like lust. We offer sisterhood, the love of family. But we may decide to withdraw that offer. For even though we have been passionately showing our desire to possess Dani Hunter, we may, in fact, have to totally reject her. Sorry, Dani. Sorry we got you all hot about the idea of being an Omega Zeta. Sorry. Yeah. Okay, so the theater of rush entails some cruel moments. Pretty much like life.

Rush is a drama and we are *so* the drama queens of courtship; we want to persuade you, fan the flames of desire, consume you with our energy to . . . join us. Rush is the lifeblood of the Greek world, in which we offer the *blood* bond of sisterhood while we *lust* for new,

²¹ During interviews, sorority members have used the term "courting." The metaphor of courtship is consistent with lust and romantic love. Numerous sororities are courting rushees; in this sense, the goal of courtship is monogamy. See Bazyn, 120-129.

²² The term "rush crush" is routinely used by sorority members, and refers to the infatuation that a member of a sorority feels toward a particular prospective new member or rushee. Traditionally, the term "crush" is used at the onset of youthful romantic feelings. Use of the term "crush" is consistent with sorority members' sense that they are engaging in "courting" behavior. Such crushes are often transformed into big sister/little sister relationships, should the prospective new member become a member of the sorority. In turn, the transformation from "crush" to a familial relationship (i.e., sisters) is reasonable. That is, the transformation of a lust-like attachment to familial status symbolically adheres to the injunction against within-family romantic attachment (e.g., the incest taboo).

attractive girls.²³ Dani Hunter is a superstar girl among less luminous bodies. We hope to get the best and reject the rest. Sometimes the drama—the theater—of courtship is cruel.²⁴ And even if our lust is satisfied, we will also feel guilt. The basis for our judgment was based on—what?—small talk and a pretty smile. How lame is *that*?

In the end, we seek to move beyond lust, and aspire to something better. We will move from lust to *commitment*.²⁵ We commit to our new members with the blood ties of sisterhood. Maybe we didn't get to know you during rush, Dani, but you are one

²³ The “blood” metaphor takes two primary forms: family and death. The blood of family is evidenced in “sisterhood,” which is a central ideal and value within sororities. Additionally, a “legacy” is a biological connection between a prospective new member and a former member (i.e., sister, mother, grandmother, aunt). Conversely, “suicide” is a term used by sorority members to refer to a prospective new member who will accept a “bid” from only one sorority; thus, if that sorority does not offer a bid to that prospective new member, she will not be in any sorority. The utility of saying that such an individual has “suicided” serves to symbolically relieve the sorority from responsibility, as the “death” was self-inflicted. See Mongell and Roth. Finally, sororities use the terms “cut” and “cutting” in reference to the removal of prospective new members from further consideration. Burke discusses “bloodlust” as a type of death related to scapegoating, which is a form of victimage that allows for the purification of sororities from numerous sources of guilt. In scapegoating, the guilt is transferred to the rushee. See Kenneth Burke, “Thanatopsis for Critics: A Brief Thesaurus of Deaths and Dyings,” *Essays in Criticism* 2 (1952): 369-375. While the “blood” relationship of sisterhood is highly valued, sorority members also understand that other, more negative aspects of “blood” occur during rush (e.g., “suicide,” the naming of which would constitute scapegoating).

²⁴ Lyman discusses Antonin Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” as the “moral equivalent of lust.” Lyman, 101-109. When set in a figure-to-ground relationship with the mundane day-to-day existence of college life (e.g., lectures, papers, examinations), sorority rush takes on a lusty, life-and-death theatricality. Various aspects of rush, including rehearsals, production numbers including choreographed singing and dancing, suggest the inherently theatrical nature of rush. Moreover, as a cultural practice, sorority rush is amenable to dramatic analysis. See Scheibel, Gibson, and Anderson.

²⁵ Similar to romantic love, rush “places too high a premium on physical beauty and questing after the new. Finally, there comes a time for commitment, when we must learn to live with each other’s flaws.” Bazyn, 129.

of us now. You are our sister. We still want to learn about you, Dani. If you have flaws, we'll live with them, as you will ours.²⁶

Hey, we didn't create rush, but sororities live by it and die by it. And if we are ruled by the lust of rush, if it reveals the dark excitement of living in the Greek World, then that seems better than a pale death.

²⁶ The bonds of sisterhood are strong, and the Greek world has many ways of maintaining those bonds. For example, under particular circumstances, current members may be granted alumni status prior to graduation. This allows the bond between member and sorority to be maintained, rather than be severed. However, each semester new members of sororities decide that they don't want to be members of the sorority they have just joined, and they "deactivate" for a number of reasons. Sororities are well aware of this, and take steps to insure the successful socialization of new members. Formal events such as "new member retreats" and the formation of "big sister"/ "little sister" relationships are examples of such events. On a less obvious level, it is common that immediately following rush, the sorority has members wear items of clothing on which their sororities "letters" have been printed or appliquéd (e.g., t-shirts, sweatshirts). A central reason for this is so that the new members are *recognizable* to the other members; as stated earlier, interaction between the prospective new member and current members of the sorority during rush is so brief that it is probable that recognition of the new member requires help. The use of Greek letters as a way to identify a new "sister" facilitates on-campus interaction that is part of the socialization process.