

"It's called hazing, asshole" : locker-room dramas of sexual violence against males in sports

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“It’s Called Hazing, Asshole”: Locker-Room Dramas of Sexual Violence Against Males in Sports

Ralph J. Poole

Sexual abuse against boys and men in sports has rarely been studied, since the majority of harassed and assaulted victims indeed are female. There has been, nevertheless, substantial institutionalized violence against boys in school sports and sports teams, and colleges have a longstanding tradition of ritually hazing freshmen. Films like *The Basketball Diaries* and TV series like *CSI* and *Blue Mountain State* have picked up these traditions and practices, approaching this male-on-male violence from radically differing perspectives and formats however, reaching from fictionalized documentary to farcical comedy. This paper attempts to assess a double conflict that reflects the still largely tabooed topic of violence against males in both research and representation: based on reviewing the scant research on sexual violence against males from a historical and social perspective, the focus will be on examining the conflicting ways mainstream visual media have taken up the challenge to represent such undocumented and illicit violence.

It was at a later time – and we shall tell how – that he realized the falsity of what he had blurted out one evening: “A male that fucks another male is a double male.” (Jean Genet)¹

¹ The motto is taken from Jean Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers* (158), the latter part of which is also a quote in Scacco’s study *Rape in Prison* re-quoted in Segal’s *Slow Motion* (247).

In 2010, the Gender Research Platform at Salzburg University felt the need to take up the recent abuse scandals in Austrian and German educational institutions, many of which being run by the Catholic Church. While large parts of the public and media seemed outraged and aghast due to the sheer number of cases of physical and sexual violence against mostly boys, it was our aim to move away from sensationalist journalism and look at our respective disciplines to reconsider what they had to say about such cases in terms of critical contributions and historical discourse. In the two-session workshop on “Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Kinder: Reflexionen aus der Perspektive der Gender Studies” ([Sexual Violence Against Children: Reflections from the Perspective of Gender Studies] 5 November and 17 December 2010), it was, for example, particularly enlightening to look at German reform pedagogy or scholarship of feminist theologians of the 1970s and ’80s. My own findings were quite disturbing for two reasons. First, as an Americanist, I could claim that such cases were far from being “new,” the American Catholic Church in particular being targeted already years ago, for example in Louisiana in 1985, Massachusetts and Indiana in 1992, Texas in 1993, and then resurfacing again with old and new instances regularly from 2002 onwards (“Timeline”). But then, as a literary scholar, I was astounded about the dearth of research on sexual abuse of boys or even on male-to-male sexual violence more generally. Within literary criticism, I was not able to find a single study, with the exception of bits and pieces on prison rape (see Wooden and Parker as well as reviews by Kaiser and Stannow on recent studies and statistics). Thus, I had to turn to social sciences to find some sound research, and it was three institutional fields being targeted that I could make out: the church, educational institutions (including religious schools but also detention centers), and sports, the latter of which I will concentrate on here.² Taking the Penn State scandal as recent and widely discussed case in point, I will then look at the some ways in which film, television and the internet represent sexual violence against boys within a sports setting.

² In the paper given at the Salzburg conference, I addressed the filmic representation of sexual violence in a variety of settings, i.e. prison rape in *Die Konsequenz* (Germany, 1977, Wolfgang Petersen), *Sleepers* (USA, 1996, Barry Levinson), sexual abuse within a family context in *Prince of Tides* (USA, 1991, Barbra Streisand), *Festen* (Denmark, 1998, Thomas Vinterberg) and *Postcard to Daddy* (Germany, 2010, Michael Stock), and sexual harassment in Catholic schools in *La Mala Educación* (Spain, 2004, Pedro Almodóvar) and *Doubt* (USA, 2008, John Patrick Shanley).

“Only the boys in the shower weren’t laughing.” Locker-Room Jokes at Penn State

In April 2012, Sara Ganim was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting for her coverage of the Penn State incidents that revolved around football coach Jerry Sandusky’s sexual assault of boys and the covering up of the impending scandal by university officials. The laudation read: “Awarded to Sara Ganim and members of The Patriot-News Staff, Harrisburg, Penn., for courageously revealing and aptly covering the explosive Penn State sex scandal involving former football coach Jerry Sandusky” (“The 2012 Pulitzer Prize Winners”). Ganim, a crime reporter for *The Patriot-News* of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was the first to take notice of the grand jury investigation in March 2012 against Sandusky (Ganim, “Jerry Sandusky”), and she was severely reprimanded by the public for doing so.³ But even more to the point is her disclosure of the years of silencing allegations dating back first to 2009, when a 15-year-old claimed inappropriate behavior of Sandusky over a period of four years, starting when the boy was 10. Not only had the grand jury meetings been going on for 18 months already, there was no reporting and Penn State continued to decline comment.

In the course of the hearings, more and more victims showed up and it was revealed that Sandusky’s sexual assaults actually dated back to the early 1990s. The abusive activities included several incidents in Penn State locker rooms and showers, which he used in his function as founder and organizer of the charity for disadvantaged boys, Second Mile. Amongst other disclosed offenses, Sandusky performed oral sex on a boy between the ages of 11 and 13 (Fall 2000, witnessed and related to university officials by a janitor without ever resulting in an official report) and subjected a boy about 10 years old to anal intercourse (March 2002, witnessed by a graduate assistant who reported to university officials, but was never questioned by police until testifying in the grand jury years later).⁴ In November 2011, finally, Sandusky was arrested and released on 100,000 dollars bail after being arraigned on 40 criminal counts (“Sandusky, Penn State Case Timeline”).

³ Ganim’s colleague David Newhouse commented later in 2011: “The national media ignored it. Locally, we mainly received anger from some readers. ‘It truly is troubling to me to see a “reputable” newspaper such as The Patriot-News carrying this type of sensationalist story,’ wrote one. ‘Shame on those who have tried to defile the legacy that Jerry Sandusky has worked so hard to build,’ wrote another.”

⁴ See for detailed timeline and analysis of circumstances the Freeh Report, an independent report by Louis Freeh and his law firm, Freeh Sporkin and Sullivan, LLP, of 12 July 2012 (Freeh, *Report*) as well as *The Chronicle’s* article on that report (“The Freeh Report”).

The secondary scandal in the Sandusky affair revolves around the failure of the Penn States' officials (especially coach Paterno, athletic director Curley, senior vice president for finance and business Schultz, and president Spanier) to file charges against Sandusky, even after repeated incidents of sexual assaults were reported by colleagues, parents, and students, and especially after Sandusky himself had testified at the university police as early as 1998 that he had showered naked with boys hugging them and had promised not to do that ever again. No criminal charges were pressed then and the case was closed – for the time being, at least.

Penn State, like all other universities, offers websites for help in cases of sexual assault. In the “Woman’s Health” section of the university’s Student Health Services one can read under the header “If you are a victim of sexual assault . . .”:

Sexual assault is an unwanted sexual act that occurs because of force, threat, intimidation, or the inability of the victim to give consent.

Approximately 25% of college women and between 3 and 7% of college men are victims of actual or attempted sexual assault.

Sexual assault is never the fault of the victim – it is solely the fault of the perpetrator. There are many resources available at Penn for victims.

(“Sexual Assault”)

These claims are followed by a list of 24/7-telephone hotlines to assist female and male victims (and although the latter are referred to the “Men’s Health” section of the Student Health Services, that site then does not mention sexual assault as one of their prime concerns). Rutgers University, to take a more commendable example, has an “Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance” that offers a specific website with statistics on sexual violence against males as well as links to help organizations. Here we learn that a study from the National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of 1998 found that 3% of the male population in the US have been victims of sexual assault in their lifetime. And a more recent study of those institutions shows that 1 in 6 men were sexually abused before the age of 18 (figures from 2006). The site further claims: “These statistics should be considered conservative, as we know that a majority of all acts of sexual violence are not disclosed or reported. Additionally, many victims, including male victims do not identify or label the experience they have had as a criminal sexual act” (“Male Victims”).⁵

⁵ Strangely though, a much more detailed website, accessed in 2010, is no longer available. There Rutgers’ Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance had given

Generally, experts claim that information on same-sex rape involving male college students “is frequently absent in campus rape education and prevention programming because the general public and popular culture have traditionally viewed rape in a context of violence against women” (Scarce, “Same-Sex Rape”). Particularly significant for the Sandusky case are the conclusions of Holmes and Slap, who in their meta study on 166 studies on sexual abuse of boys conducted from 1985 to 1997 found that “boys at highest risk were younger than 13 years, non-white, of low socioeconomic status, and not living with their fathers. Perpetrators tended to be known but unrelated males.” They concluded that sexual abuse of boys “appears to be common, underreported, underrecognized, and undertreated” (Holmes and Slap 1855). As far as the rates of disclosure are concerned, it has been stated that “[t]he fear of reprisal, stigma against homosexuality, and loss of self-esteem make boys less likely to disclose the abuse than girls. Rates of sexual abuse of boys vary from 4% to 16%” (Valente, “Sexual Abuse”).

These statistics point towards two significant – and yet hardly surprising – facts: boys and young men tend to be even more reluctant to disclose sexual violence they suffer from than girls and women are; and “[a]lthough scientists have studied sexual abuse of girls, young male victims have remained relatively unexamined” (Valente, “Sexual Abuse”). But not only do they remain unexamined, there seems to be a tacit, “gentlemanly” agreement that there is no real need for that. Journalist Maureen Dowd, writing for *The New York Times*, speaks of an “American Horror Story,” witnessing the courtroom trial of Sandusky. She observes the coach’s behavior as being far from showing signs of guilt or repentance. Instead, it relies on jocular homosocial bonding: “Jerry Sandusky [. . .] laughed and reminisced with friends in the front row of the courtroom” (Dowd, “American Horror Story”). Taking the locker and shower rooms as “gateway to horror where innocence was devoured by evil, over and over and over again, without a word being said,” she pointedly, if in a rather sensationalist manner, paints a harrowing, yet paradoxical picture of silenced noise: “rhythmic smacking and slapping noises, silent screams, gutted psyches” (Dowd).

Witnessing the psychic breakdown of the trial’s lead witness during his testimony, Dowd asserts one important fact in this scenario: “Like pedophile priests, Sandusky was especially vile because he targeted vulnerable boys. Later, when victims finally spoke up, there was a built-in defense: those boys were trouble; you can’t believe them” (Dowd). San-

many more statistics on sexual violence against males, especially also on male childhood sexual abuse including a list of references and help services. <http://sexualassault.rutgers.edu> (accessed 21 December 2010).

dusky acted as substitute for the boys' mostly absent fathers, providing all kinds of favors and thus making them co-dependent and complicit in accepting and giving sexual "favors" in return. Blackmailing and stalking were only some of the techniques Sandusky applied in keeping the boys quiet. The acquiescing homosocial climate at Penn State was yet another modus operandi that Sandusky could rely on: "It was an open joke in Penn State football circles that you shouldn't drop your soap in the shower when Jerry was around," Maureen Dowd claims and the facts of this "American horror story" certainly do not contradict such an assumption. What took years to surface, however, was yet another fact, silenced and ignored: "Only the boys in the shower weren't laughing" (Dowd).⁶

When it comes to the realm of sports and sexualized violence, there accordingly are two crucial aspects, a double conflict, as I claim, both in terms of academic research and media representations. The first aspect concerns sexual violence against young males by coaches. While this seems an obvious setting, i.e., the abuse by an authority figure, it is actually hardly approached at all in research literature and even less, as far as I could see, in the visual media. This will be, however, my first example and it highlights the lack of any deeper exploration into the issue. In contrast, the second aspect refers to a form of ritualized violence that has caused quite a bit of media attention in the last years, namely "hazing." There has been not a whole lot, but a substantial amount of research on that particular rite of passage and it has been dealt with in several films and television productions. What strikes the viewer, however, is that except for its treatment in crime series like *CSI*, cinematic and televised depictions of hazing are mostly light in tone, comic in appeal, hardly critical in approach, and highly eroticized in their visual representation.

⁶ See also the anonymous post commenting on the announcement in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of 18 November 2011, that Penn State's faculty senate requested an independent investigation of the alleged sex-abuse crimes at the university: "Great! This is exactly what college faculty need to busy themselves with – gossip. Can we please please please get past the Penn State rape scandal in the Chronicle? I am truly burnt out on reading about prepubescent boys, showers, and Jerry Sandusky's lecherous homosexual adventures. Why not talk about the student debt crisis?" ("Penn State's Faculty Senate").

Grooming the Victim: Marginalizing Authoritative Abuse in The Basketball Diaries

The 1995 film *The Basketball Diaries* by Scott Kalvert is based on Jim Carroll’s autobiography of 1978, by now a cult classic. It recounts Carroll’s youth in New York during the early 1960s, where he is a student on a sports scholarship in an elite Catholic school. Jim gets beaten by his Catholic teacher and is sexually harassed by his basketball coach. He then gradually slides into a circle of drugs and crime that leads first to another assault by his gym teacher, then to being expelled from school, turning to prostitution, and finally ending in a detention center, all of which set an end to his dream of becoming a basketball star, but put him in the spotlight as successful writer instead. The film has been discussed for a drug induced dream sequence in which Jim fantasizes a killing spree that has been compared to the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 (Carter, “Linking”; “Moral Panics”). Furthermore, there was a (dismissed) lawsuit that claimed that the film instigated 14-year-old Michael Carneal’s shooting of a prayer group at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky (Chalk, “Legally Insane”; “Moral Panics”; “Media Companies”). Given the prominent status the film has earned, there is, however, a stunning lack of discussion on the repeated incidents of sexual harassment and violence that the film depicts – or rather refrains from depicting, as the case is.

There are five occasions of sexual violence in the film, spanning the whole viewing time. The initial incident takes place at the very beginning of the film. The first aural and then visual impressions the spectator gets is the sound of whipping, then reactions on the faces of students, and only then does the camera focus on Jim and the teacher, who physically beats him. While this sets the tone and atmosphere of the film by immediately launching the viewer into a scenario of violence and abuse, the incidents are not discussed or referred to in any way. But they serve as antecedents of further abusive behavior in an educational institution that is clearly sanctioned and not pursued. Thus, shortly after, there are two more incidents of violence, which now have overt sexual implications and a visible and palpable effect on the course of the main character’s development. In contrast to the first, indirectly sequenced occasion, these two incidents of harassment by the gym teacher are represented in a straightforward, realistic manner. The locker-room and shower-cabin settings are depicted without any delay, distortions or other illusionist features. At first, the coach only suggests spending more time together, he invites Jim to his place for dinner, joking: “We’ll make a night of it.” Although his interests are quite obvious (to the viewer as well as to Jim himself), nothing physical yet occurs. But in the second scene, the coach

looks for Jim and finds him in the shower, still fully dressed. He reaches out, offering money and asserting “We understand each other,” and then starts to grab Jim’s groin. As Jim offers resistance and even hits the coach, the latter first presents yet more money, but next tries to appease Jim saying “You can’t blame me for trying. I made a mistake all right. Let’s just pretend it never happened. [. . .] Keep the money. Just don’t tell anybody, all right?” (*The Basketball Diaries*). Taken together, the scenes show how the coach “grooms” his victim, i.e., grooming here understood, as sports researcher Celia Brackenridge explains, as “the process by which a perpetrator isolates and prepares an intended victim” (35). This process is a focal point of the abuse relationship, since the “athlete builds trust in the coach [. . .] because he offers the [. . .] athlete tangible, extrinsic rewards for good performance” (36). It is a parent-like relationship, as Brackenridge asserts, “providing a mixture of discipline and affection upon which the athlete gradually becomes reliant” (36). Just like in Sandusky’s case, in this film and in Jim’s case this succeeds here particularly well, because Jim’s father is absent and his mother is overburdened, and so the coach can easily assume the role of a surrogate father.

After his acquittal from school and increasing drug abuse, the fourth incident of sexual violence is remarkable in that it mixes a realist setting, a public restroom, with a fantasized representation. While Jim for the first time turns to prostitution and lets a customer perform fellatio on him, he has a drug-induced hallucination of his coach being present and laughing at him. All we hear in this scene is psychedelic music, Jim’s heavy breathing, and the coach’s malicious laughter. This not only re-confirms the link between Jim’s hustling and the earlier sexual assaults, indirectly claiming that one led to the other, it also shows the traumatized state of the boy’s mind. The facial contortions can hardly be related solely to the sexual act itself or the influence of drugs, but rather to the continuing physical and mental violence experienced at the hands of his teachers. The pain and suffering that are reflected in the boy’s countenance can therefore be assumed to lead to a psychotic breakdown at this moment precisely by the confluence of experienced trauma and current sexual activity. Yet again, the film refrains from explicitly discussing the psychic effects of the sexual abuse that Jim has been subjected to. It is solely up to the spectator to draw conclusions here.

The fifth and last incident, finally, where sexual violence occurs is remarkable for totally different reasons. While listening to Jim’s tale as voice-over and seeing nothing but a black screen, we are told of his stay in the detention center, where he was continuously raped by prison guards. What we finally see is Jim facing the camera and telling his story, when the perspective opens up to a performance setting: Jim is on stage

in a small theater, sitting behind bars and telling his life-story. The film ends with his bow and the audience’s applause.

This radical break in illusion leaves us wondering whether the whole film is meant as a theatrical performance, being told retrospectively, and thus is supposed to function as a self-reflexive meta-narrative. Or asked another way: Does it make a difference whether we watch this film as a fictional drama of a coming-of-age story or as a staged performance of a stylized bio-pic? I believe so. In terms of sociologist Erving Goffman’s frame-analysis, there is an essential difference between an actor on stage and the role he plays. A major gap between film and theater lies in the fact that in a theater, according to Goffman, the audience in no way believes that what it sees is real life: “at no time is the audience convinced that real life is going on up there. [. . .] it is perfectly obvious to everyone on and off the stage that the characters and their actions are unreal” (Goffman 136). The audience accepts the fact that theater deals with make-believe. By way of contrast, a film – and particularly in the tradition of classic Hollywood cinema – has established the possibility through various spatial and visual means (such as the cause-effect chain or continuity editing [see Bordwell and Thompson 102-103, 236-237]) to increase the dramatic illusion leading to an act of identification between audience and character on the one hand, and actor and role on the other.

If a film like *The Basketball Diaries*, however, insists on breaking the illusion and creates a frame around the narrative instead, the play as such is made transparent *as* an illusion. In this particular case, I would claim that the reluctance to show any graphic detail of sexual violence *and* stressing the constructed staging indeed *decreases* the possibilities of identification with the victim, but *increases* the authenticity of the narration as autobiography. The abusive behavior of figures of authority remains on the margins of the film’s interest nevertheless. This is in accordance with the argument Celia Brackenridge unfolds in her study *Spoilsports: Understanding and Preventing Sexual Exploitation in Sport*:

The sexual harassment and abuse of males is often regarded as more shocking than that of females because of widespread homophobic and misogynistic attitudes within society and because male-to-male abuse is falsely associated with predatory homosexuality. (67)

Unfortunately, Brackenridge does not shed more light on such false accusations, but instead concedes somewhat contradictorily: “Although both male and female victims are of concern here, since large numbers of both sexes are engaged in sport, most of the research data reported in this book concern the effects of sexual exploitation on girls and young

woman in sport” (67-68). While this regrettably reflects the overall dismal research situation concerning sexual violence against males in a sport setting, Laura Robinson, another sports scholar, tries to make sense of the silence surrounding such incidents and she succinctly speaks of “the secrecy created by the pseudo-religious mystique of the locker-room, homophobia, and intimidation” (6).

Basketball Diaries simultaneously does two notable things here: while it addresses sexual abuse within a sports context, it only hints at its scope instead of probing deeper into the layers of abusive institutional power. And furthermore, instead of making transparent the dichotomy of power and sexuality that feminist criticism on rape has insisted on for decades now, the film conflates the two and shows the male-to-male abuse precisely associated with predatory homosexuality, and not detached from it.⁷ Therefore, the film does nothing to analyze the abusive structures supported by the institutional setting; on the contrary, by relocating the violence into an individualized and therefore sexualized behavior of a single teacher, the film fatally supports the popular lore of equating male violence against males with homosexual behavior. As the following examples will show, there is a precariously thin line of distinction between showing such abusive behavior as suppressed homosexual leanings that often go hand in hand with explicit homophobic outbursts including sexual violence, and a deeper analysis of ritually performed, sanctioned and institutionalized forms of violence against hierarchically subordinate males that reflect an underlying homosocial, yet ultimately pervasive homophobic structure of those very institutions. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out that there is a “potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (1-2). Thus, when speaking of homosocial structures that characterize social interactions between males, the paradox of the term “homosocial” needs to be stressed: “it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual,’ and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’” (Sedgwick 1). Homosocial male bonding therefore at the same time marks the avowedly non-sexual, heteronormative social interactions between men and is often characterized by severe homophobia. Such fear and hatred of homosexuality in turn may break loose and yet is institutionally tolerated or even silently encouraged. It is the paradoxical manifestation of such violent abusive out-

⁷ See Michael Scarce, who in his study *Male on Male Rape* presents empirical data and survivor testimony to debunk the myth that male rape is a violent outbreak of homosexual culture. For older, book-length studies on male rape, see McMullen; Mezey and King; and the two studies by Scacco.

breaks that characterizes the secrecy of the locker-room dramas. The question is whether research efforts as well as media representations are willing to probe the volatile distinction between homosocial, homosexual and homophobic roots of male-to-male sexual violence, or are refraining from disclosing the locker-room secrecy instead.

“You’re my bitch for the week:” Hazing as Rite of Passage Gone Wrong

Yet another variant of interlinking institutionalized power structures and sexual abuse is that of “hazing.” I want to look at some television genres that deal with this sexualized initiation ritual in order to test whether these offer more and deeper insights into the dynamics of sexual violence against males. As far as research is concerned, there surprisingly is no link between sexual violence against males by authority figures like coaches and sexual violence performed by the senior members of the victim’s team or fraternity. Researchers seem to separate different categories of male-to-male sexual violence, creating a blind spot that ignores the obvious connection arising through the tacit sanction of institutions. After all, like the “gentlemanly” joking in Sandusky’s circle, hazing takes part in a longstanding tradition of codified homosocial behavior within the educational system.

“Hazing,” also called “fagging,” is “by definition a rite of passage wherein youths or rookies are taken through traditional practices by more senior members in order to initiate them into the next stage of their cultural, religious, academic, or athletic lives” (Trotta and Johnson x). In education, this ritual dates back to the medieval university and was “created primarily in order to weed out those who didn’t have the physical and mental capacity to reach the status of professor” (Trotta and Johnson xi). In the American context, hazing began in the mid-seventeenth century with the founding of Harvard and Yale and the rise of fraternities. Although the term “hazing” was not used until after the Civil War, the first incident of hazing was recorded in 1657, and the first known death in the course of hazing practices occurred at Cornell University in 1873. Also, the first known punishment for participation in hazing dates back to 1684, that is shortly after hazing was practiced on university campuses (Trotta and Johnson xi-xii).

Like sports, fraternities are particularly available for hazing rituals because of their inherently gendered structure. Robinson speaks of male team sport in particular as an ambivalent manifestation of a highly (homo-)eroticized and at the same time sexually repressive culture that due to its worship of the young, male body for its physical prowess triggers paradoxical and often homophobic behavior. The same can be said

about fraternities with the celebration of male bonding, of codes of male behavior like bragging and boasting, and of creating severely hierarchical and gendered structures of aggressive dominance and blind submission. These kinds of sexualized rituals preclude other than violent interactions between males and any “gay” male-to-male behavior that is perceived as willfully seeking an emotional or sexual attachment (instead of being ritually forced to do so in the course of hazing procedures) will strictly be disciplined:

At the end of the initiation, any soft, empathetic, or slightly female side of a male has been cleansed through this theatre of violent masculinity. He emerges as a dutiful killing machine: a man who does what he’s told by his superiors and does not question the intent or the ethic. The rookie has entered the world of male violence and aggressive team sport where he is constantly reminded that even the symbolic presence of women is to be denigrated. “You’re my bitch for the week,” the new player on the team would be told by a senior player when he first joins the team. (Robinson 4)

Media attention dealing with incidents of hazing has risen since the late 1990s. There have been stories documented on HBO’s *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* and ESPN has a series as well as a website called *Outside the Lines* covering occasions of hazing. One of the web entries starts out as follows:

Athletes abusing athletes

In Vermont, hockey players grab each other’s genitalia and parade around in a freshman initiation ceremony. In Connecticut, a high school wrestler is hog-tied and sodomized with the blunt end of a plastic knife. In Oklahoma, a football player suffers a head injury after being jumped by teammates.

(Farrey)

Hank Nuwer, one of the leading researchers, has developed several websites providing information about hazing and its consequences (see, for example, <http://www.hanknuwer.com/>, but also Nuwer, *Wrongs of Passage*, and his *Hazing Reader*). Most US college and university Greek systems, i.e., the sororities and fraternities, have announced anti-hazing policies (see Crow and Phillips 27). Here is an example from the Phi Gamma Delta website at the University of Georgia that is typical of most Greek organizations:

No chapter of Phi Beta Sigma shall indulge in any physical abuse or undignified treatment (hazing) of its members or prospective members. Hazing is defined as: any action taken or situation created intentionally or unintentionally, whether on or off Fraternity premises, to produce mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule.

Such activities and situations include, but are not limited to:

- paddling in any form
- creation of excessive fatigue
- physical and psychological shocks
- quests
- treasure hunts
- scavenger hunts
- road trips or any other activities carried outside the confines of the campus or chapter house
- wearing publicly apparel which is conspicuous and not normally in good taste
- engaging in any public stunts and buffoonery
- morally degrading or humiliating games and activities
- late work sessions (past midnight) which interfere with scholastic activity
- any other activities which are not consistent with Fraternal Law, Ritual, or Policy or with Regulations and Policies of the educational institution. Hazing is forbidden by the Fraternity’s Constitution and by public laws of the various states.

(“Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.”)

Historically, hazing in general and athletic hazing in particular have been created to enhance team cohesion. As Margery Holman claims, however, hazing rituals “have no singular purpose and no singular outcome” (54). She rather speaks of a cycle created by annual hazing rituals “whereby initiates (the hazed) eventually become the veterans (the hazers),” a process that “re-establishes the team hierarchies at the beginning of each season” (51). Hazing seen in that light supports a system of control and male authority: “The diminishing of other human beings through the use of insults, inferiorizing, and subservience is a form of intimidation that coerces others to accept the autocracy and inequality of the structure, in this case, of sport” (Holman 51). Stripping rookies of their identity and humanity furthermore brings them close to the structural position of females within a male autocracy. The process of degradation, of proving to them that they are something less than a “real man,” is played out not only in physical actions, but also linguistically by using misogynist and homophobic words like “bitch,” “fag,” etc. This is

also the case in female hazing, which is not my interest here,⁸ but either way hazing rituals are highly gendered in their methods of denigration and subordination, and thus contribute “to the social reproduction of masculinity and femininity” (Holman 54). The problem with anti-hazing codes is that hazing rituals have moved into the college subculture, becoming even more prone to violence. Figures seem to suggest that 80% of male athletes have experienced hazing in transition to a team, especially in collision sports like football and hockey (Allan and DeAngelis 61).

“this just seems a little . . . gay?”: Hazing in Television Series

As far as the representation of hazing practices on television programs is concerned, it is especially criminal series like *CSI* that make a serious effort in telling stories where such incidents are pursued as severe crimes. The episode “Pledging Mr. Johnson” is a notable case in point. Investigators Nick Stokes and Sara Sidle are dealing with an apparent suicide at a fraternity house. It turns out that the victim James Johnson died in the course of pledging, suffocated by a strip of raw liver that had been shoved down his throat. While questioning members of the fraternity, Nick and Sara unearth that James’ death occurred as part of hazing practices (revolving around humiliation by having to find girls to sign the pledges’ penis) and that the suicide therefore was staged. More interestingly, Nick is confronted with his own history of pledging at a fraternity. While he is conflicted about his own background and therefore tends to sympathize with the perpetrators, his colleague Sara pursues a relentless path of crime disclosure, causing friction between them. One could be annoyed by the fact that it takes a morally ultra-righteous female character to “right the wrongs” that the morally dubious and chauvinist male characters, including her partner, have committed. In a review, Kristine Huntley, however, makes the crucial point that while Sara “is the one with the nagging suspicion throughout that the fraternity boys are lying,” it actually is Nick who is finally able to get one of the frat boys “to crack by appealing to his sense of community within the fraternity, telling him that unless he levels with the CSIs, the house will go dark. Though Sara’s instincts were dead on, it is Nick who speaks the language of the boys they’re dealing with” (Huntley, “CSI”). The frat

⁸ The coming-of-age comedy *Dazed and Confused* (USA, 1993, dir. Richard Linklater), set in the 1970s, for example, includes scenes of male and female hazing. See also the episode “Greek Tragedy” of the mystery series *Ghost Whisperer* about sorority hazing (season 4, episode 15, aired 13 February 2009).

boys’ futile effort in trying to make a distinction between “hazing” and “initiation,” well knowing that the former is strictly prohibited, culminates in the admittance that it is all about the wish to “belong.” The specific irony here is that James Johnson was continuously humiliated because it took him so long to get his “johnson,” i.e., his penis, signed. All he wanted – desperately – was to belong, and in that wish he proved to be weak in the eyes of the others. Instead of admitting to the paradox, the frat boys defend themselves, claiming, “You are only as strong as your weakest link,” whereupon Nick now remembers his own fraternity creed and acknowledges its ultimate lethal logic if taken to its extreme: “humiliation – initiation – appreciation” (“Pledging Mr. Johnson”).⁹

Contrary to this play between insider sympathetic knowledge and outsider’s blatant disgust, comedy college and sports series choose a different path in dealing with hazing, namely that of making fun of hazing rituals. *Glory Daze*, for instance, is a college comedy series, set in the 1980s, with some rather graphic depictions of hazing. There are instances of threats of branding, for example. Overall, however, the series tends to be a light comedy, without any ironic overtones. In contrast, the series *Blue Mountain State* is more interesting here. From the very start, it takes up hazing rituals as a main focus of sports college life. My first take on that series was to find it a silly, over-the-top parody bordering on slapstick of what it is like to be freshmen at a college. But revisiting the abundance of scenes of hazing depicted in that series, I began to see the truly ironic commentary at work. The first incident of hazing occurs after only five minutes into the series’ pilot episode. The college freshmen and football team rookies are seen in the shower, teamed up in pairs and being instructed to shave each other’s groins. The overall tone seems ludicrously comic, and yet there is a discernible undercurrent of threat and violence. While the team captain Kevin welcomes all “Freshies” to “Freshmen Hell Week” and gives orders to his “Ladies” and “little pieces of shit,” Alex, one of the rookies, jokingly questions Kevin’s rules: “First you ask us to shave each other’s nuts, and then to protect each other’s secrets. [. . .] Can’t you just beat us up or something, this just seems a little . . . gay?” Outraged, Kevin retorts: “Gay? [. . .] It’s called hazing, asshole, look it up” (“It’s Called Hazing”). The scene has all the elements of “toxic testosterone.” Helen Jefferson Lenskyj uses this term in reference to John Loy’s description of such sport teams as “fratriarchy,” a modern kind of “tribal subculture” that celebrates male prestige, physical prowess, and violent masculine styles

⁹ See also *CSI: Miami*, season 7, episode 10, aired 8 December 2008, for yet another crime investigation related to hazing practices.

(Loy 267, qtd. in Lenskyj 88). As such, fraternities exemplify hypermasculinity as an exercise of force to dominate others. My point here is that *Blue Mountain State*, contrary perhaps to initial reactions, does not exaggerate these rituals on the level of representation; there are many empirical sources and eye-witness accounts of exactly such hazing rituals. While at first sight, this scene may be taken as exaggeration for the purpose of a spoofing parody, such performances of hypermasculinity instead are, as Michael Kimmel explains, distorted initiation rituals that not only establish internal hierarchies, but are driven by misogyny and homophobia (Kimmel 5, qtd. in Lenskyj 88).

In this series, we see male sport being re-confirmed as one of the remaining bastions of male supremacy; at the same time, the inherent sexual sadism of these hazing rituals is turned inside out by its main players. It is Alex, the new backup quarterback, who serves as guide through these initiation processes. His funny comments and wisecracks are more than just comic interludes, they serve as critical subterfuge instead. His “normal” position would be to succumb to all the pledges in order to prove his team spirit and manliness. But while he has no aim to move from back-up to leading quarterback and physically does not represent the hypermasculine super-stud, his strength lies in his incorruptible character. Speaking out what he thinks, namely that he finds those rituals silly and “a little gay” and thus claiming the connection between “hazing” and “fagging” to be a literal one instead of a symbolic rite of passage, he speaks a truth that cannot be said and tolerated, namely that social practices like hazing rely on forcing quasi-gay actions on its victims without any link to homosexual leanings on behalf its practitioners. These fraternity “rituals,” therefore, are but a cynical mocking of homosexuality and in truth speak of the inherent homophobia of such fraternities. The ironic twist here, however, is that instead of striving for the accolade of athletic championship and fraternal companionship, Alex forms his own unlikely circle of friends made up of the virgin jock Craig and the team’s mascot Sammy. All three of them join to dismantle the team captain’s hypermasculine and homophobic attitude as indeed being driven by sadistic “toxic testosterone.”

In a second, drastic hazing scene that also serves as cliffhanger of this pilot, the atmosphere of toxic testosterone becomes blatantly obvious, as do the “little gay” innuendos. The “ritual” is called the cookie race. In the midst of night, the freshmen trio is dragged out of bed and onto the field, where in front of the whole team watching, the three of them have to perform in the cookie race. The rules are: they have to place a cookie between their butt-cheeks, run across the field, and whoever drops it, has to eat it. Like the various rituals that revolve around shaving, such races are well-known hazing practices. Robert Giannetto,

a former junior player in a Canadian hockey team, relates a very similar incident he experienced himself:

Finally, there was the “cracker race.” Run like a conventional relay race, the naked rookies were organized into teams and an obstacle course established. The baton in this instance, however, was a Ritz cracker that was inserted in the cleft of one player’s sweaty ass and handed off, after running the course, by removing it with one’s lips and inserting it into one’s own sweaty ass. Breaking or dropping that cracker during the race resulted in the horror of having to eat it and start over. Losing the race meant eating the other team’s cracker. (qtd. in Robinson 17)

The scene in *Blue Mountain State* again takes on a parodic approach, relinquishing the acerbic violence, but reinforcing the queerness of the “ritual,” i.e. its underlying homophobic mocking of homosexuality. The idea is to expose and humiliate the aberrant trio surrounding Alex. But Kevin, the team captain and prime instigator of the nightly event, seems so turned on by the prospect that he joins the trio in the race. This is not only highly illogic given his authoritative status that he endangers with such participation; above all it marks his hidden queer interest that can only be released in such forced practices. The captain’s heteronormative position thus is precariously at stake, since he seems to feel safe enough to overcome his usual homophobic rants reveling in this ridiculous “manly” ritual instead. In the end, the ritual is doubly undermined. When Alex drops his cookie and has to eat it accordingly, he is joined however by his two friends to prove their “outlaw” team spirit. The three of them can be seen, munching their cookies with great disgust. The purpose of specifically humiliating Alex has therefore failed; instead of succumbing to Kevin’s degrading threats and conforming to the proper team, the friends form an even closer bond – a team of their own – that relegates them to the margins of Kevin’s football team.

But the final frozen image of the episode is of Kevin, who although having won the race, watches the defeated, yet united trio, and secretly and with great delight devours his own cookie. This sublime, yet ultimately perverse moment undermines any notion of such hazing practices forging team cohesion, thus forcefully debunking the myth of hazing as ritual enhancing belonging. Instead, it unearths the mechanisms of such false initiation rites relying on sexual degradation, sexual assault and physical humiliation with sexual overtones, the three categories that researchers have found to make up “the sex + violence agenda” of male sport hazing practices (Lenskyj 86-87). Hazing supposedly builds up a system of “male solidarity,” essential especially for collision sports, with rookies having undergone hazing initiations and thus posing less threat

to the power structure, “because they have conformed to the group by following orders and placing themselves in compromising positions for the perceived good of the group” (Allan and DeAngelis 72-73). This system relies on the code of silence, it plays on the shame that rookies experience making them docile and malleable. A rookie who speaks up and out, as Alex does, unmasks hazing as something that Allen and DeAngelis call “nothing more than one group of individuals abusing power over others. Humiliation and violence are not ties that bind groups together [. . .]” (79).

Hazing rituals are supposed to prove athletic prowess, manhood – and heterosexuality. But one wonders why these rituals of the male athletic locker room take on such overtly sexual forms, rather than “simply” the form of physical assault as Alex quite succinctly asks in the shaving scene. How is it that a team captain’s sexual victimization of other men proves his proclaimed heterosexual superiority, and not his hidden homosexual interest – as we could see here? Thirty-five years ago, Susan Brownmiller already examined the underlying homophobic dimensions of gang rape (although not using the word “homophobic”) when she claimed that the sexual excitement associated with it was “largely a relationship between the boys rather than between any of the boys and the girl involved” (197, see also Sanday). While in *Blue Mountain State*, there is no actual gang rape going on, there are lots of males watching other males engaged in sexual or sexualized activity that shows more or less violent elements. And whereas Alex repeatedly comments on the closeted gayness of such gang activities and thus helps to probe the paradoxes of homosocial institutions such as fraternities, gay porn sites openly embrace the sadism of hazing, accentuating the “toxic testosterone” as stimulating aphrodisiac (see, for example, <http://www.hazehim.com/>). Whether such visual representations of hazing as pornographic sexuality are in any way subversive remains to be discussed and calls for another paper altogether.

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