

What's wrong with Rites of Spring

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There hasn't been an action I've been more nervous about than our protest of Rites of Spring this past Sunday. Though we've been doing this project for over a year and a half now, we knew that this action would be different. Going off campus to an Alpaca farm (wtf) and protesting at a private event meant higher risk and less control. We needed to be sure that we were confident in what we were doing. We needed to feel especially passionate about this particular action. After talking with a large group of activists about the potential of a protest, that passion was not hard to find.

Secret fraternities on this campus have long been ignored by administration, whispered about by curious students, and sheltered by the school's elite few. Though they might be "secret," the existence of these fraternities affects everyone. Fraternities have long been known nationally as hotbeds for toxic masculinity, racism, ableism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. Turn on your computer or check out a newspaper from the past three decades, and the number of articles about incidents of hate crimes, violence, and sexual assault will make you nauseous. Middlebury is not an exception, though we may pretend it to be. Fraternities at Middlebury were officially banned in 1991 after a bloodied female mannequin with sexual slurs written on it was hung outside of DKE. One generation later and I doubt things have really changed.

Before you get all pissed off, I'm not trying to say that today's secret frats are running around creating such blatantly violent symbols of misogyny. I am however saying that the existence of these frats blatantly disregards this history of violence, perpetuating a culture that still treats women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people like trash. The fact that students disregarded the Middlebury community's wishes to have a frat-free campus suggests that they have little concern for their fellow students, especially those who are most marginalized on campus. They send the message that they think they are above school policy, and in fact, they are! How can the school regulate an organization that technically doesn't exist? Without any affiliation to a national fraternal organization (not that these affiliations have done shit to decrease violence), how are our frats supposed to be held accountable to any sort of standard? While regular frats have an open "rush" process, secret frats are by invitation only. You've got to know people in high places. This means that admittance is only open to one segment of people—typically wealthy, white, straight men who are connected by these identity markers. Bust out that Vineyard Vines, boys and maybe you've got a chance!

If these secret frats existed in a vacuum, I would (maybe) not have a problem with them, but the fact is they permeate more than just their exclusive sphere. The same people who are undoubtedly members of these frats are also those who have the most powerful voice on campus

and the biggest influence on the general social scene. Frat culture thus becomes Middlebury party culture and that toxic masculine energy is released on all of us.

Now for the event itself...Because the dudes who are part of these frats are some of the people with the biggest social capital on campus, there is an implicit message that if you get asked to be someone's date, you better say yes. This is particularly true if you are a freshman getting asked by a senior. I've heard stories of women turning down invitations and getting shamed for it. If you want to be one of the cool kids, "no" is not an option. After paying forty dollars, a sum not affordable for many, you get bused over to an Alpaca farm in the middle of nowhere. Twenty minutes away from campus, you don't have the ability to decide to leave—you are stuck in a barn with a bunch of frat boys no matter what happens. To be clear, I'm not claiming that all these dudes are predatory. I am however uncomfortable with how this party puts women in a position where their social standing depends on pleasing the man who asked them to an exclusive, highbrow event with an open bar. The power does not seem evenly distributed to me.

For those of you who are reading this and are part of this circle, went to the party, or are a member of one of these secret frats, I hope you consider what your participation in this system means. This is not an expression of sour grapes for not being invited to Rites of Spring, rather it's an expression of how this event and the culture surrounding it represent exactly what I don't want at my school. The fact that our school allows this to continue makes us all complicit in making this place only safe for a select few.