

Caroline Rubin
21A.112 Helmreich
Final Paper
May 10, 2008

Writing Against MIT Culture

"Maybe we need to educate these East Campus freaks that their isolation from the rest of the world ends when they leave campus... freaks... [live] in east campus. Ideas and cultures, what a bunch of bullshit... One day when you grow up, you'll realize that the rest of the world does not operate on east campus principles. No hair dye, crossdressing, and trying to push free speech to the limit..."

- MIT student Mario Zunino, email to dorm discussion list, September 21, 2008

On September 21, 2008, MIT sophomore Star Simpson walked into Boston's Logan airport wearing several LEDs on a circuit board and a battery pinned to her sweatshirt. She was promptly surrounded by armed policemen, arrested, and is currently awaiting trial for charges of disorderly conduct and possession of a hoax device (Brett 2007). What ensued in the days and weeks following the incident was a heated debate about Simpson's explanation that her sweatshirt was simply wearable electronic "art," with her detractors arguing that her actions were malicious and indefensible (e.g. McPhee 2007) and her supporters that they were perfectly normal within the context of "MIT culture" (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi 2007). But what exactly is "MIT culture"? As the above email excerpt makes clear, the question is contentious even within the MIT student population itself. Lauded for promoting virtues from scientific genius to entrepreneurship, and blamed for causing problems from stifled creativity to student suicides, "MIT culture" is used to corral the nebulous sense that MIT's inhabitants are somehow "other" into one coherent catchphrase. But as anthropologist Gary Downey

points out, “every image makes some things visible while hiding other things” (1998: 5). So what does the image of “MIT culture” hide? To answer this question, we must first explore how the idea of “MIT culture” came to be.

A Brief History of “MIT Culture”

*“For students must work, and scholars must weep,
And there's so much to learn, there is no time to sleep,
And the Prof's are always pushing.”*

– Excerpt from “Three Seniors” poem, Technique (MIT's yearbook), 1887

When MIT was founded by William Barton Rogers in 1861, it had too few students and too many financial troubles to lay claim to anything as well-established and seemingly distinguished as a unique culture all its own. Still, in the first MIT President's Report in 1873, the groundwork of many traits later associated with “MIT Culture” was already being laid. In a section entitled “Physiology and Hygiene” the student body is found to be lacking:

...these students remain in the building all day, and seldom take the proper exercise... except what is got in traveling to and from their rooms, and homes. This want of exercise and a proper midday meal... is having effect upon the health of our students, and is a much more serious matter than hard study. Where the health of one student is injured simply by overstudy, the health of many is injured by want of exercise, or other preventable causes, while overstudy is usually the only cause assigned. (MIT President's Report 1875: xii)

And the report of the Institute's first, and for many years only, English professor is equally disparaging with respect to the writing ability of the earliest MIT students:

The question of the best method of adjusting my instruction to the real wants of the students of

the Institute has been, from the beginning a very perplexing one. The imperfect preparation for the scientific studies of the course which the students bring with them lays a heavy pressure upon them in that direction; and, on the other hand, the deficiencies of too many of them in English studies require attention to rudimentary drill, especially in composition, which should properly have been completed before admission. (Atkinson 1875: 79)

These sentiments seem eerily predictive of characteristics that would continue to be associated with the MIT population nearly 150 years later, yet at the time they were attributed to external factors (lack of an MIT gymnasium for the former, insufficiently rigorous high school preparation for the latter) rather than some inherent quality of MIT students.

As time wore on and the Institute's student population grew, a sense of camaraderie among the students began to grow. The editorial at the beginning of MIT's first yearbook, issued in 1887, describes this transformation in its explanation of why the students elected to begin creating a yearbook:

When the pioneer students in high scientific training were at the Institute, there was no need of anything in the line of an annual; but now that hundreds of brave hearts beat where there were but a small number a few years ago, there is a demand for such an article. (Technique 1887: 7)

At the same time, the difficulty of establishing enough of a common ground between these “brave hearts” to form the content of a yearbook is readily acknowledged:

Nearly eight hundred professors and students, scattered all over Boston and vicinity, meeting only in class-room, shop, and laboratory, with abundance of work for hand and brain, truly have but a few things in common of a social or jovial nature. But you may ask, standing side by side at work day after day, are there not many hits given and taken worthy of repetition? Yes, indeed; but they are mostly local, and only the comparatively few would understand them. (Technique 1887: 8)

So while it seems that these early MIT students spent enough time together to establish what would now be called “inside jokes,” the overall sense of campus unity in matters “social or jovial” implied by

the concept of “MIT culture” was still lacking.

This lack of campus unity changed in 1913, when MIT moved across the Charles river from its small campus in Boston to a much larger site in Cambridge. Students, instead of being “scattered all over Boston and vicinity,” for the first time lived in MIT dormitories. It is perhaps not coincidental that 1913 also marked the first year that students made and distributed a handbook for incoming freshmen to “help, as much as possible, each new freshmen in understanding the customs and activities of the Institute, and to assist him in fitting his life into the career of a real Technology man” (Foreword to The Handbook, 1929). Early Handbooks included sections on the history of MIT, the school colors, “Tech Songs,” student clubs, honors societies, athletics, and “Advice for Freshmen,” which as early as 1919 included the imperative to “GO OUT FOR SOME ACTIVITY. DON'T BE DEAD” (The Handbook, 1919: 7). This command would later transform into “Study Hard, Play Hard” in the 1928 Handbook, and eventually into the “Work Hard, Play Hard” mantra that is often associated with contemporary “MIT culture.” Also emerging in the 1920s Handbooks was a clearly articulated sense of the purpose of an MIT education, and the type of graduates the Institute intended to produce:

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is interested not only in turning out well trained engineers, but makes every endeavor to develop in its students those attributes of character that distinguish the well rounded and educated man from the merely technically trained engineer. Development of Technology spirit, of a real pride in the position of our school in the collegiate world and the formation of lasting friendships is fostered as much as possible by the undergraduates. (The Handbook, 1931: 15)

Yet despite the growing sense of there being a set of characteristics specific to MIT students, there is still no mention of an “MIT culture.” The only “culture” mentioned at all during this period is of the

capitalized and singular variety, as when the 1941 President's report recommends that the cafeteria service in the dining hall be replaced with table service to “[promote] social and cultural development among our students” (MIT President's Report 1941: 29)¹.

By 1969, however, there was enough official recognition of the unique extracurricular proclivities of the students to warrant two new sections in the annual President's Report - “Student Affairs” and “The Living Environment,” both of which appeared under the heading of “Institute Relations” (MIT President's Report 1969). And while the specific term “culture,” still was not applied to the students and their behaviors, they were beginning to be discussed in quasi-anthropological terms, as when then Dean for Student Affairs Kenneth Wadleigh reported on the first MIT student protests of the Vietnam war:

MIT had not experienced open protests prior to that time (We had, of course, 'tuition riots' and 'panty raids,' but I think it would be safe to characterize these latter events as a form of young males' springtime fertility rites and not as serious protests). (501)

This lay ethnographic analysis is concerned more with college-aged males in general, however, not with MIT-specific cultural traits.

In 1996, MIT established the Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning, in order to perform a “comprehensive review of MIT's educational mission on the threshold of the 21st century” (<http://web.mit.edu/committees/sll/>). It is in the section of this report labeled “Community” that it is stated in an official MIT document for the first time that “MIT is a special place, with a

¹ This understanding of Culture is still present to some extent in contemporary MIT – for instance, the graduate dormitory Sidney Pacific has a “Cultural Committee,” which is “charged with the organization and encouragement of activities for the cultural enrichment of Members” via activities such as museum visits and trips to the Boston Ballet

distinct mission, history, and culture.” The report goes on to elaborate:

Each of us is an example to our peers and colleagues; through professional, recreational, and social interaction with one another we build a *culture of discovery and learning* that distinguishes MIT from other universities. Hence informal personal interaction can be considered the life of the 'community': student activities, casual social get-togethers, cultural events, and daily encounters with friends and colleagues are a few general categories of such interaction. (1998: 33, emphasis added)

Thus the official concept of “MIT culture” was born.

“MIT Culture” from Outside the Institute

“An MIT student’s idea of having fun is cramming a semester’s worth of brain-draining work into three days.”

- Claudia Glenn Dowling, on MIT's annual Mystery Hunt

As the Star Simpson incident made clear, MIT students and their “culture” are not always perceived the same way from outside the campus as they are from within it. As early as 1912, there is acknowledgment on the part of students that, “the world at large, unfortunately, knows but little of Undergraduate Technology, of the opportunities – educational and social – which the Institute has to offer.” Their proposed solution was a book, “Concerning the Massachusetts Institute of Technology,” which would detail those opportunities for the edification of those outside of MIT. Apparently the book did not achieve its mission; however, for thirty years later, in the 1942 MIT yearbook, the students still bemoan the fact that “the massive structures of its buildings, the somber expressions on the faces of its faculty, and the harried looks of its students all tend to give the impression that MIT is a place to work – never to play” (Technique 1942). When asked to describe their culture themselves, as all members of

MIT's undergraduate dormitories were asked to do recently in a series of "Culture Reports" for MIT's Housing Strategy Group, MIT students describe themselves as, "enthusiastic, social, oft loud, sometimes harmonious, but always easy going people" (Ranade and Hopp 2008: 8), and "very comfortable with each other and ourselves despite coming from different backgrounds" (ibid.: 14). They proudly proclaim that, "we learn together, we cook together, and we do household chores together. Mostly, though, we figure out how to navigate the behemoth that is MIT" (Le Maison Francaise 2008: 1).

MIT students' sense that they are perceived differently by outsiders than by each other is not misinformed. Outsiders' descriptions of MIT students typically confirm their suspicions, as when anthropologist Sherry Turkle described MIT computer science students as inhabiting, "a culture of loners who are never alone" (1984: 213), or when science writer Fred Hapgood claims:

It is true that a person walking into MIT might well feel the culture bending a degree or two in this [nerdy] direction. As compared to the general population, eye contact might be a bit more glancing and the role of facial expression, voice, tone, and body language narrowed a touch. The style lends itself to precision, interruption, and contradiction. It does have an edge. (1993: 83)

This disjunction between MIT students' perceptions of themselves and outsiders' perceptions of them neatly illustrates the first problem with referring to "MIT culture" - what the phrase means depends on who is doing the referring. Former Dean of Undergraduate Education Rosalind Williams experienced this discrepancy firsthand when she invited students to join the meetings of the Committee for Student Life and Learning:

Instead of being represented through the eyes of the faculty, they represented themselves. Instead of being faces in an 8.01 lecture hall, or even in a humanities classroom, they became

visible as young adults, whose lives, while dominated by classes and homework, also included roommates, hall mates, friends, lovers, meals, sports, parties, worship, families, and dreams for the future. (Williams 2002: 159)

As anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod explains, “culture is the essential tool for making other” (1991: 470). While MIT students see each other as college students with friends, lovers, and families, who are simply trying to “figure out how to navigate the behemoth that is MIT,” most outsiders see them as members of an elite group, as “wizards” (Lombreglia 2007: 136) that are “intimidating” (Brandon 2007: 1), and hence quite other. By categorizing them as members of “a culture of loners who are never alone,” this sense of difference can be captured, labeled, and put to rest.

In addition to creating an artificially heightened sense of otherness, the language of culture also serves to “freeze difference” (Abu-Lughod 2002: 470). Hence, even though women make up nearly half of MIT's undergraduate student population (Women at MIT 2008), it is not uncommon for female students to be met with incredulous looks by outsiders when they mention where they go to school,² even (or perhaps especially) when they inform their audience of the Institute's near-even undergraduate gender ratio (e.g. Anahtar 2008). The situation is often similar for students who fall into other groups not commonly associated with “nerd culture,” such as Hispanic or Black students (see Williams 2001), despite the steadily increasing proportion of minority students at MIT (MIT Minority Community 2008). Since outside perceptions of what constitutes “MIT culture” were “frozen” long before these demographic shifts in the MIT population took place, women and minority students are frequently put

2 I vividly recall when, almost immediately after being accepted, I proudly put on my new “MIT” tshirt for a celebratory family dinner at a restaurant, only to be stopped in the parking lot by a woman who excitedly exclaimed, “Oh, my son went to MIT! Does your brother go there?”

in the position of being seen as outsiders in their own home – they are MIT students, but not fully part of traditional “MIT culture.” It is surely not coincidental that neither Turkle nor Haggood mention female or minority students in their descriptions of “MIT culture,” despite the presence of members of both groups on campus at the times of their respective writings.

Marketing “MIT Culture”

It's true that students work very hard at MIT, and you can probably count on pulling a few all-nighters in your four years. On the average night, however, students can get plenty of sleep if they manage their time wisely. Of course, sometimes it's more fun not to manage time wisely - when your floormates start a heated argument about the superiority of pi over e (or a battle of the sexes, or a discussion about the politics of race and gender, or a whipped cream and chocolate fight) at 2 AM on a school night, you'll put off that problem set for another time. And it will be okay.

- The MIT Admissions website on the “Work/Play Balance at MIT”

MIT students are not the only ones aware of the discrepancy between inside and outside perceptions of “MIT culture;” the MIT Admissions Office actively campaigns to educate prospective students about contemporary MIT undergraduates in order to attract them to the university. The MIT Admissions homepage links to a page on “Student Life and Culture,” which boasts:

At MIT, students work hard and play hard- together. And many of the most important lessons you learn here - about collaboration, negotiation, leadership, empathy, joyful curiosity and how to have a good time while still passing physics - you will learn in part *outside* the classroom.

You and your friends may organize cook-ins and cook-outs, surprise parties, Sunday brunches, theme suppers, dinner cruises on Boston Harbor, white water rafting trips to Maine, shopping trips to factory outlets. Ski trips and sky-diving are increasingly popular. Arriving from such a rich array of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, students often get to sample each other's home-cooked meals, discover new musical instruments and play intriguing new games and sports. Spur-of-the-moment pleasures include strolling into Boston, playing volleyball or starting a

snowball fight.

(Student Life and Culture 2008, emphasis in original)

Hacks, piano drops, and homemade disco dance floors are touted by the admissions office as evidence of the fun-loving culture of genius at play that prospective students can become a part of by enrolling at MIT, and statistics about current student demographics are proudly displayed on the homepage and in the recruitment literature in attempts to “unfreeze” more stereotypical beliefs about MIT and its students.

While this take on MIT culture is closer to the descriptions provided by contemporary undergraduates, it is not without problems. As Lila Abu-Lughod points out:

...cultural theories also tend to overemphasize coherence... Organic metaphors of wholeness and the methodology of holism that characterizes anthropology both favor coherence, which in turn contributes to the perception of communities as bounded and discrete. (1991: 471)

Indeed, the MIT culture of the admissions office literature is nowhere to be found on MIT's actual campus, which is made up of multiple distinct dormitories and independent living groups, each with their own history, traditions, and self-defined “culture” (hence the previously mentioned dormitory-specific “Culture Reports” for the Housing Strategy Group). The main divide between the dormitories is between those in the East, which are older and are seen as having more well-established traditions and “cultures,” and those in the West, which are newer and are seen as being more typical of a regular college campus. As science writer Claudia Dowling, who spent several weeks “going native” among MIT students and their culture, puts it:

“East Campus people are 'eccentric,’” [a student] says, delicately. 'West Campus people probably blend in better when they're off campus.' Both groups use the word *normal* to describe West Campus, the Easterners somewhat disparagingly, the Westerners somewhat defensively...West is soft tech, biology, and economics; East is hard tech, math, and engineering. 'Windows Me to our Linux,' says one of [the student's] friends. West is Starbucks Frappuccino; East is Mountain Dew. (2005: 2)

Hacking is practiced mainly by students living in on the East half of campus, the piano drop is done by a dorm on the West side. The disco dance floor was built by a living group from the East side, but not a group that participates in hacking. Of course, there are Westerners who hack and Easterners who study business and drink Starbucks, and some dorms don't quite fit this neat categorization scheme (such as Random Hall, which is “West by geography and East by affinity” [ibid.]), but regardless, there is no unified, homogeneous group of MIT students that participates in all facets of the “MIT culture” advertised by the admissions office. Furthermore, within any given living group only so much time is spent carrying out elaborate hacks and dropping pianos off buildings, so the admissions propaganda has the tendency to create an “onslaught of incoming freshmen who are under the impression that the MIT of lore and the MIT of daily life are one and the same” (Lin 2007). New freshmen are often disappointed to realize how much time MIT students spend on mundane, “culture-free” activities like doing homework and studying, as those tasks are not listed on the “Student Life and Culture” page.

The concept of a unified “MIT culture” homogenizes more than variations across student living groups, however. “MIT culture” may be described as belonging anywhere on a spectrum from “nerdy” to “techno-fetishistic” (Csikszentmihalyi 2007), but it is rarely, if ever, described as intellectual. Rosalind Williams, who in addition to being the former Dean of Undergraduate Education is currently a

Professor of the History of Science and Technology at MIT, phrases it as, “MIT people are smart, but they are generally not very intellectual in the sense of being interested in ideas” (2002: 164). The 160 other professors (Molina 2008) and 481 students (MIT Registrar's Office 2008) in MIT's School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) would probably object to this characterization of themselves and their work – unless, of course, the intended interpretation is that they do not count as real “MIT people.”³ As Sherry Turkle points out, “within every culture, even a culture that wears a collective badge of self-denigration, there is a hierarchy” (1984: 199), and students of disciplines that do not fall into the well-advertised “MIT culture” of elaborately-engineered hacks and homemade robots may well find themselves feeling like they are at the bottom of this ranking. In the words of one

Writing major:

[T]here is the unspoken agreement that HASS classes aren't real classes; they're not the meat and potatoes of the 'tvt. 8.02 [Physics II]? Real. 18.03 [Differential Equations]? A little too real. 21W.345 [Generic Writing course number]? Not real: HASS ... I have all this work to do for my HASSes, and I can't even complain about it! The moment I try to speak up...someone else says, “Yeah, but that doesn't count, it's for a HASS.” Like the Trix bunny, I hear nothing but, “Silly Bill, humanities aren't for real.” (Andrews 2005)

As with the women and minority students who found themselves outsiders in the popular image of “MIT culture” that is frozen in time, humanists at MIT often find themselves conspicuously absent from the “MIT culture” advertised by the admissions office.

3 My sophomore year I was invited to an Anthropology department presentation on the topic of Jews in Turkey, who often hide their religion from their non-Jewish neighbors and coworkers. Asked if the Turkish Jewish experience was at all similar to the experience of being Black in America, the presenter replied, “Not really, because you can't necessarily tell if someone is Jewish by looking at them. It's more like being gay in America,” to which a professor chimed in, “Or like being a humanist at MIT!”

Humanists are not the only group excluded from the homogeneously nerdy MIT of admissions advertisements. Due to the contemporary popular ideal of science as a secular mode of thinking that is “explicitly grounded in rationalism and naturalism” (Toumey 1994:19), students who subscribe to modes of thinking that are not popularly perceived as being explicitly grounded in rationalism – such as religion – also often feel like they do not belong in the science-centered MIT of lore. The difficulties Christian students at MIT have in reconciling their religious beliefs with their identities as scientists or engineers to their non-religious classmates has been documented (Rubin 2007); it is not surprising that they feel alienated from the popular ideal of “MIT culture” as based solely in science and technology, given that this ideal informs the (often negative) attitudes of other members of the MIT community towards them. Consider a recent letter to the editor in MIT's student newspaper from MIT Professor Joe Haldeman:

I was dismayed to read that MIT has decided, after a hundred years without, that it needs a chaplain.

MIT is about science and engineering and mathematics. There is no place for belief in those disciplines, only doubt — we accept evidence but constantly test it.

Our students, especially the ones from America, have grown up in cultures saturated with religiosity. We should give them a little break from it while they're here.

MIT needs religion like a bull needs mammarys.

(Haldeman 2008)

This condemnation of religion as against the scientific principles of MIT is especially surprising given that Haldeman is not a professor of science or engineering, but of Writing and Humanistic Studies. Perhaps this is simply a case of a member of one marginalized group condemning members of another

marginalized group to gain credibility with the dominant group (in this case, scientists and engineers), but regardless of Haldeman's personal motivations, he could not have thought to submit such an unapologetically anti-religion letter if faith was seen as an acceptable component of “MIT culture.” It is telling that his letter did not receive any responses in defense of religion at MIT (or at least no responses that were published). Along with the humanists, MIT students and professors who are religious are not included in the homogeneously technoscientific “MIT culture” that is marketed to potential students.

“MIT Culture” from Inside the Institute

*An MIT surveyor once found the gates of Hell
He looked the devil in the eye, and said "You're looking well"
The devil looked right back at him, and said "Why visit me -
You've been through Hell already; you went to MIT!"*

– Verse from MIT's fight song, We Are The Engineers

While members of the MIT community often have a more nuanced understanding of MIT culture than that marketed by the admissions office, the way they use the term to explain MIT-related phenomena has a tendency to ignore the ways in which experiences have been constructed historically and have changed over time, [and] to rely on notions of authenticity and the return to positive values not represented by the dominant other in a way that has the potential to erase history (Abu-Lughod 1991: 471).

This reductionist tendency is reflected in discussions of the culture of MIT's housing system. As

previously discussed, the undergraduate dormitories are divided into East and West, and Eastern dormitories are seen as having more history and traditions, or culture, than Western dormitories. Dormitory culture is heavily influenced by each year's incoming freshmen class all freshmen are required to live in dormitories, and during the Residence Exploration portion of freshmen orientation each dormitory puts on a variety of events to showcase their unique culture and recruit freshmen who would fit into it well, since freshmen are allowed to choose where they live. However, this system was not always the case. Until 1998 freshmen also had the option of living in a fraternity or sorority, a policy influenced by MIT's shortage of dormitory space for undergraduates (Resiberg 1998). But the 1997 fatal alcohol poisoning of freshman Scott Krueger during a fraternity initiation resulted in the policy being changed to the current requirement that all freshmen live in Institute dormitories. Discussions of MIT dormitory culture often ignore the influence of this particular historical event on the current housing policy, and speak of the cultures of different dormitories as if they always existed in the form they currently do. Even discussions of dormitory culture and the housing system that include the Scott Krueger incident tend to ignore the broader context of his death and its repercussions. They speak of the time before his death as a glorious period of student independence, and accuse the MIT administration of babying them in the freshmen on campus policy (e.g. Editorial in the Tech, November 8 2002). They ignore, or are unaware of, the fact that freshmen only used to be allowed to live in fraternities as a cheap fix to MIT's housing shortage, and that the administration's decision to mandate on-campus housing for freshmen was not made in a vacuum. Rosalind Williams, who was Dean for Undergraduate Education at the time of the incident and the ensuing freshmen on campus

decision, explains:

While the MIT 'community' was deeply divided over the virtues of the MIT housing system, the surrounding world – the 'communities' of Boston and Cambridge – concluded that the Institute had been irresponsible in its supervision of student living 'communities.' Whether through licensing procedures, the criminal justice system, or insurance regulations, the demands of the larger community proved more potent than any debates within MIT. In particular, Boston and Cambridge authorities made clear their conviction that MIT freshmen had to live in a more supervised setting. (2002: 161)

Ahistorical discussions of MIT dormitory culture obscure the historical and political events that shaped, and continue to shape, the reality of undergraduate life at MIT.

MIT culture is used in a way that even more seriously obscures the influence of outside factors in discussions of student suicides, a phenomenon that is perceived to be more prevalent at MIT than at other universities⁴. Brian Hapgood summarizes the popular explanation for the prevalence of suicides at MIT as:

Every institution has a certain range of acts that illuminate and amplify its cultural essence (in the view of some fractions of the population) – hazing incidents in fraternities, corruption in legislatures, price fixing by businesses, etc. At MIT these are suicides...General interest reporters, who privately suspect that all that math would make anyone suicidal, never tire of playing up the 'cost of excellence' angle, with its reassuring subtext about the dangers of working hard in school. 'It's the John Wayne mentality, writ large,' one associate dean for student affairs said in an interview. 'Students put a lot of pressure on themselves here.' (1993: 19)

The conception that MIT culture forces students to put an unbearable amount of pressure on themselves, pressure that some students feel can only be relieved by suicide, masks several factors that complicate the issue of suicides at MIT. For one thing, numerous studies have shown that MIT students

⁴ When I decided to go to MIT my mother was distraught - "But you're so happy," she protested, "I don't want you to kill yourself!"

aren't actually more likely to commit suicide than students at other colleges (Jeffreys 2000) but the publicity received by several MIT student suicides (namely Elizabeth Shin, who set herself on fire in 2000, and Julia Carpenter, who ingested cyanide in 2001) obscures that fact. But more importantly, the explanation of the suicides that do occur as being a result of MIT culture ignores multiple factors that influence the rate of student suicides. After the publicity of the Shin and Carpenter suicides, MIT instituted a number of suicide-prevention policies they increased the walk-in hours the mental health department of MIT Medical was open, began programs to screen students for suicide risk, piloted a program to train MIT community leaders (including Graduate Resident Tutors, faculty, and administrators) in suicide prevention, and launched a massive publicity campaign to make the student body aware of the free, confidential mental health services they are entitled to at MIT Medical. Unsurprisingly, the rate of undergraduate suicides has decreased since the implementation of these changes (Turner 2008), even though the idea of MIT culture as demanding excellence from students has not changed. Furthermore, psychiatrists agree that most suicides are the result of clinical depression, a neurochemical imbalance in the brain that may be exacerbated by a person's environment, but is not entirely caused by it (National Institute of Mental Health 2004). Blaming student suicides on MIT culture implicitly ignores the underlying structural and biological causes of the problem and thereby implies that the problem is intractable, as when student Mike Hall decries MIT Medical's outreach campaign because it is spending money on the impossible task of changing our culture (2001). The success of the program, however, clearly does not support such a conclusion.

Lastly, internal Institute discourses of MIT culture as consisting of the traditions of student

living groups or an Institute-wide pressure for excellence obscures a critically important fact about the work that occurs at MIT science and engineering are rooted in culture too. But discussions of MIT culture take for granted that science and engineering are context-free and completely objective, and therefore good. Technological advancement is seen as a culture-free way to solve messy societal problems (Downey 1998); in the words of Rosalind Williams, I cannot imagine a more pro-technology place than MIT. At its core is a deep belief in the value of technology as the basis for human improvement, and in technological analysis as the basis for problem solving (2002: 13). As numerous anthropologists and sociologists of science have demonstrated, technology is indeed deeply rooted in culture (e.g. Downey 1998), and the idea that science is a culture of no culture is patently untrue (Traweek 1988). Discussions of MIT culture are confined to the dormitories at the expense of discussing its impact in the laboratories, thereby perpetuating the myth that science and engineering exist in a world without loose ends, without temperament, gender, nationalism, or other sources of disorder...a world outside human space and time (ibid.: 162).

Conclusion: Writing Against MIT Culture

In the words of Gary Downey, every image makes some things visible while hiding other things (19998:5). The outside image of MIT culture as consisting of science and engineering nerds who do nothing but work hides the existence of MIT students who do not conform to this outdated stereotype, such as women and minorities. The MIT culture that is marketed by the MIT Admissions

department makes visible the diversity of MIT students and the non-academic activities they engage in, but homogenizes the complexity of the MIT dormitory system and hides the existence of humanists and religious people at MIT. And the more nuanced version of MIT culture that is discussed within the Institute hides the historical and political contextuality of MIT-related phenomena such as the housing system and student suicides, as well as obscures the culturally-influenced nature of science and technology itself. These problematic undertones of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness (Abu-Lughod 1991: 476) all indicate that it is time to begin writing against MIT culture.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. Writing Against Culture. In *Anthropology In Theory: Issues in Epistemology*, ed. Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders. Blackwell, 2005, 466 – 479.
- Anahtar, Melis. “NY Times Article on Women in Science.” MIT Admissions Blogs.
Accessed 11 May 2008.
- Andrews, Bill. 18 October 2005. Imminent Collapse: Kickin' My HASS. *The Tech*, 125(47).
Accessed 12 May 2008.
- Atkinson, W. P. 1875. “Report on the Instruction in the Department of English.” In MIT President's Report, 1873 – 1874. Boston: Press of A. A. Kingman.
- Brandon, Emily. 2007. MIT: Think of a Number. *US News and World Report: America's Best Colleges 2008*. Accessed 11 May 2008.
- Brett, Bill. 21 September 2007. “MIT Student Arrested at Logan in Bomb Scare.” *Boston Globe*, Accessed 10 May 2008.

- Concerning the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Second Edition. 1912. Published by Undergraduates. New York: J. F. Tapley Co.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Chris. 22 September 2007. "Star Simpson Helps Me Reanimate My Blog." Accessed 10 May 2008.
- Dowling, Claudia Glenn. 6 May 2005. MIT Nerds. Discover Magazine. Accessed 11 May 2008.
- Downey, Gary. 1998. *The Machine in Me: An Anthropologist Sits Among Computer Engineers*. New York: Routledge.
- Editorial. 8 November 2002. "The Reality of Freshmen on Campus." *The Tech* 122(54). Accessed 14 May 2008.
- Haldeman, Joe. 9 January 2008. Letter to the Editor: MIT Does Not Need a Chaplain. *The Tech*, 127(62). Accessed 12 May 2008.
- Hall, Mike. 20 November 2001. Better State of Mind. *The Tech*, 121(61). Accessed 14 May 2008.
- Hapgood, Freed. 1993. *Up the Infinite Corridor: MIT and the Technical Imagination*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Jeffreys, Kathryn. 18 February 2000. MIT Suicides Reflect National Trends. *The Tech*, 120(6). Accessed 14 May 2008.
- Le Maison Francaise. 2008. Report to the Housing Strategy Group. Accessed 11 May 2008.
- Lin, Michael T. 25 September 2007. Drunk With Culture: Signs You've Had Too Much. *The Tech* 127(41). Accessed 11 May 2008.
- Lombreglia, Ralph. September 2007. "The Turnaround is at Hand." *Esquire*, 134 – 147.
- MIT Minority Community. 2008. MIT Admissions: Explore and Discover MIT. Accessed 11 May 2008.

MIT President's Report, 1873 - 1874. Boston: Press of A. A. Kingman, 1875.

MIT President's Report, 1941 – 1943. Published by the Institute: Cambridge.

MIT President's Report, 1969 – 1970. Published by the Institute: Cambridge.

MIT Registrar's Office. 2008. Accessed 13 May 2008.

McPhee, Michele. 24 September 2007. "Schools Baby Kids Born Under Lucky Star." Boston Herald, Accessed 10 May 2008.

Molina, Jennifer. 2008. Personal Correspondance.

National Institute of Mental Health. 13 December 2004. Press Release: Mutant Gene Linked to Treatment-Resistant Depression. Accessed 14 May 2008.

Ranade, Vinayak, and Hopp, Sarah. 2008. East Campus Culture Report 2008. Accessed 11 May 2008.

Reisberg, Leo. 6 November 1998. MIT's Inaction Blamed for Contributing to Death of a Freshmen. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Accessed 12 May 2008.

Rubin, Caroline. 2007. 21A.218 Paper 3: Faith. Unpublished. Accessed 12 May 2008.

Student Life and Culture. 2008. MIT Admissions: Explore and Discover MIT. Accessed 11 May 2008.

Taskforce on Student Life and Learning.

Task Force on Student Life and Learning [committee report], September 1998

Technique Number 1. 1887.

Technique. 1942.

The Handbook of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 1918.

The Handbook of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 1928.

The Handbook of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 1929.

The Handbook of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 1931.

Toumey, Christopher P. 1994. *God's Own Scientists: Creationists in a Secular World*. Princeton: Rutgers University Press.

Traweek, Sharon. 1988. *Beamtimes and Lifetimes: The World of High Energy Physicists*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Turkle, Sherry. 1984. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Turner, Elijah Jordan. 13 May 2008. MIT Medical Works to Identify, Address Causes of Suicide. *The Tech*, 128(26). Accessed 14 May 2008.

Williams, Clarence G. 2001. *Technology and the Dream: Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941 – 1999*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Williams, Rosalind. 2002. *Retooling: A Historian Confronts Technological Change*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Women at MIT. 2008. MIT Admissions: Explore and Discover MIT.

Accessed 11 May 2008.

Work/Play Balance at MIT. 2007. MIT Admissions: Explore and Discover MIT.

Accessed 12 May 2008.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.157 The Meaning of Life
Spring 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.