

**FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING IN:  
TRADITION AND DVIERSITY AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY**

A Thesis

by

EMILY LYNN CAULFIELD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Eric Rothenbuhler
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## ABSTRACT

From the Inside Looking In: Tradition and Diversity at  
Texas A&M University. (May 2008)

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This study explores how the unique history, culture, and traditions of Texas A&M University shape students' perceptions and understandings of diversity and diversity programs. I examine these issues through participant observation of Texas A&M's football traditions and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the student body.

In response to increased media scrutiny, public pressure, and scholastic competition, the current administration has embraced a number of aggressive initiatives to increase diversity among members of the student body. The collision between decades of tradition and the administration's vision for the future has given rise to tension between members of the student body and the administration, which I argue is due, at least in part, to the culture that began developing at Texas A&M during the middle of the twentieth century as students began reacting to the prospect of change. I conclude that this historical and cultural context continues to impact modern campus life through students' dedication to tradition.

In addition, I suggest that current students tend to assign different meanings and values to the concepts of both tradition and diversity than either faculty members or administrators do, creating tensions that have not been comprehensively examined or understood within the context of the Texas A&M community. Based on these findings, I suggest that proponents of diversity can improve the diversity project at Texas A&M University by giving students more responsibility for diversity programs, emphasizing the process (rather than the results) of diversification, attempting to eradicate *all* forms of intolerance and injustice on campus, and insisting on a policy of mutual respect.

To the former, current, and future students of Texas A&M University.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank the students who participated in this project for graciously sharing their time and honestly sharing their thoughts with me. Many thanks, also, to the wonderful faculty and staff of Texas A&M's Department of Communication, who daily create the vibrant, challenging, and collegial culture that makes research both possible and rewarding.

This endeavor continues to benefit from the insight, wisdom, and guidance of my thesis committee, who took this project seriously and saw its potential through its flaws. In addition, I owe special mention to Dr. Eric Rothenbuhler, chair of my committee and tireless sounding board who challenged and encouraged me from our very first meeting. I could not have asked for a better model of intellectual excitement, scholastic rigor, and collegial support.

Throughout this project, I was encouraged and blessed by a group of people to whom I owe an incredible debt of gratitude: to Katy and Jennifer, for building me up and calming me down, to Angela, for listening and knowing exactly what not to say, to my family, for supporting me in all things, and to Lars, for holding my hand on good days and bad. This project was only possible because of your prayers, patience, and love.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

My subject is A&M. Not just Texas A&M University, but A&M, which includes the former students, the Aggie Spirit, the rituals and ethos of an institution. It's a good subject, because A&M reflects many of the conflicts in the society of which it is a part: the struggle between conformity and tradition on the one hand, and creativity and eccentricity on the other; between the desire to know the good from the bad and the need to make a living; between the work ethic and the wise use of leisure; between doctrine and reason; between hope and the necessity to face unpalatable truth.

- from an address by Dr. Earl Cook, professor of geology and dean of the College of Geosciences at Texas A&M from 1965 to 1981

At the center of the Texas A&M University campus stands a statue of Lawrence Sullivan Ross, the state's fourteenth governor and the school's seventh president. The ten-foot bronze likeness, created by Italian sculptor Pompeo Coppini, was unveiled on May 4, 1919, just over two decades after Ross died suddenly while serving his seventh year as president of the A&M College of Texas. According to local lore, Ross tutored scores of students during his tenure as president, asking nothing in return besides "a penny for their thoughts" (Pierce, 2004). To this day, students drop pennies at Sully's feet in the hopes that it will grant them luck on upcoming exams.

Lawrence Sullivan Ross was born in Iowa Territory in the fall of 1838, the fourth child of a frontier farmer and the daughter of a wealthy German planter. Drawn by tales of land and opportunity, the entire family moved to Texas before Ross's first birthday, settling along Little River then moving to Austin and eventually helping to settle the

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This thesis follows the style of the *Journal of Communication*.



newly-founded town of Waco. After receiving his education from Baylor University in Texas and then Wesleyan University in Alabama, Ross (who was known for most of his life as “Sul”) earned fame first as an Indian fighter then as a Texas Ranger, Confederate general, county sheriff, state senator, Texas governor, and finally, president of A&M College. In this last position, which many cite as his “crowning achievement and his most valuable contribution to the Texas society of his time” (Benner, 1983, p. 234), Ross was credited with saving the school from obsolescence, modernizing the campus, boosting enrollment, securing financial stability, improving relations with the University of Texas, enriching student life, and restoring public confidence in what had once been a factious and despondent institution. On the day after his death, as people all over Texas mourned his passing, the *Dallas Morning News* paid tribute to Ross as a man of:

...sterling common sense, lofty patriotism, inflexible honesty and withal a character so exalted that he commanded at all times not only the confidence but the affection of the people...He leaves a name that will be honored as long as chivalry, devotion to duty and spotless integrity are standards of our civilization and an example which ought to be an inspiration to all young men of Texas who aspire to careers of public usefulness and honorable renown. (*Ibid.*, p. 235)

But despite the apparent solidity of his character, Benner (1983) calls Ross a man of complexity and paradox. While courageous in battle, he feared public ridicule and shrank from derision. His unfailing chivalry belied ruthless dealings with the enemy, and for someone who so effortlessly quoted Byron and Shakespeare, his understanding of basic English grammar was surprisingly lacking. While a passionate Confederate as a

young man, Ross instilled in Texas A&M's Corps of Cadets "a tradition of patriotism to the re-United States" (*Ibid.*, p. 235), and he remained a model of humility despite serving in Texas' highest office and earning Texans' highest regard. An audacious and adventurous frontiersman, Ross abhorred being apart from his home and family, and his Jeffersonian belief in limited government did not prevent him from expanding state services during his terms in public office. The man lived in a world of paradox, and the school that would grow up around his statue came to embody not just his values and aspirations but his contradictions as well. One of these contradictions, in particular, persists with as hard and constant a presence as that of the statue itself.

In 1889, during his second term as governor of Texas, Ross was confronted by a spate of accusations leveled against him and his administration by members of the opposing Republican party. In response to these accusations—that Democrats were responsible for alienating and oppressing African Americans in Texas—Ross wrote a brief but impassioned statement detailing "what Texas, under Democratic rule, has done in the past and is doing now for the education and benefit of the colored race" (1889, p. 1):

The Democrats of Texas have agreed that the negro shall enjoy equal rights before the law...They were for years led as so many chained slaves by their white political leaders; now they rule supremely these old chieftains. They have made rapid progress in education and personal independence. They have in Texas thousands of accomplished teachers and preachers and many political orators able to cope with the gifted speakers of the white race. Democrats have

contributed largely to this triumph. It is a singular notion that the Democrats could be hostile to the negro. It would be idiotic to yearly hand out \$665,000 for the negro's advancement if the Democrats desired to suppress them. Education will strengthen them for any contest. If kept in blind ignorance they might be governed to extinction by the white race, stronger in numbers, wealth, and intelligence. (Ross, 1889, p. 3)

Therein lies the contradiction. While Ross "was only a nominal supporter of the peculiar institution" (Benner, 1983, p. 20), owning no slaves at the outset of the Civil War, he maintained a strong sense of racial superiority. In a letter to his wife, written between battles during the fall of 1861, Ross describes one soldier's uniform as a garment "no Negro in Waco could be induced to wear" (Morrison, 1938/1994, p. 16). And according to Benner (1983), a law requiring the racial segregation of railroad cars was passed during Ross's tenure as governor, yet he supposedly maintained a "cordial" relationship with the African American community (p. 196). Whatever cordiality existed and whatever good he did, Ross nonetheless considered African Americans an inferior race of people.

The fragility of the A&M College of Texas before Ross's appointment to the presidency cannot be exaggerated. Under constant threat from inadequate physical accommodations, fires, financial crises, administrative disagreements, legislative apprehension, and student unrest, the school came close to disintegrating more than once during its inaugural decade. Ross lent untold dignity and stability to an institution that desperately needed both. However, his ambivalent relationship with the African

American community would become an unfortunate analogy, not for racial intolerance at Texas A&M (although that continues to exist) but for the more complicated tension between past and future, between what is and what could be, between tradition and change.

### *Tradition and Change*

Founded in 1876, Texas A&M University is a Tier I research institution located in the heart of the Brazos Valley. As the oldest public university in Texas and one of only three public schools to maintain a full-time, voluntary Corps of Cadets, A&M boasts over a century of highly-structured, military-centered tradition. Of course, the majority of those traditions have been hewn from a single stone—a white, male, Protestant stone. In response to increased media scrutiny, public pressure, and scholastic competition, the current administration has embraced a number of aggressive initiatives to increase diversity among members of the student body. As decades of tradition collide with the administration's vision for the future, the present has become a negotiated space, one fraught with tension, layered with consequence, and rich with meaning. At this juncture, perhaps one of the most critical in the university's history, the uneasy engagement between tradition and diversity has given rise to a single, pressing question; how do we preserve the past while transforming the future?

Current Texas A&M students—the Fightin' Texas Aggies—are both custodians of tradition and the target of A&M's diversity initiatives. As such, the student body is a theater of conflict, the battle zone in which tradition and diversity are most frequently and earnestly engaged. This study is an account of life in that battle zone, a report of the

lived textures that have emerged through participant observation, formal interviews, casual conversation, and honest introspection. This project is an attempt to inscribe a university's conceptual landscape—but even more, an effort to discover how the past and the future structure our understanding of the present.

At the heart of this phenomenon is a profound, religiously earnest Aggie identity constructed around symbols resembling those found in the totemic religions studied by Durkheim. The purpose here, though, is not to compare Texas A&M to traditional societies or religions but to understand the beliefs and rituals that effect both enduring group membership and resistance to institutional change, the latter of which foregrounds, in particular, tension between the student body and the administration. In the context of diversity, this tension has become more evident in recent years as the administration's efforts to increase diversity at Texas A&M have become both more specific and more visible.

According to a web site maintained by the office of the Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity (2006), the administration is currently dedicated to documenting each department's diversity efforts, training key faculty members to deal with diversity issues, exposing incoming students to more explicit information about diversity, recruiting more students from underrepresented groups, and developing and implementing better mechanisms to assess the campus climate at Texas A&M. These are only a few of the practical steps comprising the administration's commitment to diversity, and as the initiatives have become more focused and organized—particularly within the last decade—students have begun to respond with more serious and frequent

expressions of concern. But because the student body is an enormous group—over forty thousand people—that lacks the purposive direction and unified voice of an administrative body, dissent is usually expressed through informal avenues in informal settings—conversations in coffee shops, living rooms, hallways, and the like. This makes the phenomenon of student opposition difficult to quantify and even more difficult to track, but the examples of dissent that *are* available—one of which I describe below—illuminate a great deal about the tension that can develop as members of the student body and administration disagree over the role of tradition and diversity at Texas A&M.

In the fall of 2003, the A&M administration welcomed to its ranks Dr. James Anderson, the university's first Vice President and Associate Provost for Institutional Assessment and Diversity. As he arrived on campus, Dr. Anderson was greeted in two very different ways. While the Department of Multicultural Services hosted an official student welcome, the Young Conservatives of Texas (YCT) staged an affirmative action bake sale to protest the creation of Dr. Anderson's position. At this event, people from different racial groups were required to pay different prices for baked goods, which members of YCT claimed as evidence that affirmative action is an inherently unfair practice. In response to this incident, then-president Dr. Robert Gates sent an email to the student body stating that individuals' opinions "must be presented with a genuine sense of civility" (Moghe, 2003, p. 1) and that to do otherwise violated the rules of conduct that each member of the Aggie community should be required to uphold. YCT responded with a letter of its own, stating that "YCT officers who, unlike you [Dr.

Gates], are A&M students or alumni, resent your presumptuous claim of what is and is not Aggie tradition” (*Ibid.*). During a question-and-answer session held at an open forum later that week, Dr. Gates was asked whether or not he planned to apologize to YCT for his comments. He responded simply by saying, “I am the one that deserves the apology” (*Ibid.*).

While the opinions voiced by members of YCT should not be generalized to the rest of the student body, this example does illustrate the problems that can develop when students and administrators espouse different understandings about the meaning and value of tradition and diversity at Texas A&M. And because this disparity seems to be creating tension that has not dissipated over time—as evidenced by the fact that diversity continues to be one of the most common and sensitive topics of discussion in the A&M student newspaper and in more informal settings across campus—it needs to be thoroughly examined before unease and unrest give way to more serious forms of conflict.

I chose to study these specific concepts in this specific cultural context for a number of reasons. First of all, Texas A&M’s history of both tradition and relative cultural homogeneity—combined with the increasing prevalence and volatility of diversity issues—suggests that powerful social and cultural forces are interacting in ways that have not been critically examined. While the university has sponsored a number of research projects dealing with the issue of diversity on the Texas A&M campus (see, in particular, Texas A&M University, 2004, and Texas A&M University, 1998), little effort has been made to understand the underlying symbolic, cultural, and

ritual commitments that, *from a student's perspective*, make membership worth defending and change worth resisting. Thus, this project is an attempt to examine the student body from within, to search out the ways in which Texas A&M's unique history and culture inform how students describe, understand, and experience the concepts of change in general and diversity in particular. In the sections that follow, I articulate students' perspectives by describing—and in many instances, adopting—they, in order to give the student body a more coherent, cohesive voice in the ongoing dialogue about diversity. In doing so, I hope to give administrators, faculty members, and even students themselves a more complete understanding of the tensions that inhibit productive dialogue and effective change.

Second of all, my position as a current and longtime A&M student has enhanced my ability to access, collect, and analyze the data necessary to begin unraveling these concepts. As a member of the student body, I was able to bypass some of the wariness that other researchers might have faced in trying to explore the sensitive issues that frequently emerged during interviews. Students may not have felt comfortable, for example, responding as emotionally or passionately as they did when describing their concerns about the administration had I been *affiliated* with the administration. In addition, as an A&M student, I could identify with many students' experiences, emotions, and concerns, making it easier for me to connect these phenomena to their cultural source. However, this familiarity also imposes an important limitation; as a student, it would be impossible for me to view these data from anything like an objective distance, meaning that my effort to elucidate “a student's perspective” is necessarily



colored by a student's perspective. No amount of self-reflexivity can balance the weight of identity. Nonetheless, I undertook this project believing that my position as a student contributed to this study more than it detracted.

Finally, and most importantly, the self I have discovered over the past five years is a testament to the educational excellence and formative power of this university. I record and reprove its frailties with the hope that doing so will illuminate the contours of the mistakes behind us and the problem before us—not *because* there is a problem, but because there must be a solution.

### *Methodology*

Over the course of this project, I interviewed twenty current Texas A&M students, including five members of the Corps of Cadets, four graduate students, four international students, five American-born students who identify strongly with another culture, six students with strong religious ties (primarily Christian and Muslim), twelve students who were born and raised in Texas, and two students from states outside of Texas. The nine males and eleven females, all at various stages in their degrees, were asked to describe their experiences with and understandings of both tradition and diversity on the Texas A&M campus by responding to four specific questions:

Question 1: How do you define tradition?

Question 2: What are some experiences you've had with tradition here at Texas  
A&M?

Question 3: How do you define diversity?

Question 4: What are some experiences you've had with diversity here at Texas A&M?

Follow-up questions depended on students' responses but almost always involved the importance of tradition at Texas A&M, the ways in which students did or did not identify with "being an Aggie," the value of and problems with diversity and the administration's diversity initiatives, and the emotions experienced through participation in or rejection of A&M culture. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasted from 30 minutes to two hours and were conducted at various locations on the A&M campus. Participants were recruited through both email and direct person-to-person contact, and participation was voluntary, uncompensated, and anonymous.

In addition to interviews, I observed and participated in each Midnight Yell Practice and home football game throughout Texas A&M's most recent football season. As the source and center of many A&M traditions, football weekends offer the greatest density of ritual activity and the greatest intensity of student participation. In addition, I was able to observe the same set of rituals consistently over time, as the Aggies played at home seven times over the course of the three-month season. Having been a student at Texas A&M since the fall of 2003, this was my fifth season to spend every home game in the stands at Kyle Field. In order to revitalize the textures around me, worn smooth by familiarity, I focused in particular on the norms, motives, and emotions that seemed to drive ritual participation—to figure out, in the words of Clifford Geertz, "what the devil they think they are up to" (1983, p. 58). The results of these observations, coupled

with the themes that emerged during interviews and my own experiences as a student over the past five years, provided the impetus for the analysis that follows.

In the first section, I trace the history of the “Aggie Spirit,” an abstraction and amalgamation of the numerous values that reportedly exemplify “what it means to be an Aggie.” More specifically, I will show how the Aggie Spirit is a ritual system organized around a core set of values, which are said to render Texas A&M a place unlike any other. The concept transcends typical definitions of school spirit—a fact from which students derive a great deal of pride and on which outsiders and insiders alike base a frequent comparison: that Texas A&M seems like a religious institution. I take up this issue—the university’s religious dimension—in the next section, which uses Durkheim’s definition of religion to analyze how rituals organize and sanctify life at Texas A&M. Based on these points of comparison and the work of, in particular, Van Gennep, Turner, and Goffman, I argue in the following section that A&M’s rituals and symbols are doubly sacred based on their situation in a college setting, in which students experience a significant degree of liminality. During this liminal period, as students form and reform their social identities, they incorporate into the self bits and pieces of their cultural context—in this case, Texas A&M University. In the next section, moving briefly away from tradition and culture, I outline the four main concepts that interviewees used to define diversity—as dialogue, choice, race, and “a good thing.” The final section is an attempt to synthesize the information from each previous section into a coherent framework, to organize the data in a way that illuminates more clearly the connections between them. Based on these connections, I point to practical steps that may help

reduce unproductive tensions between the student body and the administration. While I hope to provide insight that has practical application for improving communication and understanding between these two parties, my ultimate goal is not to say what A&M ought to be but to elucidate the forces that make it what it is.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AGGIE SPIRIT

Some may boast of prowess bold  
Of the school they think so grand,  
But there's a spirit can ne'er be told  
It's the spirit of Aggieland.  
- From "The Spirit of Aggieland"

"The Spirit of Aggieland," the alma mater of Texas A&M University, was written in 1925 by Marvin H. Mimms, a junior at Texas A&M and a member of the Aggie Corps of Cadets. Sung at every football game, most sporting events, and numerous other ceremonial occasions, the song has become an integral part of the rituals that make Texas A&M, according to the university's most recent marketing campaign, "a place where tradition is a way of life."<sup>1</sup> It took little time for "the Spirit of Aggieland" to outgrow the song that had given it life, quickly becoming a conceptual phenomenon that codified and unified the entire Aggie experience into one neat, sweeping phrase. What had once been referred to rather vaguely as "that fine esprit de corps which has always characterized the student body" (Ousley, 1935, p. 48) now had a name, not to mention a melody. As James Carey describes, language creates "representations 'of' and 'for' reality" (1988, p. 26), calling into question *and existence* the phenomena that organize our real social lives. Once "that fine esprit de corps" had been given a place in symbolic reality as the Aggie Spirit, "the camaraderie and student

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://communications.tamu.edu/aggieland/>.

unity at A&M, great from the very beginning of the institution, truly reached the pitch of the one great ‘fraternity’” (Dethloff, 1975, p. 437).

The Spirit of Aggieland is notoriously hard to define, as suggested by the song’s most frequently-quoted line, “there’s a spirit can ne’er be told.” Indeed, students can often be heard explaining to visitors and guests that “from the outside looking in, you can’t understand it; from the inside looking out, you can’t explain it.” Yet while a perfect interpretation remains elusive, the Aggie Spirit is most clearly and frequently defined as Aggies’ “particularly intensive spirit of cooperation and loyalty to one another, and to the school” (Dethloff, 1975, p. 437). According to Clarence Ousley, an early historian of Texas A&M, two men in particular “laid the foundations” (1935, p. 48) for what would come to be known as the Aggie Spirit. Thomas Gathright—the university’s first president and a powerful, volatile leader—and Major R. P. W. Morris—the first commandant of the Corps of Cadets and a “spirited Virginia gentleman” (*Ibid.*)—demanded from the school’s inception that cadets be trained to understand the importance of duty, discipline, efficiency, responsibility, service, and honor. These values remained at the core of A&M’s mission even as the administration changed hands and the university began to reevaluate its role as one of the premier academic institutions in the state of Texas.

Of course, Gathright and Morris were not solely responsible for the distinct temperament that developed at A&M during the school’s formative decades. Some have argued that the Aggie Spirit owed its vitality to “the need of an isolated band of country boys in the Brazos wilderness for a psychological defense against homesickness” (Cook,

1983, p. 5). As Cook suggests, Texas A&M's relative geographic isolation did, according to one former student, "have the effect of developing a very cohesive 'one for all and all for one' school spirit" (Rollins, 1970, p. 2). However, geography alone cannot account for the endurance, intensity, and complexity of the Aggie Spirit, just as manifest destiny does not explain the vivacity of American patriotism. In addition, A&M's location may have actually had a *dampening* effect on the Aggie Spirit, as suggested in 1913 by former A&M president David Franklin:

The present location of A. and M. is exceedingly unfortunate, agriculturally and educationally. An institution needs the support of a highly developed community. The Faculty and students both suffer...It is difficult to prevent stagnation resulting from isolation. I found the best men restive and discontented under conditions at College Station. I could get and keep stronger men [at the University of Texas] in Austin. (Dethloff, 1976, p. 235)

Whether isolation hindered or enhanced the development of the Aggie Spirit, it does not explain the speed with which it grew or the tenacity with which it endured.

If geography does not account for the Aggie Spirit, perhaps history does.

According to Jonathan Smith (2007), A&M was born into a culture populated by two incompatible narratives, both developed after the South's devastating loss of the Civil War. On the one hand, Southerners were "an embattled people couched in a defensive posture" (p. 184), terrified that their way of life would be crushed under the weight of Reconstruction. On the other, they saw industrial development and technical innovation as the only way to salvage their exhausted economy—and thereby defend against further

erosion of Southern culture. Modernity, then, was simultaneously hero and villain—savior and saboteur—and A&M came to exemplify this tension more fully and vividly than any other institution in the state. From its inception, the college was charged with setting the pace for technological innovation in Texas at a time when the state’s agrarian economy, already fragile after the war, was vulnerable to a number of critical pressures, such as crop failures, cattle tick fever, loin disease, soil erosion, and boll weevil plagues. “The heroism of the pioneers of agricultural investigation” (Ousley, 1935, p. 107) was seen as the salvation of “the whole people [of Texas] in factory, counting house, farm, and home” (*Ibid.*, p. 98). The university, then, was an institution capable of equipping young men to be leaders and innovators at a time when the state needed scholars to be heroes.

Yet despite its crusade for progress, Texas A&M also became the state’s most visible and dynamic custodian of Southern culture. In the antebellum South:

gentlemen did not work or fight with their hands; they fashioned laws for the governance of the rabble, they delivered orations and indited verses to their lady loves, they flirted and gambled, they rode to hounds, they fought duels with swords or pistols and were captains and generals in the wars for king and country, they lived highly and swaggered nobly to gouty and untimely ends.

(Ousley, 1935, p. 5)

Out of this tradition came the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets, an all-military organization intended to supply the nation’s forces and the state’s militias with fully-trained, able-bodied young men. But beyond the pragmatism behind its inception, the Corps can also



be understood as an organization “devoted to preservation of the Southern Way of Life” (Smith, 2007, p. 185). Indeed, rural culture thrived in the Corps—through tobacco and hog calling, honor and hard liquor—and cadets wore Confederate gray until 1917 (Tang, 2000, p. 93). Whatever its practical purpose, the Corps served an important symbolic role: to reassure Southerners that their way of life did not die at the courthouse in Appomattox.

The Aggie Spirit was born in the impossible crux of these two incompatible narratives, a solution to an unsolvable problem. The only way to integrate the residue of a shared culture with the progressive commitments that could destroy it is by consecrating the present—by continually making *right now* the sacred moment in which both can live harmoniously. Thus, the Aggie Spirit developed not because A&M represented “the best in American rural life” (Ousley, 1935, p. 79) or because students were lonelier in the undeveloped Brazos Valley than they might have been elsewhere—both phenomena being equally true of other universities that lack a cultural totem analogous to the Aggie Spirit. Rather, the Spirit of Aggieland developed because it was essential to the viability of the institution itself. It was the Spirit that reconciled “the way things were” and “the way things ought to be” by establishing “the way things are,” rendering the dying past and the uncertain future compatible in the effervescent present.

This unapologetically presentist culture explains both the ineffability of the Aggie Spirit and the authority of experience. An article from the school paper in the early 1930s states that the Spirit “cannot be experienced by outsiders” (*Battalion*, 1934), a sentiment echoed by Buck Weirus, Texas A&M class of 1942 and former director of

the Association of Former Students, who explains that the Spirit is “just *felt*—in a swelling of the throat, tears in the eyes, rapid pulse, and goose pimples on the flesh” (1979, emphasis in original). And according to a web site maintained by the Texas A&M Traditions Council (2002a), “*by experiencing [Texas A&M’s] honored traditions* you can begin to understand what is truly meant by “the Spirit of Aggieland” (Aggie traditions, para. 2, emphasis added). Because the Spirit defies description, understanding is contingent upon participation. And because cultural norms and values are transmitted *through* this participation, students are unlikely—even *unable*—to generate values and language that advocate change. This explains why Texas A&M culture is “always strong and confident, but also inarticulate and inflexible” (Smith, 2007, p. 186).

The Spirit of Aggieland is not simply an abstract, impotent phenomenon but rather a dynamic ritual system protected by the rigidity of a presentist culture, which actually began, over time, to transform the university from within. Cook (1983) notes this important transition in Texas A&M’s history:

Changes in Texas began to be reflected in the student body [in the late seventies and early eighties]. Texas was fast becoming urban and affluent. No longer did A&M students come largely from the rural working class, but from the urban middle class. No longer did they come to A&M to learn how to use a knife and fork and to improve their status in American society, but to maintain and raise the economic level their parents had attained already. But increasingly, I suspect, they came because of the Aggie Spirit and the rituals of Muster, Bonfire, Twelfth

Man, Silver Taps, and individual diplomas at commencement, which set Aggies apart. (p. 9)

Cook's theory was confirmed by a number of interviewees, like the sophomore cadet who said that he "looked for tradition in coming here" and the sophomore female who insisted that "tradition is what brought me here." If students' experiences at Texas A&M are defined by tradition, defined by the Aggie Spirit, then understanding the role of ritual at Texas A&M is central to the purpose of this project because tradition and the Spirit are *represented* and *performed* in rituals. Only by studying them can we understand the symbolic commitments that inform students' responses to the prospect of change. And of course, following Robert Bellah (1967), "we know enough about the function of ceremony and ritual in various societies to make us suspicious of dismissing something as unimportant because it is 'only a ritual'" (p. 2).

### CHAPTER III

#### TRADITION IN AGGIELAND

It took me a year to fall in love with the school. As a freshman, I enjoyed A&M, but I wasn't in love with it. Then came Muster, on San Jacinto Day. I hadn't really planned to go, but I happened to be walking past the coliseum just at the right time. I followed the other students in. The Ross Volunteers fired a 21-gun salute, and family members lit candles for Aggies who had passed on in the last year. When each name was read out, friends and family around the building called out 'here.' I thought to myself, 'I am so lucky to have gone here. It's so much more than a degree.'

- A student quoted by Paul Burka in *Texas Monthly*, "Did you hear about the New Aggies?"

Texas A&M boasts hundreds of traditions, some grand and dignified—like the annual Muster ceremony, and some decidedly less serious—like when students from Walton Hall signal the end of dinner at the school's main dining hall by banging the table twice. Some of Texas A&M's more famous traditions include Silver Taps, a monthly ceremony that honors current students who have passed away, Reveille, a purebred Collie and the official mascot of Texas A&M, the Ross Volunteers, an elite group within the Corps of Cadets and the honor guard for the Texas governor, and "Howdy," the standard and expected campus greeting. But one source of Aggie tradition seems to command more attention, dedication, and curiosity than all the rest: Fightin' Texas Aggie football. Based on the number of traditions revolving around football, the percentage of students who participate, and its centrality in both my interviews and media coverage of Texas A&M, I spent the most recent season observing Aggieland from the student section at Kyle Field.

Every Saturday in the fall, college football fans from around the nation prepare themselves to watch “the game.” Conversations turn to rushing yards and pass coverage, rivalries are suddenly enough to justify blatant enmity, and body paint becomes a socially acceptable style of dress. Since 1869, when Princeton bested Rutgers in the first-ever recorded game of college football (Peach, 2007), the sport has grown in popularity to such an extent that “game day” has become a cultural phenomenon, thanks, in part, to ESPN’s ubiquitous “College GameDay” show. Yet game day in Aggieland begins long before camera crews start setting up equipment and trainers start taping ankles. In fact, it starts almost a week before, when the most dedicated Aggie fans pitch tents at the north end of Kyle Field in order to reserve their spots in the ticket line. (When the Aggies take on their rival, the University of Texas Longhorns, students actually start camping out *two* weeks before the opening snap.) What starts out as a few scattered tents eventually swells into a dense, organized colony complete with couches, satellite dishes, barbecue grills, and Christmas lights, and more than one student reports missing class in order to retain a spot in line. Eventually, over the course of the week, tents begin to disappear one by one as first seniors, then juniors, etc., are allowed to pull tickets for the upcoming game. But while the village of the faithful disperses, preparations gain momentum as local businesses change their marquees, Transportation Services begins setting up traffic cones and sawhorses, the Bryan/College Station *Eagle* and the Texas A&M *Battalion* run longer, more urgent stories about trick plays and injuries, and students start arranging rides and laundering the maroon shirts they wore to last week’s game. As one student put it, “You’ve got to go camp out [for tickets], buy

your water, find your face paint, fight the traffic on Texas [Avenue]...it's just all part of the game, you know?"

Preparations for the game culminate in Midnight Yell Practice, a tradition that has existed almost as long as Aggie football itself. In fact, cadets began yelling in unison as early as 1906 (Smith, 2007, p. 187), just over a decade after the Aggies defeated Ball High School in the school's first recorded game of football (Dethloff, 1975, p. 501). According to John Pasco (1940), in a series of fictional letters documenting a freshman's journey at A&M in the late 1930s:

We think it's the greatest yell section in the world, but the fact that it is so good is due to some hard work at yell practice...We sometimes have what is called midnight yell practice...The band marches all over campus with Freshmen following behind. We end up at the Y[MCA building] steps and have a regular practice, which is over about one o'clock...It's the life, Joe, and I sure do like it. I'd like for you to be here sometime for a yell practice. (pp. 45-8)

As Pasco suggests, Midnight Yell Practice is unique among American universities, a tradition in which Aggies gather at midnight before each home game in order to practice the yells for the following day. Students begin arriving at Kyle Field as early as 11:00, although practice does not officially start until the band and the Corps file into the stadium after the traditional march across campus that commences just before midnight. Once the Corps has arrived, the five yell leaders (each elected by the student body) enact a series of demonstrations and performances that culminate in the phrase, "Let's have a little Fightin' Texas Aggie Yell Practice, Ags!" In the traditional Aggie seal of

approval, the crowd responds with a resounding “whoop!” Each yell is then initiated by a particular hand signal—called a “pass-back”—and then performed through chanted words, specific movements, and precise sound effects, which can leave outsiders, like this reporter for ESPN, feeling disoriented and bewildered:

You haven't felt alone—truly alone—until you've stood in a stadium with 20,000 people, every single one of whom is bent over, flashing hand-signals, and roaring about fighting farmers, while you're standing upright with a notebook in your hand. It's like going to church for the first time in six years and having no idea what's going on, while the entire congregation knows what to say and when to say it. You're clearly the guy who doesn't go to church. In this case, you're clearly the guy who isn't an Aggie. (Drehs, 2003)

In contrast to that of the game itself, the atmosphere at Midnight Yell is decidedly carefree, raucous, and chaotic. In fact, yell practice resembles a carnival as much as it does a serious exercise of convention. Students frequently and intentionally break the rules of various rituals,<sup>2</sup> shout additions to the yells, carry signs that state their need for a date, and attend in costume (with or without the excuse of Halloween). As Rappaport (1979) suggests, ritualized orders can actually be “vitalized or invigorated by confrontations with their anti-order” (p. 214), which could certainly apply to the distinctly *disorderly* behavior that frequently characterizes Midnight Yell. Turner (1974) offers a slightly different perspective, suggesting that humans use symbols “not only to give order to the universe they inhabit, but creatively to make use also of disorder” (p.

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<sup>2</sup> In Aggieland, this is referred to as “pulling out.”

23). For him, ludic chaos is not only intentional but also highly structured, dynamically reinvigorating the symbols that it breaks. From the perspective of either scholar, Midnight Yell serves to jubilantly and playfully reinforce Texas A&M's cultural norms and symbols.

This ebullience sets the tone for the next day's game, although the latter commands a great deal more seriousness and intensity than did the events of the night before. At the game itself, yelling in unison is no longer a moment of choice and levity but rather an earnest responsibility bestowed upon the Twelfth Man, a term used to define students' commitment to "stand during the entire game to show their support...[and willingness] to be called upon if they are needed" (Traditions Council, 2002b, para. 2).<sup>3</sup> Outside of the safely insouciant confines of Midnight Yell, students no longer see themselves as spectators at a parade but rather as participants in a drama of good versus evil—us versus them—on which the viability and validity of the Aggie Spirit hangs. Aggies pride themselves on providing their team with the greatest "homefield advantage" in college football, which Schwartz and Barsky (1977) call "a distinctly instrumental element: insofar as audience support enhances the performance of a team, that audience may be said to have participated in the game itself" (p. 658). Because of the real and effective role students believe themselves to play, "it's always awful when you lose," said one male student. "It's like you failed at being an Aggie or something." And so, students participate in the rituals at football games with a sincerity

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<sup>3</sup> In a 1922 football game against Centre College (then ranked first in the nation), E. King Gill was called out of the stands by Coach Dana Bible, who was desperate for extra players. Gill never played but stood ready at the sidelines the entire game, quickly becoming a symbol of sacrifice and commitment. This act gave rise to the tradition of the Twelfth Man.



that is pleasantly festive but fully serious; to disengage from the gravity of the moment would be a rejection of the responsibility of the Twelfth Man and the potency of the Aggie Spirit.

The precise choreography of both Midnight Yell and the various football rituals exemplifies the highly structured nature of A&M's ritual performances, the "formal acts and utterances that are not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport, 1999, p. 24). But more important than their structure, these two ritual systems allow students "to participate in—that is, to become part of—something larger than what is ordinarily experienced as the self" (Rappaport, 1979, p. 213). Durkheim describes this phenomenon as "effervescence," "a sort of electricity" (1995/1912, p. 217) generated by the sheer act of coming together as a group. That is, students experience an elevated level of excitement and enthusiasm at both Midnight Yell and football games simply due to the fact that they are moving and acting together, a sensory experience predicated on the feeling of being packed shoulder to shoulder, on the empowering sound of one's own voice being lost in the crowd's, and on the images of self reflected in the 3,954-foot video board that consumes the south end of Kyle Field. In addition, the student body senses its own intensity by looking across the field at the faces in the former student section on the other side. Since the stands at Kyle Field (which can accommodate nearly 83,000 people) are arranged in a horseshoe shape:

...the crowd is seated opposite itself...They are seated some distance away from him, so that the differing details which make individuals of them are blurred; they all look alike and they all behave in a similar manner and he notices in them

only the things which he himself is full of. Their visible excitement increases his own. (Canetti, 1962, p. 28)

Turner (1974) extends this concept of effervescence through his discussion of “spontaneous communitas,” a “direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities” (p. 51). Spontaneous communitas exists in moments that transcend both effervescence and the convention of normal social interaction, as when the Aggies score and two strangers exchange an exuberant high-five. Taken together, effervescence and communitas help explain the religious intensity of the ritual experience—and thus, the religious earnestness with which Aggies commit themselves to tradition—because they are experienced by the student body as a palpable force. Eliade (1957) calls this a moment of “hierophany,” when some sacred power reveals itself. And according to Durkheim (1912/1995), as students recognize this power, the emotions they experience under its influence become attached to certain external symbols—the yell leaders, the band, the mascot, etc.—that come to form the physical topography of the Aggie Spirit and to induce something like religious devotion from the student body.

Aggies have been called religious—even “cultlike and crazy” (Hallett, 2006)—on more than one occasion, and their zealous dedication to football traditions does little to contradict that impression. One current professor suggests that Texas A&M’s traditions “hold sway over students and alumni with a strength that seems almost mystical at times” (Miller, 2002, p. 573), and Cook (1983) explicitly recognizes “the strong religious element in Aggie ritual” (p. 5). This element is manifested in Adams’s history of Texas A&M’s Association of Former Students (1979), in which he includes

this quote: “If you ever visit the Khairathabad Mosque in Hyderabad, India...you may hear the soft chant of a mysterious prayer from the Himalayas: ‘Hullabaloo kaneck, kaneck,’<sup>4</sup> because an Aggie, Mohammed Haq lives there” (p. 4). The religious nature of rituals in Aggieland is a phenomenon that defies description while simultaneously demanding it, and few have provided a better framework for understanding Texas A&M’s religious dimension than Durkheim, Turner, and Goffman.

### *The Aggie Religion*

A shared religious history, as Robert Bellah (1970) suggests, can allow for the development of certain “common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of [community members] share” (p. 42). At Texas A&M, those common elements invite the suggestion that Texas A&M is, in fact, at the center of a sincere and earnest religion. Sacred texts, such as the Aggie honor code, draw from Protestant mores, and historical figures, like James Earl Rudder<sup>5</sup> and E. King Gill,<sup>6</sup> have been sanctified and idolized in various campus statues, buildings, and myths. The yell leaders might as well be priests, interceding on behalf of the student body to access the Holy Spirit of Aggieland, and Big Event exemplifies Aggies’ belief in their obligation to give back to the community.<sup>7</sup> Of course, at the literal center of it all, Lawrence Sullivan Ross stands watch in the middle of Academic Plaza, accepting offerings from the needy in

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<sup>4</sup> “Hullabaloo, caneck, caneck” is the opening line of the Aggie War Hymn.

<sup>5</sup> Rudder became the third president of the Texas A&M University system in 1965 and is credited with making membership in the Corps optional and allowing women into the university.

<sup>6</sup> In a 1922 football game against Centre College (then ranked first in the nation), E. King Gill was called out of the stands by Coach Dana Bible, who was desperate for extra players. Gill never played but stood ready at the sidelines the entire game, quickly becoming a symbol of sacrifice and commitment. This act gave rise to the tradition of the Twelfth Man.

exchange for good fortune and blessings. These rituals—and myriad others—have become a part of life for many in Aggieland. They are performed and experienced by thousands of people—on a daily basis—with religious ardor, reverent gravity, and evangelical zeal.

Yet noting superficial commonalities between Texas A&M and traditional religions actually obscures the complexity of the religious forces at play. A more useful lens is Durkheim’s definition of religion (1995/1912), “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (p. 44). That A&M boasts a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” is readily apparent in the concept of the Aggie Spirit, a system of agreed-upon values (beliefs) manifested in rituals (practices) that allow participants to discern “the good from the bad” (Cook, 1983, p. 3) (things set apart and forbidden). These beliefs (the values of the Aggie Spirit) and practices (traditions) unite into one single moral community called the Church (the Aggie Family),<sup>8</sup> all those who adhere to them. Interestingly, Aggie alumni are called “former students”—never “ex-students”—to reflect the idea that the bond forged between Texas A&M and its students is never broken. This establishes the integrity of the one Church by uniting, in the language of religion, the living saints (current students) and the dead (former students).

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<sup>7</sup> According to its web site, Big Event is “the largest, one-day, student-run service project in the nation where students of Texas A&M University come together to say ‘thank you’ to the residents of Bryan and College Station.”

<sup>8</sup> The concept of the “Aggie family” is one of the most well-recognized and frequently-quoted metaphors used to describe group membership. It was cited at least once by every student interviewed.

Yet despite the fact that Durkheim's definition of religion maps easily onto the Aggie experience, that experience stops short of religion in a number of important ways. The most obvious—and incisive—critique of a comparison between Texas A&M and traditional religions centers on the fact that even the Aggie Spirit, A&M's most sacred and unifying concept, does not offer what Durkheim calls a "cosmology" that can organize the whole sacred world. It does not deal with the soul, with gods, with cosmic eternities or the nature of humanity in the same way that other religions do, and while some may stretch the Spirit to its conceptual limit, making claims that "all Aggies go to heaven" (seen on a bumper sticker) or that "being an Aggie is a lifelong experience" (Adams, 1979, p. 3), it fails to encompass, with real seriousness, an existence "of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world" (Eliade, 1952/1957, p. 11). In the end, despite its "hallowed place in the heart of every man [or woman] so fortunate" (Adams, 1979, p. 4), Texas A&M is an institution of higher education; that is all.

And yet, that is not all. "It's crazy," said one senior female, "but I just love this place. I *love* it. It's so much more than a degree or a college. I guess it's just an experience that you can't really describe, but that you will always remember. I just know that it's not like any other place, and I love it." Because this student had never attended another college, her statement amounts to a profession of faith in the singularity and superiority of Texas A&M, which another senior echoed by saying, "I mean, I'm an *Aggie*. That *means* something. It's not like at other schools, where you get your degree and move on. Why do we have the most active [Alumni] Association in the country?"

Why do we have more traditions and more people [participating in them] than other schools? It's because we're different." These claims of singularity might be suspect—based as they are on conviction rather than evidence—were it not for the confirmation of those both inside *and outside* the university, as exemplified by Burka (1997) in *Texas Monthly*:

Outsiders have always had a hard time understanding Aggies, and I confess to faring no better. As an undergraduate at Rice University, I would occasionally go to College Station to watch athletic events, and I always had the uncomfortable feeling of entering a Third World country. The yells, the gestures, the conversation, even the fierce and close-cropped look of the students...were the rituals of a primitive tribe...How could anyone revere such a place? Aggies, I thought, were people who believed everyone was out of step but themselves. This view crumbled when I entered the post-collegiate world and met A&M graduates I came to like and admire. (para. 8)

Even Texas A&M's oldest rival, the University of Texas, recognized the school's singular temperament in the wake of the Bonfire tragedy.<sup>9</sup> Then-student body president Eric Opiela visited the A&M campus in order to attend the Bonfire memorial ceremony and subsequently wrote the following:

I looked over my shoulder and saw the sight of close to 20,000 students spontaneously putting their arms on their neighbor's shoulders, forming a great circle around the arena. The mass stood there in a pin-drop silence for close to

five minutes, then, from somewhere, someone began to hum quietly the hymn “Amazing Grace.” Within seconds, the whole arena was singing. I tried too—I choked, I cried... For all us Longhorns discount A&M in our never-ending rivalry, we need to realize one thing. Aggieland is a special place, with special people. It is infinitely better equipped than us at dealing with a tragedy such as this for one simple reason. It is a family. It is a family that cares for its own, a family that reaches out, a family that is unified in the face of adversity; a family that moved this Longhorn to tears. (Miller, 2002, p. 574)

Whatever their conceptual shortcomings in the realm of the sacred, the Aggie Spirit and the traditions that give it life transcend even some of the most profound religious experiences. In fact, if the Aggie Family could be properly called a Church, it would doubtless be considered one of the most dynamic based on the sacrificial devotion and zealous participation of its members. That A&M is such a unique institution speaks to the considerable power of effervescence and *communitas*—or more broadly, to the integrative power of ritual.

And yet, if the student body is so well integrated and so consistently enthusiastic about participating in the profundity of ritual, why should the administration’s diversity initiatives engender such hostility? Why might students respond negatively to efforts so seemingly compatible with the values of the Aggie Spirit? To answer these questions, I turn once more to Turner, along with Goffman and Rothenbuhler.

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<sup>9</sup> Every football season before playing the University of Texas, A&M students built a large, multi-tiered bonfire to symbolize their “burning desire to beat the hell outta t.u.” In 1999, the stack collapsed while students were working on it, resulting in the deaths of twelve Aggies.

*Negotiating the Liminal*

College is a liminal space, embodying a “rite of transition” (van Gennep, 1909/1960, p. 11) in which students move through a series of tests (quite literally) in order to prove their competency in a particular skill or discipline. From its inception as an all-male military institution, Texas A&M accepted this challenge boldly, “promis[ing] to turn young males into men” (Smith, 2007, p. 190) who could then participate in the “new cause of technical education” (Ousley, 1935, p. 13): rebuilding the economic and social structures that had collapsed in the wake of the Civil War. Elements of this perspective are echoed in one of the university’s recent marketing campaigns, which encourages students to find “their story.” The video clip, which has been shown at several of the recent football games, spotlights the stories students create as they move through the college experience. The strong narrative element of the campaign implies a beginning and an end to one’s passage, a clearly defined journey resembling that which, over a century ago, those boys must have taken as the college transformed them into men. The difference is that the modern conception of college as an odyssey places the *student* (not the university) at the helm, which is reflected in both this video clip and the responsibility students tend to take for their own experiences. “I grew up here,” says one recent graduate. “I got to figure out things for myself, which was scary, but I needed to do it so I could figure out what I was doing and where I was going.” Another student—a freshman—describes his experience as an exploration of “whatever it is I’m going to be in four years. I guess that’s my call, right?”



Thus, college is a rite of transition bracketed by a rite of separation (when the family drives away in the minivan) and a rite of incorporation (the aptly named commencement ceremonies) (van Gennep, 1909/1960). Following Turner (1974), then, the college experience is “in principal a free and experimental region of culture” (p. 28), the realm of the “anti-structure” where norms are replaced by the potential to play with reality itself. This results in the “analysis of culture into factors and their free or ‘ludic’ recombination in any and every possible pattern” (*Ibid.*), a process that unfolds differently in modern, industrialized societies—in which work and leisure are sharply differentiated—than it does in tribal ones. Turner argues that the liminal spaces of modernity (an American university being an obvious example) are rather more *liminoid*, meaning that participation in the symbolic play afforded by the transitional space is more volitional, complex, critical, and potentially dangerous than it is in the truly liminal spaces of tribal societies (pp. 40-41). Free of structure and norms, the potential in a liminoid space does not preclude subversion—or even revolution.

Applying Turner’s theory of the liminoid to the context of Texas A&M creates a slight but serious disconnect. Certainly, students at A&M view themselves as squarely in the anti-structure of the transitional stage. “What’s my favorite thing about college?” says one freshman student. “Oh my gosh, it’s definitely that my parents aren’t here with me. I love them and all, but I just needed to have my own *space* for a change.” Another refers to her experience as “the chance for independence,” and one young man exclaims that “I just didn’t want people telling me what to do anymore! I do what I want now...eat what I want, sleep when I want...which isn’t crazy or anything, but it’s nice.”

However, whatever their claims about freedom and independence, college students are actually subject to some of the most bureaucratized organizations with which they will ever come in contact: universities. In these institutions, deadlines abound, degree plans are inflexible, paperwork is ubiquitous, syllabi are seen as contractual agreements, schedules are set months in advance, membership is contingent upon forms and qualifications specified by the organization, and even the bagels in the campus cafeteria are selected by committee. The anti-structure is, in fact, populated by an elaborate, well-articulated structure not terribly far from what Goffman (1961) calls a “total institution.” However, as suggested above, students still describe college life in terms of choice, freedom, and independence, which indicates that structure in the liminoid is still *experienced* as anti-structure. And because experience, not reality, is the reality of the liminoid (since it occurs specifically *between* structures and since those structures are reduced to separable and recombinable units of culture), then anti-structure it is.

As students explore the liminoid, they begin to apply its potential to their own identities, which often initially falter—or even collapse—without the social and symbolic networks of home and high school. “When I came to college, I didn’t really know who I was,” says one sophomore, and a junior suggests that “I was just lost, I think. I had to start thinking about who I wanted to be and making things happen so I could achieve it.” These statements reflect an important element of life in the liminoid. For many students, myself included, coming to college was not just about earning a degree but about finding and forming a social and intellectual identity. The process, then, is not just a recombination of cultural units, as Turner suggests, but the

*incorporation* of those units *into the self*. And because Texas A&M offers a number of readily available, vividly experienced, and sacredly defined cultural units—in part due to that well-articulated structure that has allowed cultural memory to accumulate beyond the four-year life cycle of the typical student body—those units are incorporated readily, but *willingly and self-reflexively*, into the self. Says one freshman student, “It’s cool because you get to *decide* who you are, you know?” The result of incorporation, then, is that students feel, in a very real sense, “that the college is in truth part of themselves” (Smith, 2007, p.187).

Layering this theory with the work of Durkheim (1912/1995), Goffman (1967) and Rothenbuhler (2005)—who all suggest that “the person is a sacred object” (Rothenbuhler, 2005, p. 92)—reveals at once the potential problem of diversity initiatives, made clear in this quotation from a graduating senior:

I remember when my freshman year, [then-President Dr. Robert] Gates announced that A&M as it was was not acceptable, period, because we weren’t diverse to the standards that he and his administration desired. That really bothered me. To say that A&M as an educational institution was not acceptable? I suppose, yeah, it hurts to hear that I’m unacceptable.

This student, upon hearing Texas A&M deemed “unacceptable,” interpreted that as a comment on his *own* personal acceptability, an experience he describes as painful. Thus, when the administration—or *any* body—makes claims that question the merit of Texas A&M or any of its central symbols, students may experience those claims as an attack on their own personal identities, tied up as they are with that of the university. While

change is useful, productive, and necessary, it will not penetrate and transform the culture of the students as long as those students have to defend the sacred symbols that conceived their sacred selves. Productive dialogues must also be *positive* dialogues, focused not on what is wrong with the way things are but on what is right with the way things ought to be.

But simply shifting discussions about diversity into a more positive tone does not ensure that the issue will cease to generate tension and resistance. Diversity is far too complex a concept—and the student body, far too complex a population—to assume that students, for all this time, have been responding negatively merely because their feelings have been hurt by language that alienates their social selves. In the section that follows, I attempt to move inside students' perspectives on the concept of diversity, drilling down to the layers of meaning that inform their attitudes, emotions, and behavior.

## CHAPTER IV

### DIVERSITY IN AGGIELAND

Institutions of higher education are charged with preparing young men and women to function in a complex world, one that is both shrinking and diversifying rapidly (Lucozzi, 1998). In order to accomplish this goal, universities must create an environment that embraces diversity (Rankin, 1998), yet the concept has come to mean a great deal more than simply increasing the presence of underrepresented groups on campus. While demographic statistics remain a significant concern for university administrators, the idea of *experiencing* diversity has worked its way into the academic dialogue—not merely monitoring the thread count, so to speak, but taking heed of the pattern. In this sense, institutions have begun to recognize the importance of “creating a shared community that maintains the integrity of difference” (Hirano-Nakanishi, 1994, p. 64), of negotiating what Mary Louise Pratt calls “the contact zone...social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (1991, p. 33). Pratt, along with many other scholars, identifies diversity as an experience through which students encounter unparalleled wonder and revelation, not to mention invaluable educational benefits (Pratt, 1991; Astin, 1993; Rudenstine, 1996; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Milem & Hakuta, 2000; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). These scholars, and many others, argue with compelling conviction that encounters in the contact zone benefit “individual students, institutions, and society at large” (Umbach & Kuh, 2006, p. 169).

In response to both these findings and the realities of an increasingly diverse population, American institutions have begun turning their gazes inward, holding their own populations and policies up against the emerging standards of diversity. According to a joint report from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-grant Colleges (NASULGC) (2005), change must come from within, and institutions are taking heed. However, although member schools (such as Texas A&M) have made significant strides in the area of diversity—most markedly in the enrollment and retention of underrepresented groups—much is left to accomplish. In fact, the AASCU and the NASULGC suggest that little else can be done without more *systemic* changes, which are invariably and understandably difficult to enact (*Ibid*). According to Rogers (2003), an organization’s members actively *resist* systemic changes, even when those changes are logically sound and have the potential to improve organizational life. Of course, the concept of diversity generates tension and conflict of its own accord, with or without the prospect of institutional change (Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998; Levine & Cureton, 1998). Given the inherently controversial nature of the topic and the resistance it can provoke by generating the impetus for change, diversity, it seems, is a perfect storm.

Over the past ten years, the concept has taken on new form, meaning, and import for the Fightin’ Texas Aggies. In 1997, then president of Texas A&M, Dr. Ray Bowen, announced the Vision 2020 project, a set of twelve initiatives through which the administration believed A&M could become one of the top ten public universities in the nation by the year 2020. One of those initiatives, titled “Diversify and Globalize the

A&M Community,” asserted A&M’s need to “attract and nurture a more ethnically, culturally, and geographically diverse faculty, staff, and student body” (Texas A&M University, 1999, p. 5). Five years later, Dr. Bowen’s resignation opened the door to Dr. Robert Gates, a man of vision and initiative who embraced Vision 2020 with vigor. Shortly after assuming the presidency in August of 2002, Dr. Gates announced to Texas A&M’s Faculty Senate that he would focus on three key Vision 2020 initiatives: elevating the faculty, strengthening graduate programs, and diversifying the A&M community (Texas A&M University, Office of University Relations, 2002). Under Dr. Gates’s leadership, the university’s efforts to increase diversity became meticulously defined and highly visible, as evidenced by this statement from the university’s “Campus Diversity Plan”:

A commitment to diversity means a commitment to the inclusion, welcome, and support of individuals from all groups, encompassing the various characteristics of persons in our community. Among these characteristics are race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, age, socioeconomic background, religion, sexual orientation, and disability...Our vision of diversity as a wellspring of academic energy goes beyond race and ethnicity to all manner of thought and action. An educated person must appreciate and interact with people of all backgrounds and engage ideas that challenge his or her views. (Texas A&M University, Office of the Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity, 2002)

The administration’s earnestness was confirmed by immediate action, which included the expansion of mentorship and retention programs, increased recruitment of

underrepresented groups, and a greater focus on diversity education. “We have talked the talk about diversity,” said Dr. Gates, “but we haven’t walked the walk. It won’t happen just because we will it” (*Ibid*). Although Dr. Gates left A&M in December of 2006 to serve as the United States Secretary of Defense, his vision remains. In fact, the search committee that was charged with finding a new leader for Texas A&M paid Dr. Gates homage—implicitly—on its web site, which included a list of qualities that nominees for the position must possess. Next to the last bullet at the bottom of the page, a brief statement placed a telling and familiar demand on any potential candidate; “be a model of diversity that ‘walks the talk’” (Texas A&M University, Presidential Search Advisory Committee, 2007b).

There is ample evidence that the university’s diversity efforts are bearing fruit. In fall of 2007, minorities made up 22% of the undergraduate student population, marking a 23% increase since the fall of 1999 (Texas A&M University, Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, 2007a). In addition, Texas A&M ranks among the top universities in the nation for the retention and graduation of minority student groups and the enrollment of international students. Perhaps more significantly, a 2004 study sponsored by the university found that 99% of Non-White students reported being “glad” to attend Texas A&M (Texas A&M University, 2004), a sentiment echoed in several of the interviews I conducted with international and minority students. One student from Hong Kong described A&M culture as being “really accepting,” and a student from the Philippines stated that “actually, [the school’s] diversity is why I came here.” Another student even suggested that her home country could benefit by following



A&M's example; "one good point that I think [Texas A&M] has is the diversity—one thing that you don't usually find so often in Brazil, for example... We don't have many international students in our universities—things that we can find here, different cultures, different religions...*everything* is different."

Yet despite the improvements fostered by Dr. Gates and hundreds of other members of the faculty, staff, administration, and student body, diversity issues continue to plague this university. "The one flaw I can point out about A&M," said one student who was interviewed for *The Princeton Review* in 2002, "is that people of minorities, whether a religious minority, a racial minority, or a minority based on sexual orientation, are not necessarily encouraged to come here by what they see" (Franek, p. 505). Indeed, a reporter for ABC News called racism at Texas A&M "[Dr.] Gates' unfinished business" (Walter, 2006), and one reader who responded to the article cited the source of the problem as the "racism and bigotry" (*Ibid.*) that exist on the A&M campus. These stigmas—of racism, prejudice, and intolerance—sully A&M's public image and hinder minority recruitment, which places the administration's goals even further out of reach. As one current student, a young man from Nigeria, put it, "Before I came here, I heard of A&M as being this very bad place for me, and that's because of the atmosphere." It seems that even adamant determination, extraordinary exertion, and marked improvement have not rewarded A&M with a chance to revise its reputation; the press and the public still associate the university with a lack of diversity, a propensity for prejudice, and a culture of intolerance.

Of course, these perceptions are not built on old problems and new rumors alone. Frequently—and unfortunately—A&M earns its troubling reputation. In the past few years, there have been continued reports of racism and intolerance, repeated acts of violence against international students, and an incident involving a racially offensive video that was posted to a public web site, all of which confirm for many that the university is not doing enough to create a culture of acceptance. In fact, in the 2004 study of Texas A&M's campus climate, nearly half of Non-White students interviewed “agreed that racism was a problem at A&M” (Texas A&M University, 2004, p. 3). At no point in the recent past has there been such gnawing uncertainty about the university's ability to achieve its own aims or define its own future. With goals so far from realization and anxiety so close to the surface, it is little wonder that discussions of diversity at Texas A&M are often hushed and heated.

Of course, diversity does not live in the realm of statistics, initiatives, and perception but rather in real interactions between real students. Those interactions inform students' perceptions of other cultures, religions, and lifestyles, which in turn guide their behavior in subsequent interactions. Experience informs understanding, understanding mediates experience, and the cycle continues. Thus, in order to understand the broader picture of diversity—as the academic concept described above that is debated in classrooms, photographed for brochures, lauded in speeches, and printed on T-shirts—one first has to understand the individual pixels that compose it. As such, in interviews with students, I focused in particular on drawing out their

understandings of and experiences with diversity by asking two key questions: 1) what are some experiences you have had with diversity, and 2) how do you define diversity?

Over the course of the interviews, a trend began to emerge among students' responses. When asked to describe their experiences with diversity, very few students answered immediately, and most responded with a blank stare or a confused expression. Only after I asked the second question—how do you define diversity—and then prompted them once more to describe their experiences could they think of anecdotes or insights to share. While it may have been prudent to reverse the order of the questions, which I did during the last several interviews, the fact that students so consistently struggled with the first question makes an important statement about the concept of diversity. Although asking students to describe their experiences with diversity produced rich and varied narratives, those narratives could only be accessed *once the students had defined diversity*. This suggests that “diversity” is not a readymade, clearly defined mental construct, such as “minority,” “tolerance,” or “stereotype” might be. (When I asked students to describe their experiences with stereotypes, for example, as I did in a number of interviews, their responses were immediate and specific.) In order for students to see diversity in their real, daily lives, they first had to turn diversity into a definite category—to reestablish the practical perimeter that has been blurred by the concept's vague and frequent use in popular dialogue. As one student put it, “I don't really know why we talk about diversity so much. To me it's just like, ‘Hey, I'm white, you're black, and we're friends.’” Although this student very clearly described a real experience with diversity (an interracial friendship), he failed to see the concept's real

pertinence. It seems that diversity has lived so long in the world of theory and ceremony that it may have lost some of its functional relevance—a tiger turned housecat.

Therefore, understanding the ways in which students define—and thus reify—diversity became of primary importance in my analysis of diversity at Texas A&M. In the sections that follow, I situate the data within four categories, the four definitions of diversity that emerged most frequently and prominently over the course of my interviews: diversity as dialogue, diversity as choice, diversity as race, and diversity as “a good thing.”

### *Diversity as Dialogue*

A close friend of mine was recently debating whether or not to stay in a long-term relationship that he had been unhappy with for some time. In discussing the situation, I asked him to explain his most serious concern. “Well,” he said, “this is what it comes down to. She and I are basically the same person. What are we going to talk about for the rest of our lives? How much we both like ham?” His comment underscores a fundamental element of dialogue—that it is precipitated by differences between people. For the students who participated in this study, those differences and the dialogues they generate are the central feature of living in a diverse society.

Taking into account all twenty definitions of diversity provided by all twenty students over the course of this project, only one word appears in all twenty responses: “different.” Across the board, students recognized difference as the fundamental feature of diversity, and most offered a list of characteristics that contribute to the experience of difference between people and groups. “[It’s a] difference in culture—like basic

concepts of how the world is viewed,” said one student, and another described diversity as a product of a “different culture, different race, different background, different personality.” Other characteristics mentioned include religion, language, customs, sexual orientation, life experiences, political affiliation, country or state of origin, and level of ability or disability, and most students provided at least one example of diversity at play on the A&M campus. “Most people I knew were in the honors dorm where you have [both] atheists and devout Christians,” said one student, who went on to describe the range of religious and political sentiments that produced rich discussions in that particular on-campus community. Another student, who was in charge of organizing a variety show on behalf of one of the cultural organizations on campus, stated that “our talent show...is to showcase diversity at Texas A&M, so we’re bringing in hip-hop dancing, our [own] cultural performance, a comedian, ballet, dancers...all sorts of things.” Other students described a variety of experiences, including establishing friendships with people from Iran, participating in panel discussions on living with disabilities, playing soccer with students from Africa, tearing up over spicy Korean food, discussing politics with friends from New York, listening to hip hop music for the first time, and sharing an office with students from four different continents and six different countries. In describing each encounter, students implicitly and explicitly reinforced the idea that diversity lives in difference, in the ideological spaces that divide one person from another. As one student put it, “diversity...is about what people *don’t* have in common.”

For some, the differences that define diversity open the door to a variety of tensions. According to one student, “diversity, at a certain point, ceases to be something that brings people together,” and one student admitted that differences between groups of people made him “a little bit fearful of diversity.” While no one expressed outright hostility toward the idea of living in a diverse community, some, like this student, described experiences with other cultures that produced a certain level of uncertainty and discomfort:

I haven't had a lot of in-depth interactions with my neighbors, sad to say, but I live in a mostly Muslim apartment complex...I think most of them are Indian [sic]. There have been a lot of cricket games at the apartment, but I've never gone out and played. I guess, personally, diversity actually makes me a little uncomfortable. Unfamiliarity makes things uncomfortable sometimes. I haven't really gone out there and *asked* to play. I didn't know how welcome I would be. None of them have been anything but kind to me, and I'd like to think that I've been the same, but it's almost like a different world...It's intimidating at times.

Like this student, several others were frank about the fact that diversity can be overwhelming, particularly when the experience of difference is layered with the experience of isolation. “For the first time, I'll always be like the only diverse [person] in class or whatever, so I guess sometimes I do feel singled out,” said one student from Hong Kong, and two others described experiencing similar emotions in similar situations. Bennett (2007) suggests that “students who have lived as part of a majority for their entire life may find it frightening to be asked to visit a place where they will be

in the minority” (p. 26), which I personally experienced while conducting a research project with African international students. As part of the project, my research partner and I (both Caucasian females) attended general meetings held by the Texas A&M African Student Association. Due to a scheduling conflict, one of the meetings had to be moved from its usual location into a much smaller room, one that was paneled on all four walls with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. My partner and I sat toward the back, and as the meeting began, the person sitting in front of me reached down to grab a pen. For a split second, I was confronted with an unobstructed view of the mirror in front of me—my own face, a foreigner. The moment was startling enough that in the margin of my notes, I wrote, “I’m white,” and for the first time, felt like I knew what that meant. Diversity is much less formidable a creature from the safety of the majority.

Given no less than the entire course of human history, it is little wonder that diversity can lead to awkward, startling, or distressing situations. As Pratt states, cultures “*meet, clash, and grapple* with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power,” (1991, p. 33, emphasis added) in social spaces like the modern American university. Yet over the course of my interviews, students did not focus on the politics of difference or even diversity’s divisive potential. In fact, more than anything else, they described the concept as a conversation between cultures—an invitation not to tension but to dialogue. According to one student, “diversity is many people coming together...and being able to sit in the same room with someone with different religious beliefs or sexual habits, being able to sit in a room with them and feel comfortable—bounce back ideas, have a civilized conversation.” Other students used

the terms “education,” “learning,” “discussion,” and “debate” to describe the ideal development of diversity, and one student insisted that “that’s where a lot of diversity *comes* from is bringing those values that drive our decisions out into the open.”

For some students, exchanging ideas and information with other people resulted in an increased sense of identification with different cultures and worldviews. Said one Nigerian student, “I can hang with my white folks, I can hang with my African Americans, I can hang with my Asians...I would say I’m very diverse now.” Yet even when students described exchanges that did not result in greater identification, they still saw the *process* of exchange as productive and rewarding, as in this narrative told by a Caucasian student who befriended a foreign exchange student:

I learned like, Korean food versus American food. I tried *kimchi*...a wet cabbage rolled in crushed red pepper and left to ferment for days. So it’s dried out...and then when it touches your tongue, it’s crazy. I felt bad about not being able to finish that, and I told [my friend] I just couldn’t do it. But actually, the next week it was kind of funny; we went to [eat] on campus...and he had a bag of potato chips, and he ate a few of them...and gave me this look like, “I can’t finish them. It’s too salty; I can’t eat more than about four or five chips.” It’s just a difference in cultures. They can handle a lot of pepper, but we can handle a lot of salt.

The student goes on to describe how interacting with the young man from Korea “helped me understand just the way they approach [things],” even though he also suggested that he never fully grasped the complexity of Korean culture. Again, we see that these



students understand diversity not as an ideal and distant endgame but rather as a constant process of mutual cultural exchange, which, for the Brazilian woman who shared an office with students from six different countries, was the highlight of her experience at Texas A&M; “sometimes during our office hours, we are just kind of talking about religion, for example, talking about soccer...this kind of stuff I *really* love.” Across the board, students described diversity as a richly complex, mutually rewarding, and constantly changing dialogue between different people and groups. “It’s...a process,” said one student, “[of] people getting to know more about other people.”

When Flora Davis compared the United States to a giant salad bowl in 1991, she brought into sharp focus the shortcomings of the traditional melting pot analogy. The latter implies that the diverse cultures at play within the United States are thrown together, cooked down, and served up as one homogenous, collective entity. Davis reframes the metaphor to underscore the country’s decided *lack* of homogeneity, as her analogy reflects the notion that America’s myriad cultures maintain their distinctiveness and integrity, even as they participate in constituting a collective culture. While the salad bowl metaphor—much like the popular stew, orchestra, and mosaic metaphors—is frequently criticized as being too ambiguous, static, and naive, the model can still be powerfully applied to a variety of contexts, including Texas A&M given students’ focus on experiencing differences without nullifying them. In interview after interview, students listed characteristics that created distance—even tension—between themselves and others, yet across the board that distance was portrayed as an opportunity to taste and savor the experience of difference. From this perspective, diversity is not a problem

to solve but rather a cause to celebrate, and the concept is beautifully exemplified in Texas A&M's annual international variety show. During the grand finale of this year's show, the curtains opened on an empty stage as the emcees of the evening began calling roll. Sri Lanka. Colombia. Africa. Iran. Each name was greeted by a roar from the audience and a troop of performers, who emerged from the wings carrying the flags of their respective nations. When the list and the show came to an end, the performers lifted the flags over their heads, creating one giant, patchwork banner that covered the entire stage. As I exited the theater with a small group of friends, I overheard two women in front of me discussing the performances of the evening. "You know," said one, pausing before she continued, "I feel more...*beautiful* just for having *been* here."

If diversity lives in the spaces between people, then no single person can experience diversity of his or her own accord. Diversity only *happens* when we interact with people, who are first "others" against which we compare ourselves and second, foils through which we discover more about who we are not—and thus, more about who we are. From birth, I know only my reality—my needs, my thoughts, my family, my toys—until I perceive that my sister walks differently than I do or meet the boy down the street who has two dads and a unicycle. Only through the experience of contrast do I understand what it means to say that these legs, these parents, these Legos, are mine. Although our comparisons become ever more refined and the realizations about ourselves ever more complex, the process remains the same. The concept of diversity *only enters reality* when, through either language or experience, we see the contrasts

between ourselves and others and then participate in recognizing those contrasts. Thus, diversity is dialogue, the conversations we share in the margins outside of ourselves.

That the students who participated in this project tend to view diversity through this lens more frequently than any other provides two important insights into the way they understand the concept. First of all, they do not see diversity as an opportunity to identify completely with someone different from themselves. Dialogue breaks down if the parties involved do not maintain their own integrity and distinctiveness. Second, the tension inherent in recognizing the differences that divide us can be productively and rewardingly managed through mutual exchanges that reduce uncertainty and enhance understanding, even if those exchanges initially create discomfort. While the practical implications of these insights will be discussed in a later section, one student made a particularly emphatic comment while describing his own plans for generating diversity dialogues at Texas A&M; “I enjoy learning about other cultures a *lot*, and I’m not just saying that because you’re taping this. I really do.”

### *Diversity as Choice*

On November 6, 2006, the Texas A&M University administration became aware of an offensive video that had been posted to a public web site. The video, ostensibly created by three Texas A&M students, showed a young Caucasian male painted with black shoe polish acting as a “slave” while being whipped and physically abused by another Caucasian male, the “master.” Within hours of discovering the video, which had been posted to YouTube by one of the students involved, the administration contacted the site’s web host demanding that the video be removed. Before YouTube could

comply, however, the video was deleted by the same student who had posted it, presumably after he recognized the signs of a brewing maelstrom. But it was too late, and the situation quickly ballooned into a national spectacle.

The video surfaced just as President Bush announced his intention to replace U. S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld with Dr. Robert Gates, then president of Texas A&M. Prompted by the Democrats' decisive victory in the midterm elections, the move put both Dr. Gates and Texas A&M at the center of a media frenzy just as public outrage over the video began gathering steam. News of the video and A&M's problems with racism became fodder for all manner of media, including ABC, CBS, Fox, NPR, U. S. News and World Report, myriad local and college newspapers, and a number of popular blogs. One article published by ABC News even cited the video as "an example...of the unfinished business Gates will leave behind at Texas A&M: ending racial hostility on campus" (Walter, 2006). Through an unfortunate coincidence of timing, what might have remained a local issue became evidence in a national trial of character.

On November 7, 2006—just one day after the video had been brought to the administration's attention—Dr. Gates sent a strongly-worded email to all current students, staff members, and administrators expressing his outrage, embarrassment, and regret. "I am extremely disappointed by [the creators'] behavior," he said, "but even more saddened by the hurt this might bring to many members of our campus and extended communities" (Gates, 2006). He proceeded to invite students, faculty, and staff to a community forum, an event hosted by the university to provide members of the

A&M community with “an opportunity to express their opinions about how the university moves forward and overcomes this disgraceful episode” (*Ibid.*). Held that same evening in Texas A&M’s Rudder Tower, the forum marked the beginning of a discussion that would last with unmitigated intensity for several weeks, eventually including a Rally Against Racism, a Petition for Change, a fierce debate between contributors to the student newspaper, and myriad meetings by various groups within the student body and administration. Immediately after appearing at the White House, Dr. Gates returned to College Station to continue dealing with the video’s aftermath. Despite their protests that it was an attempt to satirize—and thus bring to the fore—Texas A&M’s problems with racism, the students responsible for creating the video were immediately expelled.

One of the most remarkable—and commendable—elements of this unfortunate incident was the speed and fervor with which both the administration and the student body responded. Within the span of a single day, the students involved were disciplined, a mass email was sent, a forum was held, a petition was started, and a rally convened. While the promptness and intensity of the response did not quell public concern or media interest, it left little doubt about the university’s resolve to deal with and eliminate the specter of racism on the Texas A&M campus. With decisive finality, the administration and the student body condemned both the video and the bigotry it represented.

At Texas A&M, no form of discrimination meets with such vigorous opposition as racism. While no campus can claim to have eradicated all racist people and all racist

perspectives, Texas A&M has at least demonstrated its resolve to respond with such fury and force that overt racism has been forced into the catacombs more completely and conclusively than at any other time in the school's history.

Only one student who participated in this project described an instance of racially-motivated discrimination, and the incident was initiated off campus by people not associated with the university. However, as another student put it, "that doesn't mean that everything's puppies and sunshine around here." A surprising number of participants, like this Iranian doctoral student, described situations of not racial but religious intolerance:

I think, in my previous school, Prairie View [A&M] is mostly African American. When I got here, I was surprised to see like, a campus that's mostly white. But I think that the problem is going to solve over time. But one thing that is now mainstream I guess is the religious issues. For example, in Iran, the Christians are accepted. Christianity is an accepted religion. But here, when I talk to people, they don't accept Islam as a faith. They treat it as a fake religion. That's a little problem. Most of us here are not very religious, but I think this issue—when you tell someone they don't have a real religion—that's how they try to convert you. Especially after 9/11, we have become like a fake religion. So maybe some work is needed in that area. To make people aware that other religions—and not just Islam—are like, real. Respect other people's religions.

A different Muslim student expressed similar concerns over a lack of respect and boundaries, suggesting that "people come into our mosque and talk to children...I mean,

we don't mind if you visit, but we need to draw some lines." Several atheist students also reported feeling pressure from various religious groups, including one who described evangelical Christian denominations as "a little pressing." More than anything else, students communicated a sense of unease about the various religious tensions that seem to be invading the Texas A&M community relatively unnoticed.

Religious discord is not confined to interactions between students, as several interviewees also reported tense moments involving various members of the Texas A&M faculty. One young woman who identified herself as a Christian described participating in a class discussion during which students were asked to share something about their culture. In response to this prompt, the student shared her belief in various biblical teachings on family and marriage—"honor thy father and mother, charity, get along with family, marriage being between a man and a woman, you know." The next day, the student was contacted by her professor and informed that such "discrimination" was not welcome in the classroom:

She said, "you need to realize that that could have been offensive to other people in the classroom. You shouldn't have said that." I felt like I was being attacked. Even though my opinion is in the majority, I should be allowed to express it. I think [the situation] was handled very poorly, and from that point on, I didn't feel like I could add to the discussion.

Other students also described what they perceive to be "some professors' bias" against conservative religions in general and Christianity in particular, which I have both witnessed and experienced during my time as a graduate and undergraduate student at

Texas A&M. During one of my undergraduate classes, one young man asked a question from a Christian perspective that undermined the validity of the professor's argument. Seemingly angry, she responded with a severe rebuke and dismissed the question as "ridiculous." Similarly, in one of my graduate seminars, a debate between a student and professor over the nature of reality devolved into a heated theological argument that lasted for the majority of the class period and resulted in the professor—but not the student—shouting in anger. As part of the requirements for this same course, students were instructed to write and present a paper voicing "their opinions" on a number of topics, and my own response relied heavily on perspectives from biblical Christianity. My presentation of the paper during our final class meeting met with laughter. As one interviewee put it, "I know that there have been issues at A&M with professors being, like, left of center and the students being right of center," and those ideological differences are occasionally confirmed through tense exchanges and outright arguments. It seems that religious discord populates not only the Texas A&M community but also its classrooms.

Surprised by the prevalence of students' concerns about religion—and then concerned by my surprise—I began to look for other latent, subtle, or even playful manifestations of intolerance on the Texas A&M campus. From my own observations, the most obvious and ubiquitous of these are political, as exemplified in the popular local bumper sticker, "Keep College Station Normal." The phrase is common enough in Aggieland, appearing on a number of cars and T-shirts, and was created in response to the memorable "Keep Austin Weird" slogan that began cropping up about a decade ago



at A&M's rival school, the University of Texas. Aggies have always enjoyed decrying Austin in general and the University of Texas in particular as a haven for mohawks and hippies, just as Longhorns are happy to portray Aggies as rednecks with mullets. In a song entitled "Fightin' Texas Aggie," Texas A&M graduate and popular country music artist Robert Earl Keen describes this mutual antagonism through the eyes of an A&M student:

Well he picks up a *Battalion* / Just to see what's going on / But all he finds to  
read about / Is what we're doin' wrong. / "This school's too damn conservative!" /  
I guess they want us to be / Like all the hippies down in Austin / Wearin' orange  
and sippin' tea.

Yet beneath the surface of this spirited school rivalry is another layer, the assumption that being "normal" means being politically conservative. "[A&M]'s just a conservative place," said one student, and another suggested that "you just don't get as many liberals here as you do conservatives." For some, the idea is that "real Aggies"—"the good ol' boys"—vote Republican, and in fact, as one student put it, "Well, if you're gonna vote Democrat, you better give me some smart reasons why." It is little surprise that the 2008 *Princeton Review* ranked Texas A&M sixteenth in the category "Students Most Nostalgic for Ronald Reagan."

Of course, Texas A&M was a bastion of conservatism long before the present. "Born during radical Republican rule in Texas" (Dethloff, 1975, p. xii) and endowed with the responsibility of training young men in the agricultural and military sciences, the college quickly earned a reputation for being more socially and politically

conservative than most of its institutional peers. Joseph G. Rollins, Texas A&M class of 1938 and author of an anthology of Aggie anecdotes, returned to campus in 1970 at the behest of his publisher in order to give his reaction to “the present day A&M University” (Rollins, 1970, p. 93), which sheds some light on the political inclinations embraced by many Aggies who attended A&M during the school’s earliest decades:

These clean cut, courteous young men would have impressed me at *any* time, but under today’s circumstances, they presented a most refreshing contrast to the type frequently seen on other campuses around the country, the fuzzy-thinking cliché spouters with the manners of young shoats at feeding time and whose above-the-shoulder grooming follows that style once so popular in Galilee. (p. 100)

In addition to evaluating its student body, Rollins compiles a list of A&M’s shortcomings, one of which—the university’s lack of a drama program—he dismisses by stating that “frankly, a young man desiring thespian studies would perhaps feel more at home in Austin” (p. 97). And during his visit, Rollins reports being relieved to hear from then-president General Alvin Luedecke that “Texas A&M students don’t have to wear beards or riot to gain attention” (p. 102). Although the university has become decidedly more politically plural over the past several decades, it continues to privilege the “conservative norms and aspirations” (Smith, 2007, p. 197) of traditional Southern culture that helped to forge its philosophical foundations.

As with religion, politics can send members of the faculty and student body to opposite sides of a delicate line. One student reported that some student organizations,

such as the Young Conservatives of Texas, “keep an eye out on our liberal professors,” and another stated that most students perceive professors as having “a liberal bias.” Indeed, during my departmental training to become a teaching assistant, one doctoral student attempted to prepare the rest of the group to work with A&M students by saying, “the students are very, very conservative, but at least the faculty are not.” Later, during one of my graduate classes, a professor stated that of her department’s twenty-two faculty members, “I think there’s only one person who would vote Republican.” These ideological differences between members of the faculty and student body can be difficult to manage, as some students express frustration over “having to listen to liberal politics in class” while faculty members may become “impatient with the social and political conservatism of A&M and the surrounding community” (Cook, 1983, p. 9). Dr. Earl Cook, who joined the A&M faculty in 1965 and stayed for several decades as a professor and dean, identified with the distress of his fellow faculty members who felt:

culturally marooned; for whom the then-current expression ‘vast wasteland’ did not mean television as it did for others, but central Texas; who resented the blowing of a factory whistle to mark the campus work periods, the prayer that opened meetings of the misnamed Academic Council, and the so-called civilian dress code. (*Ibid.*, p. 3)

Differing social and political ideologies can be particularly difficult to navigate in an educational community, where even the most prevalent and accepted ideologies are not excused from scrutiny.

Among the students who discussed political affiliation as a characteristic of diversity, most, like this one, expressed a “live and let live” philosophy:

My best friend is a pretty staunch libertarian, but I feel that there are certain issues with that political philosophy. So we get into discussions about it sometimes, but we don’t come to blows over it. I’m not trying to convert him to some other non-libertarian way of life. I just say “oh, ok, well good luck with that.”

But for some, the prevalence of the conservative mindset at Texas A&M creates a sense of isolation. Said one student, “I’m more liberal, so I don’t know that I fit in here,” and another described the ways that he differed from the general A&M population by saying, “well, I’m a Democrat.” It seems that students who do not embrace a conservative worldview tend to see themselves at the margins of A&M culture, an idea that is reinforced in a variety of ways and contexts. For example, “hippie” is frequently used as a disparaging term at various A&M-sponsored activities, including Midnight Yell Practice, and at least one student organization on campus has had difficulty generating interest among the student body due to its perceived political affiliation. In a recent interview with *The Battalion*, the president of Texas A&M’s Environmental Issues Committee (EIC) reported facing serious obstacles due to the fact that, in her words, “we’ve been the hippies” (Deuterman, 2007, para. 2). In order to garner more interest and support from the student body, the EIC is trying to distance itself from perceptions of liberalism, avoiding terms such as “environmentalist,” “global warming,” and “green” in favor of more politically neutral language, such as “clean energy.” The organization

hopes to boost membership and expand its programs by severing political ties, which Deuteran fairly and frankly cites as the “defining factor for so many students” (Ibid., para. 5).

While most of the political commentary described above seems to be shared or displayed in the spirit of good fun and stops far short of outright discrimination, the fact remains that many students seem to be comfortable openly marginalizing differing political perspectives, just as many students seem to be comfortable aggressively evangelizing minority religious groups. One student, a married Caucasian female who converted from Christianity to Islam, shared a particularly revealing narrative that may shed some light on the forces responsible for this trend:

It’s not so much a problem with me and my husband being together, because we kind of match. (I mean, I’ve got the headscarf.) It’s the, “Oh, you converted? You mean, you weren’t born this way? You had a choice?” That’s where things start getting interesting. I think that people are happier assuming that I didn’t have a lot of choice, like, “I have a family who’s like this. You can’t blame me.” And I’m like, “No no no, I converted in 2000, I chose to wear a headscarf.” And then they’re kind of like, “Whoa, what’s wrong with you?”

Her statement introduces an important character in the drama of diversity: personal choice.

If we translate this woman’s experience into theoretical terms, then the characteristics that differentiate one person from another (units of diversity, so to speak) can be divided into two categories: those that allow a degree of choice and those that do

not. The former category includes such characteristics as religion, customs, political affiliation, and lifestyle choices, and the latter, race, sex, age, and disability. For example, a person can choose whether or not to worship Allah or vote Republican but has no say in getting older every birthday or being born Colombian. Certainly, it could be argued that a woman in Saudi Arabia does *not* have a choice about whether or not to worship Allah or that a Colombian person can choose to reject Colombian culture. I have admittedly mapped tidy boundaries onto a much messier reality. But in order to more clearly and compellingly elucidate the forces that seem to be at play here, I return once more to the idea that people exercise a measure of autonomy over characteristics in the first category but not over those in the second, which in turn informs the ways in which people choose to evaluate one another.

When viewed through this bifurcated lens, the various tensions at play in Aggieland take on a more coherent and consistent pattern. For example, based on the fury generated by the racially offensive video described earlier, it seems that Texas A&M students are *not* willing to condone or allow overt racism, discrimination based on a characteristic over which people have no control. In addition, *New Mobility* magazine ranked Texas A&M as the tenth-most disability-friendly campus in the country (*New Mobility*, 1998), and both disabled students who participated in this project reported feeling more comfortable and accepted here than at other schools they had visited or heard about. While racism and disability discrimination certainly still exist at Texas A&M, both generate such public outrage that any open display of intolerance elicits severe punitive measures, even to the point of expulsion.

However, if students perceive a degree of individual choice in the way others differ from themselves, as they seem to with politics and religion, it increases the likelihood that they will feel comfortable *openly* and *assertively* questioning or criticizing that difference. As the Islamic woman stated, people became *especially* hostile when she explained that her religion was a self-reflexive choice, not a preexisting condition imposed on her by culture, and the young man who finally admitted that Democrats can be Aggies, too, insisted that they would need to defend their choices with “some smart reasons why.” The idea is that someone who *decides* to think, act, or live a certain way ought to be willing and able to defend that decision, even in the face of aggressive criticism.

This perspective helps to explain why homosexuality can be a particularly sensitive issue on a particularly conservative college campus. Although the subject only came up in one interview, in which a female student suggested that other students “aren’t always comfortable” with homosexual individuals, a 2004 dissertation by Noack reports that “[Texas A&M] does not provide a campus environment that is welcoming to all members of the community, especially those individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender” (p. iv). Reflecting the conservative Christian position in debates of recent years, many A&M students see homosexuality as first of all, wrong, and second of all, a choice rather than a condition predetermined from birth, and the controversy has been codified in the debate between the phrases “sexual preference” and “sexual orientation.” In fact, when the topic came up in one of my own undergraduate courses at Texas A&M, the professor had to step in and end what quickly became a

yelling match. The undisguised opposition that many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students face at A&M in particular and conservative schools in general may be derived from the fact that a significant percentage of Christian students view alternative sexual orientations as a choice. And as with religion, politics, and hairstyles, choices can be questioned, criticized, and changed.

The prevalence of this perspective—that a person’s choices can be questioned and judged—suggests that it springs from a single source, a shared understanding based in a shared culture. According to Cook (1983), “the [university’s] religious bias is rooted in its cultural environment, [which] helps explain the cultural fit of A&M with the world around it” (p. 5). Of course, Texas A&M is actually situated within various *networks* of cultures—such as academic, bureaucratic, scientific, and agrarian—that are interrelated and highly complex. These cultures can be organized and categorized in a variety of ways, the simplest of which involves grouping them into local, state, and national cultural systems. Social norms and patterns at each level inform students’ perspectives on personal autonomy, and although these perspectives are suspended in layers of culture too thick, fluid, and complex to be understood in their entirety, much can be learned from trying.

At the national level, few social principles have been more specifically, systematically, and extensively codified into law than those governing the personal characteristics over which people have no control and their corresponding forms of discrimination. Take, for example, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1968, and 1991, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Age Discrimination in



Employment Act of 1967, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and so forth. Certainly, the characteristics in this category (race and sex being the most obvious examples) have been in great measure more grossly degraded, historically embattled, and socially vulnerable in the United States than those in the other category. Thus, it makes sense that they have been more thoroughly and earnestly protected in the American legal system. Yet the phenomenon is not only historical but also cultural and philosophical, the country's very foundation being none other than those certain self-evident truths. In the Supreme Court decision that ended all racially-motivated restrictions on marriage in the United States, then-Chief Justice Earl Warren alludes to these truths in writing the majority opinion; "over the years, this Court has consistently repudiated distinctions between citizens solely because of their ancestry as being odious to a free people whose institutions are founded upon the doctrine of equality" (*Loving v. Virginia*, 1967)

If America's cultural norms enforce the idea that no inborn attribute precludes someone from the benefits of equality, Texas's cultural norms suggest that our *acquired* attributes are an opportunity to benefit from *inequality*. By the time shots were fired on Fort Sumter in April of 1861, Texans had been fighting a war of their own for several decades. At the harsh edge of an unforgiving frontier, settlers were plagued by uncontrollable prairie fires, scant resources, insufficient housing, soaring crime rates, and increasingly violent skirmishes with the local Native American tribes (Benner, 1983). In this inhospitable environment, self-reliance was not a luxury but a responsibility, and for most, a necessity. Those who lost drive or focus lost their homes

and land, and thousands sacrificed even their lives while trying to carve an existence from the Texas wilderness.

When the land surplus dried up around the turn of the century, Texas remained a frontier state due to its vast supplies of untapped resources. By 1900, success no longer depended on one's ability to control and protect the land but rather on one's capacity to convert raw materials, such as water, timber, minerals, and fossil fuels, into marketable goods (Cook, 1983, p. 6). Efforts to harness the potential of the resource frontier led some to wealth and others to heartache, impressing upon settlers the possibility of creating favorable economic inequalities through scientific development and hard work. Thus, young men enrolled at the state's Agricultural and Mechanical College not for a liberal education or the "college experience" but rather as a "practical means of self-improvement in a hardtack world" (Cook, 1983, p. 5). They had a "fierce desire for material advancement and a conviction that hard work was the only sure road to success" (*Ibid.*), which illuminates the basic connection between Texas culture and the mindset of Texas students. Based on the state's cultural values, informed as they were by its material realities, students came to see education not as the great equalizer but as a ladder to the high end of the inequality seesaw. For many, individual agency became the variable distinguishing success from failure, wealth from poverty, right from wrong, and life from death.

Due to this mindset, Texans began to see success as a sign of virtue and failure as a sign of shame. And because toughness and self reliance had been such necessary elements of life on the frontier, these qualities became institutionalized in Texas culture

even as their pragmatic foundation began to disintegrate. As the frontier disappeared, Texans no longer had to be tough to *survive* but rather to *fit in*, and the ideas and symbols of independence, hard work, and tenacity are still celebrated today in a variety of ways. In Texas, rodeo is the official state sport, the phrase “Texas tough” is used to describe something that exceeds “normal” standards of toughness, and the city of Houston named its newly-formed NFL expansion team the “Houston Texans” in 2000. (In doing so, they expressed confidence in the idea that a “Texan” is as ferocious an opponent as any of the other NFL mascots—the Bengals, Jaguars, Giants, or Vikings, just to name a few.) Texans still seem to privilege the values of their frontier heritage, which lends credence to the idea that individual choice continues to be a relevant and significant element of the regional culture in which Texas A&M is situated.

At present, the importance of individual choice is reinforced at the local level by Christian culture, which has dominated the Texas A&M community since the university’s earliest days. Henry Dethloff, a former history professor, describes the life of a student during the college’s inaugural decades: “every morning he attended chapel and every Sunday he attended at least one ‘preaching’...[students] could not possess arms, could not drink or gamble, or hold private parties, or visit places of public amusement” (1975, p. 41). While religious rituals have not been institutionalized in such a way since World War II, the majority of A&M students currently identify themselves as Christian, leading one A&M student to say in *The Princeton Review’s The Best 345 Colleges*, “Honestly, we are a school of white, heterosexual, Christian students” (Franek, 2002, p. 505). In more recent editions of *The Princeton Review*,

Texas A&M ranked tenth in 2007 and sixteenth in 2008 in the category “Students Pray on a Regular Basis,” and the university was described in more than one interview as a stronghold of Christianity. Said one student, “[A&M has] a white, conservative, Christian population,” and he went on to discuss, in particular, the number of A&M students who identify with evangelical Protestant denominations. Given the prevalence and visibility of this particular group on campus, the idea of personal autonomy takes on new meaning and gravity, especially within the context of diversity. According to Macken (1990), many Protestant denominations’ “insistence on the ethical freedom in which baptism with water must be undertaken leads [them] to reject the practice of infant baptism” (p. 81). Through the rite of baptism, as well as the concepts of human will, worship, and salvation, Protestants tend to “affirm human freedom and...assert more than a ‘mere reflection’ on man’s side of the movement of God toward him” (Macken, 1990, p. 82). While the implications of this perspective will be discussed in a later section, it may explain why, as one student suggested, some Texas A&M students see no religious, political, or sexual orientation as legitimate “unless you’ve...*decided* on it.” And because that decision is as vulnerable to human error as any other, it can be doubted, challenged, and corrected.

Most of the students who participated in this project expressed open-minded enthusiasm for diversity in all its forms. However, people who embrace the perspectives described above are invigorated not by the differences between people but by the possibility of *eliminating* those differences, a mindset that could make Texas A&M an uncomfortable place for someone whose sexual orientation or religious views place them

outside the bounds of the majority. When anyone—a student, professor, or administrator—adopts this mindset, diversity is no longer an assembly of differing perspectives but rather a battleground of competing agendas—nothing short of politics itself.

### *Diversity as Race*

During interviews, as students attempted to remember and share their experiences with diversity, they invariably filled the spaces between narratives with comments on the process of recollecting. “Oh goodness,” said one, “it’s just hard to remember,” and others used such phrases as “let’s see,” “let me think,” and “hold on, I’m sure I’ve got more.” During one of these verbal transitions, one young man seemed to be particularly deep in thought as he asked for “a minute or two,” fidgeted with the zipper of his coat, and turned a studied gaze toward the stains on the ceiling tiles. After several minutes of staring and humming, zipping and unzipping, he turned to me with a satisfied expression and said, “Sorry, I just had to think of one that’s *not* about race.” This simple comment turned out to be just as intriguing as the narrative he proceeded to share.

When asked to define diversity, students mentioned demographic characteristics that touch on every major element of human identity—everything from sexuality and spirituality to family structure and style of dress. However, when asked to describe their *experiences* with diversity, students focused almost exclusively on one family of characteristics: nationality, ethnicity, and race. Within this category, students described a range of encounters, such as introducing international students to the sport of baseball,

interacting with a group of African American students, attending an international event on campus, and joining an organization with students from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Spain. However, only rarely did their narratives fall outside of racial and ethnic bounds, and the narratives that *did* wander past were almost always extensions of a particular thought or perspective. For example, one student suggested that “this university is more diverse than people probably give it credit for, but I know that it has certain cultures that aren’t as apparent. Because like, I went to a restaurant in Austin, and the maître d’ had the biggest mohawk I’ve ever seen, and you don’t really see that in A&M.” This story was shared as a way to prove a point about diversity, not as a self-contained, stand-alone narrative concerning the student’s own experiences with the concept. He, like most students, only ventured outside the category of race and ethnicity when unable to find a compelling example within its perimeter.

In addition, some students described experiences with diversity that directly contradicted their definition of the concept, especially in regards to race. For example, this student from Hong Kong took great care to define diversity as a product of much *more* than race:

I would think of not necessarily just like, diverse by race or color, but it could also be diverse by like, what you believe in and what you think—like what’s your personal belief. And especially with this campus, you can’t really define diversity by like, having more Asians come to this school, or having more Hispanics come to this school. Yeah, that is one part of it, but at the same time, diversity to me can also be like, what you think toward one thing. Like if you

decide to go to class or skip, if you drink or not drink...if you're involved with school or you just like to hang out with friends, or involved with student organizations or if you just want to be at school. So that can also be diversity. This student cited even personal behavioral choices as a source of diversity. However, when asked to describe her *experiences* with the concept, she suggested that, "for the first time, I'll always be like the only diverse [person] in class or whatever, so I guess sometimes I do feel singled out." Her definition of diversity did not inform—and in fact, contradicted—the way she would later use the term to describe diversity's practical impact on her life. This phenomenon can also be seen in the case of the racially offensive video, which touched off a series of debates in the student newspaper about the various diversity issues plaguing the A&M campus. In one article, students responsible for organizing Texas A&M's Rally Against Racism call for the administration to "nurture and propagate diversity" and to "actively implement mechanisms to improve every student's experience on the campus of Texas A&M" (Nichols, 2006, emphasis added). However, the accompanying "Plan of Action" deals almost exclusively with racial and cultural diversity. In fact, the plan's third suggestion involves adding a section to the Aggie Code of Conduct that specifies punishment for "racial and ethnic harassment" (*Ibid.*). Discrimination based on age, gender, religion, disability, or sexual orientation is omitted from the language. In addition, in one of five full-length news articles, Jessica McCann suggests that "the discussion about diversity at Texas A&M will continue," although she later states that efforts are focused on calling for "changes to A&M policies to improve the racial climate at the University" (2006). In fact, out of

the twenty pieces published by *The Battalion* in the wake of the video incident, only one mentions something *other* than race to characterize the problems facing a diverse population. Given the nature of the video, it makes sense that students and administrators alike would focus on problems and solutions involving racial discrimination on campus. However, the fact remains that almost every student who participated publicly in the debate described the incident as a diversity issue—but only described diversity as a race issue.

Students' preoccupation with race is not surprising given the concept's current and historical significance in the Texas A&M community. One professor calls the university's recent racial issues a deeply-rooted "structural and cultural problem" (Walter, 2006), one as old as the school itself that was first codified through the 1876 act that established a separate Texas A&M branch, the Prairie View A&M College, "for the benefit of colored youths" (Gammel, 1898, p. 972). In fact, African American students were not allowed to enroll at the Texas A&M main campus until 1963, nearly a century after the school's inception and a mere seven years after the A&M student body voted to continue enforcing segregation (Martin & Smith, 2001). In the decades that followed, racial tension proved to be a serious source of controversy and unrest, sparking student protests, government investigations, and myriad confrontations between the administration and the student body (*Ibid.*). The most recent serious incident, that of the offensive video, led one current student to insist that "I would never recommend [Texas A&M] to a minority without warning them of the racial situation here and the problems that they as minorities will face" (Farmer, 2006).



Taking into consideration both contemporary problems and over a century of tension, the prominence of race in students' responses can be seen as a reflection of the issue's relative centrality in recent decades. However, locating race within its broader social and historical context does not explain how it came to dominate the lived experience of diversity. Why did students define the concept so broadly in the realm of theory and so narrowly in the realm of experience? How did "diversity" become synonymous with "racial diversity"?

Before entering this realm of inquiry, it is important to distinguish it from another with which it could easily be confused. More specifically, it would be logical to interpret the dilemma framed above as an exploration into why race in general and black-white relations in particular tend to be such central issues in American politics and society. Given three centuries of slavery and over four of social injustice, it is understandable that black-white relations continue to be the most volatile, sensitive, and difficult of any diversity issue in the United States. But as complex and consequential as this phenomenon is, I omit it from this section because it does not explain why students in this study defined diversity in one way and applied it to their lives in another. If the historical centrality of race had informed students' responses, it would likely have been reflected in *both* students' definitions of and experiences with diversity. In fact, since students are educated in the history and import of black-white relations in an abstract, academic sense, it would logically inform their answers to the abstract, academic interview question—how do you *define* diversity—were it the impetus behind students' responses. That race was central not to their definitions of diversity but to their

*experiences* with it suggests that some other force is at play here. Thus, this section deals not with national issues of race and history, as momentous as they are, but with the local disparity between students' abstract and applied definitions of diversity.

According to many of the students who participated in this project, the Texas A&M administration has done an admirable job of evaluating and addressing the school's various diversity issues. Said one student, "the university is doing a bigger, better job of pushing diversity and making other students aware, and that's something that the world and A&M and the nation really need to be aware of." Another student suggested that A&M's diversity programs showed "good initiative by the university," and still another described the administration's focus on diversity as "a really good move." However, students were not always satisfied with the administration's efforts, and their most frequent and passionate critiques involved not the initiatives themselves but rather the definitions behind them. According to one student:

It bothers me, I guess, that diversity is viewed...[as] "what race are you?" If you're black, you obviously must be different from white. Therefore, we want to recruit you to make our numbers look better. It's just, it's the way bureaucracy works, and I'm not saying that I could do better. It's just *frustrating*. I mean, diversity is such a big issue, and of course it is important. But the *important* issue isn't what [the administration] works for. [Theirs] is the very simplistic science of diversity: different race.

This student, along with several others, expressed concern not over specific diversity programs but over the definition of diversity that seems to be informing them.

In some cases, the administration's focus on race generated more than concern, as several students expressed feelings of frustration, alienation, and anger. Said one student, "the administration leaves Europe off the map. It *sucks* to be from a tiny country that nobody cares about. We're cultures too, we matter, but it's not the kind of diversity [the administration] wants. They make other minorities notice how much they *aren't* included." And another student even reported being emotionally affected by what he perceived to be the university's disdain for his racial group:

I guess it's a matter of the university saying these others are more important at this point. "These others are more important than white students, and you're all white. Why can't you be something else?" And that's nothing that we can change. That's nothing that any one of us can do differently. We can't look at a white student and say, "You know what, it would really help us out if you could just change your skin color." We can't help that. We are who we are, and to say that we need less of you and more of them is just a slap in the face.

However, frustration did not come from students concerned solely about race. One disabled student suggested that he felt "like the university probably just thinks more on race and ethnicity, because I have yet to hear anything diversity-related that had to do with disabilities." For many, diversity seems to be a sensitive issue not because of its controversial nature but because of the emotional response it evokes. As one student suggested, the administration's diversity efforts "make me feel *more* isolated. They haven't reached out to me—they will *never* reach out to me—and it's because they don't *need* to reach out to me."

Interestingly, students expressed concern about the administration's definition of diversity *even as they used that same definition* in describing their own experiences with the concept, yet none seemed to recognize the irony. While trying to understand this contradiction, repeated so consistently throughout interviews, I overheard a young couple discussing the administration's plans for diversity as I enjoyed a cup of tea close to campus. "What they want," the young man said, pounding his fist for effect, "is diversity they can photograph and put in a brochure. That's the easiest way to show that we *have* diversity." Although I had heard such reasoning many times before, I was newly struck by its simplicity. For both the administration and the student body, focusing on race may simply be, in some part, a consequence of living in a culture saturated by visual media.

If seeing is believing—if seeing diversity is believing diversity—then the data reported here reflect not a preoccupation with race itself but with the visual experience of diversity. Students focused on race when describing their experiences not because they failed to see diversity *outside* of race but because racial diversity proves itself. It requires no explanation or justification. As one student suggested, "If you're black, you obviously must be different from white." Thus, because I am white and she is black, we are different. I could tell you about my experiences with diversity, but I would rather *show* you. This perspective explains why one disabled student suggested that, "I guess, being hearing impaired, I am a pretty diverse member, although I am white. We are not very visible members of campus because we look like anyone else." Because this student is white and his disability is visually imperceptible, he believes that the

university does not recognize his contributions to diversifying the student population. Because media tends to privilege the visual and society tends to privilege media, race has become a synecdoche for diversity.

Of course, understanding the phenomenon does not eliminate the social and emotional anxiety it seems to have caused. Dealing with students' concerns, however contradictory, will be the subject of a later section, and one student gives us, from his perspective, a practical place to start:

There's a lot to be learned from cultural diversity, but that's where the issue is. Race is not cultural diversity. You could still have diversity if everyone looked exactly the same because people still have different beliefs, histories, traditions, backgrounds, experiences. And so, to define diversity by one characteristic does not inherently even relate to diversity. It's dodging the real issue.

#### *Diversity as "A Good Thing"*

The subject of diversity, much more than that of tradition, evoked some of the most negative and emotional responses from the students who participated in this project. However, whatever students' concerns and frustrations, they always started from or returned to a positive place, insisting that diversity itself is, in the words of one student, "a good thing—even a *great* thing." This perspective took many different forms but was one of the most distinct and consistent of the various themes that emerged over the course of this project.

For some students, diversity simply generated positive experiences, interactions with others that were "cool," "nice," or "a good reason to get involved." But for most,

diversity actually represented an essential part of the educational experience. “It makes us more [well-]rounded people,” said one student, “and to produce a well-rounded student, I think that’s important.” Another suggested that “there’s a lot to be learned from cultural diversity,” and still another described it as “something to be encouraged.” Several students even framed diversity as an element capable of proving or disproving the merits of an educational institution. Said one student, “I’m so glad that it’s one of [the administration’s] main focuses—that they’ve really been pushing that because that makes us a better university.” Another student elaborated on this sentiment, saying:

You don’t want something homogenous in a classroom environment if differences in culture help make progress. If everything’s the same, you have no impetus for thinking anything different, and that’s probably what makes you less good overall...I think that diversity *is* good. And what makes a university education good is *having* that diversity.

In varying forms and to varying degrees, students across the board recognized diversity as a positive element of both education and experience.

The sentiments expressed here are straightforward and widely accepted. Particularly in the realm of academia, few dispute the need to diversify student populations or the benefits to be reaped from doing so. Yet noting this perspective—however common—is essential, not because the idea that diversity is “a good thing” needs reinforcement but because it offers a promising patch of common ground. If students, faculty members, and administrators alike agree that diversity is an essentially positive phenomenon, then consensus has been reached—and equally as important,

*proven possible*. For the tensions that have yet to be resolved, which are revisited in the section that follows, the question is no longer why but *how* do we make diversity work, effectively, durably, and together.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Without some concept of culture, the link between tradition and diversity is tenuous at best. What does Midnight Yell practice have to do with religious intolerance? Continuity with difference? Ritual with change? The connection only becomes apparent when viewed through the lens of culture, which Geertz defines as systems of meaning specific to a particular community of people. Thus, the charge of the anthropological scholar is to discover “what this people or that take to be the point of what they are doing” (Geertz, 1983, p. 4), which is what I have attempted to elucidate in the preceding sections. Why do Aggies camp out for football tickets, yell in unison, say howdy? What do they feel when they sing the war hymn? See when they walk across campus? Hear when they listen to speeches? Think when they go to class? This section is an attempt to synthesize these behaviors and perspectives into a coherent framework of meaning, to illuminate the stays and joists of culture that so enduringly upbear “the way things are in Aggieland.” How do the past and the future inform our behavior in the present? As Cook (1983) suggests, “an institution that places great store in pride and tradition can find difficulty in seeing a need for change. Pride and tradition can so easily become pride and prejudice” (p. 4).

#### *Pride and Tradition*

By the middle of the twentieth century, Texas A&M had begun to change with the world around it. The liberal arts program was expanded, interest in agricultural



studies declined, the “pure sciences” gained ascendancy, and the administration announced new efforts to abolish hazing in the Corps and renovate the school’s outdated academic programs. However, beneath the surface was brewing a crisis greater than any the college had yet faced, and what might have been prudent, progressive changes were in reality reactive, cosmetic, and desperate. When General James Earl Rudder was inaugurated as president of Texas A&M in 1960, he found himself caught between two strands of a single controversy: whether or not to continue compulsory military training and whether or not to admit women. According to Dethloff (1976), “both were highly explosive issues; together they were atomic” (p. 557).

In 1961, Rudder appointed a twenty-one-member, long-term-planning committee to reevaluate Texas A&M’s needs, goals, and standards. The committee took less than six months to produce a 600-page report, which advocated the development of a new tenure policy, more competitive salaries for faculty members, higher standards for admission, the expansion of graduate studies, and an “end to compulsory military training and [the] all-male admissions policy” (Dethloff, 1976, pp. 563-564). Based on the recommendations from this and several other reports, the Board of Directors voted on April 27, 1963, to admit women on a limited basis, and all barriers to coeducation were lifted by 1971 (Dethloff, 1976, p. 570). In addition, in September of 1965, compulsory enrollment in the Corps of Cadets was replaced by a “freedom-of-choice system” (*Ibid.*, p. 574), which reduced the Corps to less than half of the student population within a few years and less than one-fourth within the decade. According to

Dethloff (1976), “Texas A&M was a university on the move, and Rudder set a quick pace” (p. 574).

The local community lauded both Rudder and the Board of Directors as champions of much-needed change, as in this opinion piece from the Bryan *Daily Eagle* (as cited in Dethloff, 1976):

The board’s action yesterday proves that the college fathers are willing to act in an objective manner not motivated by tradition for tradition’s sake. With the board operating in a flexible manner and attuned to the changing world we live in Texas A&M is well on its way to the excellence sought by school officials and the people of Bryan-College Station. (p. 569)

However, the community’s applause was drowned out by the cries of disappointment, frustration, and anger that came from the majority of current and former Texas A&M students. While some viewed the change as an opportunity to “start having a little fun” or enhance the school’s attractiveness to football recruits, most saw it as a direct threat to their way of life, the Aggie Spirit, and tradition itself. At a meeting called by General Rudder to announce the Board’s decision to the student body, cadets booed, hissed, and chanted “We don’t want to integrate,” just as they protested bitterly in *The Battalion*, formed *ad hoc* committees, and threatened to take their case “to the people of Texas” (*Ibid.*), arguing that admitting women violated their right to attend an all-male, military institution. Students’ hostility smoldered for weeks, months, and then years, flaring with increasingly less frequency but all the while lending new vehemence to the popular phrase, “ol’ army has sure gone to hell” (Smith, 2007, p. 190). However, by 1968,

Texas A&M had doubled its enrollment, upgraded its facilities, expanded its programs, raised its standards, and integrated its student body. The old Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, now known as Texas A&M University, had moved on.

During that critical era of decision and turmoil, students responded to a perceived threat with concern, resentment, and frustration. Looking back after half a century of adjustment and change, the anger expressed in old copies of *The Battalion* and by former students who attended A&M during that formative decade seems pedestrian, predictable, even quaint. However, the convenient version of A&M's history omits a crucial and compelling truth. While the collective memory of any given cohort of college students is limited to a four-year life cycle—enrollment through graduation—the collective memory of any given *culture* is potentially immortal. The tension of the fifties and sixties was not resolved, nor did it dissipate when students graduated and moved away. Rather, it was institutionalized in *Texas A&M culture* in a way that continues to affect the university to this day, a fact that is best exemplified through the example of the Fightin' Texas Aggie Bonfire.

In the fall of 1945, as Texas A&M began adjusting to changing social and economic conditions in the wake of World War II, cadets prepared for the annual “Varsity” game against the University of Texas Longhorns as they did every year: by building a bonfire. Started nearly four decades earlier, Bonfire was initially a practical addition to the burgeoning tradition of yell practice, which began in 1906 as a way for cadets to coordinate the “yells” performed at each football game. Sometime between 1908 and 1912, cadets began burning small piles of trash at yell practices during the

chilly October and November months; “letting off steam at night before the coming event, [they] welcomed a warm fire to crowd around” (Dethloff, 1976, p. 514).

These small piles of trash would eventually become the soaring, unmistakable wedding-cake silhouette of the traditional Aggie Bonfire, the significance of which grew right along with the size of the fire. As Tang (2000) suggests:

Bonfire is spelled with a capital B, like Super Bowl, which it is comparable to when it comes to Aggie traditions...The Bonfire is burned every year on the night before the annual grudge football game against the University of Texas at Austin...Bonfire represents every Aggie’s undying love for his [or her] university and every Aggie’s burning desire to beat the hell outta t.u. If the burning Bonfire stands erect beyond midnight, tradition has it, the Aggies will win the football game. (pp. 7-8)

Burned every year (except 1963 due to the assassination of President Kennedy), the Bonfire tradition came to a tragic end when the stack collapsed in 1999, killing 12 students and injuring 27 others. The tradition was revived in 2002 and continues today but is no longer sanctioned by the university.

Bonfire, like many of Texas A&M’s traditions, owed much of its vitality to the old debate between progress and tradition. As discussed earlier, Texas A&M was founded just a decade after the end of the Civil War, a time when Southerners, under the weight of Reconstruction, felt an urgent need to both preserve Southern culture and revitalize the Southern economy through innovation and progress. Of course, the two

aims are largely incompatible—even contradictory—and Texas A&M inherited this tension through the Morrill Land-Grant Act, which promised public lands to colleges:

where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes on the several pursuits and professions in life. (S. 301, 1861)

On the one hand, Texas A&M was charged with training young men in the agricultural, mechanical, and military arts, exercises that richly exemplified the Southern way of life. On the other, the school was expected to improve citizens' daily lives through technical research and innovation, which required the hiring of faculty members—"pioneers of education" (Ousley, 1935, p. 11)—who did not balk at the idea of being audaciously progressive. Once again, Texas A&M could not help but become "a paradoxical place," (Smith, 2007, p. 182), and by the middle of the twentieth century, the school no longer had to *borrow* that paradox from the culture around it. It had become part and parcel of the university itself, exemplified in "a curious ambivalence between progressivism and traditionalism" (Dethloff, 1976, p. 476) and codified in the growing tension between tradition and change.

Understandably, this tension thrived in the ideological divide between members of the faculty and administration and members of the Corps of Cadets, the former being proponents of progress and the latter being "the bearer[s] of the flame of Aggie

traditions” (Dethloff, 1976, p. 575). As A&M plunged into its season of change—the forties, fifties, and sixties—administrators began clearing the way for progress by applying principles of rationality to the school’s practical problems. For example, after World War II, the administration attempted to quell a high rate of attrition among freshman cadets by abolishing some of the Corps’ most rampant hazing practices, which resulted in a series of student protests that cast a dark pall over relations between the student body and the administration for years to come (*Ibid.*). According to Dethloff (1976), in response to such situations:

the Corps of Cadets...began to ritualize many of the practices of former days which had been, at best, customs. Thus, yell practice, muster, the bonfire, and observance of memorials were increasingly codified and ritualized, and while the form was retained the earlier meaning was often lost. (p. 476)

Of course, meaning was not so much lost as reinvented through tradition, but the process of ritualization that began in the forties and fifties marks an important shift in the *purpose* of tradition at Texas A&M. Divorced from function, tradition became an end in and of itself—tradition for tradition’s sake. For the Texas A&M student, the Corps no longer meant military training, and Bonfire no longer meant keeping warm. Tradition was no longer ritualized function but rather “an antidote to the alienation that accompanies instrumental rationality” (Smith, 2007, p. 195), which merely exacerbated the tension between convention and change. Because Texas A&M’s traditions had been loosed from the moorings of function, they became purely experiential phenomena. Students demanded then (and continue to demand today) that the Aggie Spirit can be

experienced, but never explained. As Smith argues, “persons motivated by traditional knowledge find it difficult to explain, defend, or intentionally modify [their] habits” (p. 186), a concept codified in the popular Aggie maxim, “there’s a Spirit can ne’er be told.” And since experiential knowledge cannot be explained *or challenged*, many Aggies unquestioningly accept traditionally transmitted behaviors and values. In short, apart from function, tradition became its own justification and its own salvation.

As students began to adopt this perspective as a defense against the administration’s seeming disregard for their emotional connection to tradition, it actually became *easier* for the administration to criticize—and thus threaten—tradition on the grounds that it did not conform to any empirical standards of rationality. According to Smith (2007), Aggies “inhabited a place that, because it had been *rationalized*, had at the same time, paradoxically, been rendered *unreasonable*” (p. 193). Clinging to unprovable truths in a world that demanded proof, Aggies became increasingly inscrutable to both the administration *and each other*, isolated as they were by the ineffability of experience. In the case of Bonfire, this phenomenon resulted in an institutionalized student rebellion that would last until the 1999 collapse.

The rebellion grew slowly over the course of several decades. Due to the rationalized changes of the 1960s—the admittance of women and the elimination of compulsory membership in the Corps of Cadets—participation in the cutting and stacking of Bonfire took on a great deal more significance than it had in previous years. As the school began to change, it effectively splintered into two separate institutions—the first bureaucratic and academic and the second vivacious and transcendent. Students

naturally identified with one or the other, and since enrollment in the university could no longer be equated with dedication to tradition, “true Aggies” proved their authenticity by building and burning Bonfire, one of the most thrilling and enduring symbols of their commitment to the A&M of myth and legend. At the same time, and with equal energy, Bonfire culture began to change, slowly devolving into what Tang (2000) describes as a betrayal the Aggie Spirit itself:

the culture of violence; the sexual discrimination, harassment and violence against women; the ‘boys will be boys’ attitude; the suppression of dissent and intolerance of nontraditional viewpoints; the historical racism; and the repeated need to validate manhood by any means necessary have not only betrayed the tradition of Bonfire as a unifying force, but have also alienated and betrayed even those members of Aggieland who believe in the Aggie Spirit. (p. 5)

According to Smith (2007), the escalating violence and vulgarity of Bonfire culture was a direct result of the school’s “paradoxical commitments to tradition and instrumental rationality” (p. 195), a product of being caught in the unnavigable, inhospitable combat zone between doctrine and reason. Certainly, this tension explains the authority of tradition and the earnestness of students’ devotion, but it stops short of revealing why students began acting *inappropriately* instead of just adhering more strictly or redoubling their dedication. Tension alone does not explain bad behavior.

In response to perceived threats, students began ritualizing their way of life, turning tradition from a functional good—“the way things are”—into a sacred one—“the way things have always been.” When this did not disable but rather *strengthened* the



forces of change, students retreated even further into the world of effervescence and *communitas*, which filled the needs of community and identity at a stage of life when young men and women experienced for the first time the thrilling and bewildering freedom of a truly liminal space. When Bonfire culture took a turn for the worse, it reflected students' ever-more-radical commitment to the indescribable *place* they had found in the world, as individuals, as adults, and as Aggies. This place—and all the tensions central to it—had become a part of the self. Thus, cutting, stacking, and burning Bonfire was not merely an effort to prove and vivify the Aggie Spirit but also an effort to prove and vivify the self, which turned the tradition from a purely cooperative enterprise into a theater of deadly serious, intensely meaningful performances of identity. These performances created a shell beneath which the individual's truest and most *fragile* self was protected—but as shells bumped up against one another, taking and inflicting social damage, individuals were motivated to protect themselves with even thicker and more bombastic performances. Once inflated, absurdity and aggression were normalized and institutionalized. Bad behavior became a central—even essential—accelerant for the towering pyre that had once been “a warm fire to crowd around” (Dethloff, 1976, p. 514).

### *Pride and Prejudice*

The devolution of Bonfire culture is an example of the university's historical struggle to manage racism, sexism, homophobia, and a host of other issues associated with the integration of a diverse population. But more importantly, the rise and fall of Bonfire provides a compelling example of what can happen when tension between the

student body and the administration is left to its own devices. The benefit of studying Bonfire lies not in assigning blame or decrying the past but in recognizing that the same thing could happen—*is happening*—with diversity. As one student suggested, “there’s misunderstanding on both sides” of the issue, and the rift only seems to be growing wider with time. The *real* question, then, is not how to define the problem but how to fix it. Practically speaking, how do we do diversity? How do we do negotiate difference? Manage tension? Implement change? But above all, as an educational institution, a community, and a family, how do we bind up these wounds?

One of the goals of this project is to shed light on the ways in which students define, and thus understand, the concept of diversity. The most prevalent of these definitions—diversity as dialogue, choice, race, and “a good thing”—are discussed in the preceding sections as insights into how students assign meaning and significance to diversity as a theoretical concept. However, these definitions may also offer insight into the *practical* steps students, faculty members, and administrators can take to reduce resistance, promote unity, and effect change.

*Dialogue and Choice.* According to Bennett (2007), students who never become aware of differences “may never rid themselves of their perceptions, assumptions, judgements, and stereotypes about people who are culturally different from themselves” (p. 27). That the students who participated in this project so frequently defined diversity as dialogue—which *assumes* difference—suggests that they are both aware of differences and willing to participate in recognizing them through mutual exchanges of

experiences, perspectives, and ideas. This explains why a number of students mentioned Texas A&M's International Week<sup>10</sup> (or I-Week) as a richly rewarding event. Said one:

I was involved in International Week...and I thought that was pretty cool that like, people come and actually want to learn about like, you and your culture...I feel like people are interested in [my culture], but they don't have that much of a chance to get to know us.

In order to maximize the positive potential of the dialogic perspective, the administration and individual student organizations should continue organizing and promoting events that provide opportunities for different cultures, lifestyles, and worldviews to interact. I-Week, in particular, may be especially satisfying due to the fact that it requires students to take responsibility for educating others about their own culture. As one student exclaimed in describing the experience, "they actually liked our presentation!" Her role in planning the event increased the sense of fulfillment she gained from attending it. Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006), in their study on which practices most effectively increase the presence of women and African Americans in management positions, suggest that "structures establishing responsibility are followed by significant increases in managerial diversity" (p. 590). Individual responsibility can lead to increased satisfaction, which enhances the efficacy of diversity programs like corporate diversity committees and Texas A&M's International Week. In addition, because students often join student organizations in order to connect socially with others like themselves (as

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<sup>10</sup> From the Office of the Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity web site: "International Week (I-Week) is hosted by the International Students Association (ISA) to promote international awareness among the Aggie Community. The events include a Cultural Display, Variety Show, Dress Parade, and an International Buffet."

evidenced by the internal homogeneity of most cultural, religious, and political groups on campus), events such as I-Week may be particularly effective given their size—large enough to accommodate the participation of entire student groups. As one interviewee suggested, “it’s more fun because you’re with your friends, but you learn something too.” The individual responsibility, social interaction, and cultural dialogue afforded by programs like I-Week increase the likelihood that they will foster productive and satisfying exchanges between people from different backgrounds. Creating and organizing other events that incorporate these elements could prove to be equally as effective and rewarding.

By defining diversity as dialogue, students also defined it as a process. From this perspective, diversity becomes something that is *participated in*, never achieved, which complicates but enriches the lived experience of diversity. By definition, any given process is more complicated than the goal it is meant to accomplish. For example, washing your car is more complicated than the clean car that results. Running three miles a day and eating sensibly is more complicated than simply being healthy. Staying married is more complicated than being married. Diversity, the process, is more complicated than diversity, the goal. Because students tend to see diversity in this way—as a process rather than a goal—it makes little sense to portray diversity as an easy, simple, or natural phenomenon. One student in particular described the problem with such a perspective:

You know that poster on campus that you see that has people of all different colors locking arms? I think it says, “Diversity and unity build a community.”

Anyway, a better phrase is “unity *despite* diversity.” People are afraid to admit that diversity is a challenge. Diversity does not have to be the opposite of unity, but it makes it harder. There’s a richness to diversity—it broadens horizons—but it does not bring us together unless we make it work.

From this student’s perspective, diversity is a deliberate, complicated process, and portraying it as anything less minimizes the intentionality and commitment it takes to “make it work.” For him, and for many others, diversity is not a destination but rather a bridge worth crossing.

This perspective stands in tension with the results-driven structure of the modern American university. Colleges in general and administrators in particular are required to show progress through hard facts—reportable evidence (usually statistics) that proves the success of specific diversity programs. While universities are unlikely to abandon this empirical focus when it comes to diversity initiatives, administrators might more effectively relate to students by underscoring the idea of process whenever possible. For example, a memo updating the student body on the university’s diversity efforts could highlight the variety of diversity programs and the number of people who participate in those programs rather than the number of minorities on campus or the number of countries represented by the international student population. New ways of quantifying diversity could help resolve the tension between students’ and administrators’ understandings of the concept.

While students defined diversity as dialogue, they also described it in terms of choice, a perspective that produced some of the most serious instances of intolerance

revealed over the course of this project. The idea that certain elements of diversity are products of individual choice—and thus open to attack—can lend itself to all manner of incivility. However, taken together, dialogue and choice effectively balance one another—or more precisely, the strengths of the former have the potential to neutralize the failings of the latter.

Framing diversity as dialogue implies adherence to implicit social rules. Dialogue is only dialogue if both parties are allowed to speak and both parties agree to listen. Thus, if *all* of diversity—even the discretionary bits—can be subsumed into the framework of dialogue, this would necessarily demand from all parties a greater degree of civility. In fact, the “diversity as choice” perspective lends itself readily to the metaphor of dialogue because it suggests that people are responsible for their own lives—which assumes a degree of self reflexivity that could lead to deeper, more interesting dialogic exchanges. But how to accomplish such a conceptual shift? While simply framing diversity—in *all* its forms—as dialogue is a logical place to start, a successful program should also advocate mutual respect, which is slightly but significantly different than the idea of “respecting others.” (The latter is unidirectional and static and the former, bi-directional and dynamic, which makes it less puerile and more sophisticated, less pedantic and more progressive.) Mutual respect is necessary at all levels, from the newest student to the highest administrator, and a successful diversity program should reflect the interconnected, interdependent nature of relationships in the modern university—particularly between students and professors. Stanley Fish (2006)

provides some particularly helpful guidelines for professors as they introduce and navigate discussions in the classroom:

Any idea can be brought into the classroom if the point is to inquire into its structure, history, influence and so forth. But no idea belongs in the classroom if the point of introducing it is to recruit your students for the political agenda it may be thought to imply...it is part of a teacher's job to set personal conviction aside for the hour or two when a class is in session and allow the techniques and protocols of academic research full sway. (p. 4.13)

However, this model only works if students agree to temporarily abandon their *own* agendas, refuse to proselytize or bait professors and classmates, and respect both the pedagogical process and the intentionally neutral position professors may occasionally have to take. According to Rothenbuhler, “the diversity project requires respect flowing from all sources in all directions” (personal communication, January 29, 2008). Only then are choices protected and dialogues, possible.

*Race and “A Good Thing”*. As the university presses forward toward its goals for diversity, students still seem resistant to change, even though every student who participated in this project defined diversity as “a good thing”—even a *great* thing—that engenders edifying interactions and rewarding relationships. Students’ resistance, then, must be at least partially rooted in differences and misunderstandings between the administration and the student body. As one student put it, “they don’t understand our traditions, we don’t understand their diversity,” and the most common source of tension

involves the administration's focus on recruiting and retaining students from racial and ethnic minorities.

According to a web site run by the Office of the Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity, Texas A&M's commitment to racial and ethnic diversity is intentional and firmly grounded in research; "with respect to the Texas public and legislators we are especially concerned about improving racial and ethnic diversity at Texas A&M University" (n.d., para. 2). In addition, the site provides a list of common misconceptions about diversity and responds to them by citing recent studies that describe the importance and benefit of diversity on college campuses. One of these misconceptions—the idea that "the ideal outcome of diversity efforts at TAMU is a campus that is 'blind' to individual differences such as color or ethnicity" (*Ibid.*, para. 17)—comes closest to identifying students' concerns about race and garners a particularly strong response from the administration:

Colorblindness in a social sense is often a damaging excuse to undervalue cultural richness. Moreover, in a political sense, it provides a reason to ignore demonstrated discrepancies in basic circumstances across races. No effective diversity effort can be based on colorblindness. (*Ibid.*, para. 17)

However, based on the data from this study, the administration may have misconceived the misconception. In no interview did students advocate a "colorblind" policy, nor did they dismiss the value of cultural richness. Rather, they expressed concern over one specific point: that the university's preference for certain racial groups over others is inconsistent with its stated commitment to diversity. As one student so adamantly



stated, “the administration leaves Europe off the map. It *sucks* to be from a tiny country that nobody cares about. We’re cultures too, we matter, but it’s not the kind of diversity [the administration] wants.” Above all, students expressed a desire for the administration not to change its commitment to diversity but to *stand behind* it—to uphold, in every way, its pledge to enforce the “inclusion, welcome, and support of individuals from all groups” (Ibid., para. 1). According to one student, the administration’s actions suggest that “here are special people, and here are white, boring people who aren’t interesting. They consider Neapolitan ice cream branching out.” Recall, too, that one disabled student stated, “I guess being hearing impaired, I am a pretty diverse member, although I am white.” Without changing their priorities, administrators might effectively reduce student resistance simply by developing more inclusive ways of stating and demonstrating their commitment to diversity. As one student put it, “I love that we’re focusing on diversity and that we’re recruiting more races and stuff. All I want to see is that [the administration] believes what they say they believe—that everyone matters. And if that’s honestly the case, they’ll wring every ounce of diversity out of this place that they can.”

In addition to the concerns expressed above, some students suggested that the university’s focus on racism might be allowing other forms of intolerance to seep into campus culture relatively unnoticed. According to one Muslim student, “racial diversity just needs some time, but some work is needed...to make people aware that other religions...just respect other people’s religions.” Religious intolerance was by far students’ most common and serious concern, yet it seems to be consistently

overshadowed by discussions of racism, which may also be happening with issues of sexual orientation and homophobia. While walking across campus, I overheard two students arguing over whether homosexuality is decided individually or genetically, and one young woman ended the discussion by saying angrily, “Whatever. Homosexuality is homosexuality. Nobody here talks about it anyway, and I’d just rather move on.” As critical as it is to ferret out and destroy any sources of racism on the Texas A&M campus, other forms of discrimination deserve the same attention, lest we find ourselves one day having won the battle against racism and lost the war against intolerance.

#### *A Broader Lens*

The solutions described above seem simple—even easy—until we take a step back, zooming out to view Texas A&M’s diversity problems through a lens that encompasses more than just the student perspective. From this vantage point, the dilemma confronting Texas A&M’s diversity advocates is much more complex, troublesome, and intractable. As the administration focuses on attracting and retaining students from various minority groups, students who are part of the majority culture seem to feel slighted, overlooked, and ignored. But how can administrators and faculty members justify policies that celebrate *all* groups and cultures without minimizing the historical realities of inequality and injustice? In addition, a commitment to every person and every culture could alienate members of minorities to a greater degree than it pacifies members of the majority, placing the university’s goals for diversity even further out of reach. Even worse, if the administration adopts a more expansive perspective on what counts as diversity, does it risk validating unacceptable behaviors or

worldviews? Can a student hang a Confederate flag next to one from Nigeria? Perform an animal sacrifice in Academic Plaza as part of a religious ceremony? Demand that he not be required to work with female students on a class project because he sees them as inferior? The slope can be much more dangerous and slippery than students realize, and while these questions fall outside the scope of this project, they are far too consequential to ignore. Whatever the solution, these tensions have to be resolved before students, administrators, and faculty members can come together to successfully advance the cause of the diversity project.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

When asked to define diversity, one student borrowed the words of a French writer and philosopher; “the definition of diversity that I love is by Albert Camus, the author of *The Stranger*, and that’s, ‘Unity and diversity, and never one without the other.’ It’s cool to think about that...Diversity is coming together from all different cultures.” But the quotation she cited, frequently referenced by advocates of diversity, is not a definition at all but rather a dialectic. As Camus writes in his essay “Ephemeral Creation,” “any thought that abandons unity glorifies diversity!” The two are held together not by affinity but by tension. The question, then, is not how to turn diversity into unity—one might as easily turn base metals into gold—but how to productively negotiate the tension between them, making meaningful, articulate, and fertile the differences that divide one person from another. But whatever the solution to Texas A&M’s diversity problems, it will remain elusive until we decide to *communicate*—to see broadly and think deeply, to speak moderately and listen radically. And as Rothenbuhler (2002) suggests, “The value of communication is that it makes a meaningful experience of differences, altering individualities in light of the other, making life together a product of those differences” (p. 117). Thus, the solution may lie not in finding the answer but in seeking it.

But can Texas A&M—“this unique institution, this onetime Sparta-on-the-Brazos, this would-be world university” (Cook, 1983, p. 4)—actually change? It already

has, and students, myself included, seem to believe that it can continue to do so not despite but *because* of the culture that has always made it a singular institution. While interviewing a member of the Corps of Cadets for this project, I asked if he had a solution for Texas A&M's diversity problems. It had been a long day and an emotional interview, so I was not totally prepared for his response. "Well," he said, "do *you*?" Caught off guard, I blinked for a second and then responded, "well, I think we have to try." He looked at me for a long moment and finally nodded; "Last Corps Trip?" I looked at him for an even longer moment and then nodded back. That poem, written by P. H. Duvall, Jr., class of 1951, I have excerpted here.

#### The Last Corps Trip

Assembled on the drill field  
Was the world-renowned Twelfth Man,  
The entire fighting Aggie team  
And the famous Aggie Band.

I've seen them play since way back when,  
And they've always had the grit;  
I've seen 'em lose and I've seen 'em win  
But I've never seen 'em quit.

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