Two weeks ago, several brothers of the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity vandalized and defaced the house of Tau Epsilon Phi, apparently in retaliation for TEP’s establishment of LCA’s Smoot markings on the Harvard Bridge. Potentially more harmful than the physical vandalism is the LCA brothers painted “To TEP = 33 Nerds + 1 Queer” on the sidewalk in front of the TEP house. LCA issued an apology 11 days later and the two groups have agreed on reparations for the material damages, leaving the impression that the matter is resolved and that it is only of concern to the two fraternities. But regardless of what the two groups of MIT might think, the issues raised by the vandalism and the graffiti are issues that should concern all of us.

The recent unveiling of the harassment administration, however, remained characteristically silent and inactive on this issue. While the vandalism was a serious criminal act, the fact that the graffiti with the homophobic slur was part of the vandalism subtly changes the message of the vandalism from thoughtless and inconsiderate to premeditated hate crime. Compensation can be made for damages to the house, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to repair the insult. To some people the loss of a home or the loss of a job may be a greater loss than a house.

Some students question the validity of concerns about the graffiti. They say that the use of the allegedly offensive word is a harmless prank. Concerned students distributed flyers last Monday at the entrance to Lobby 7, and The Tech has received several letters protesting the graffiti, one with nearly 100 signatures. Such actions do not represent random response from a fringe group, but a concerted attempt to bring to light the serious nature of the offense.

While the administration has received makes it an insulting slur. Some students question the validity of concerns about the graffiti, claiming that the word “queer” was used merely to complete a clever rhyme, and should not be construed as anti-gay or derogatory. Others have tried to emphasize the seriousness of the physical vandalism and damage to the TEP house while downplaying the outrage expressed by student groups and publications over the anti-homosexual content of the graffiti. While the vandalism was a serious criminal act, the fact that the graffiti with the homophobic slur was part of the vandalism subtly changes the message of the vandalism from thoughtless and inconsiderate to premeditated hate crime. Compensation can be made for damages to the house, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to repair the insult made to the gay or gay community.

Contrary to what some might have you believe, the outrage over the homophobic nature of the graffiti does not come from a fringe group, but from the mainstream, from the silent majority. The whole act was obviously intended to be rude and vengeful against TEP, and the fact that the offending word was part of this qualifies the vandalism as a hate and prejudice-motivated crime. That some students don’t feel that LCA’s graffiti qualifies as a homophobic slur shows the unequal treatment the gay/lesbian/bisexual minority receives compared to other, more socially acceptable, minorities. If LCA brothers had vandalized New House instead and painted racial slurs about Chocolate City on the sidewalk in Allston, you can bet that the public outcry would have been much more vocal.

The members of LCA who vandalized the TEP house caused serious material damage and, more significantly, offended the MIT lesbigay community. They showed not only thoughtlessness and poor judgment with the physical damages to the TEP house, but also prejudice and hate with the graffiti. The size of the protest against the graffiti demonstrated that the incident should have been resolved long ago, preferably with some refreshing leadership from the MIT administration.

The current controversy concerns the painted graffiti, particularly the use of the word “queer.” Many students and student groups have protested against the homophobic and derogatory use of the word. The MIT administration, however, remained characteristically silent and inactive on this issue, despite the recent unveiling of the harassment policy, until last Tuesday, long after the incident. This delayed response from the administration can only serve to encourage future use of anti-gay and other discriminatory slurs.

The underlying question is: When does a prank turn into a homophobic slur, and who should decide when this line has been crossed? The answer is not clear, especially when the same groups that claim insult sometimes use the allegedly offending word to describe themselves. However, the spirit in which the graffiti at TEP was written and, more importantly, the spirit in which it was received makes it an insulting slur.

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Contrary to what some might have you believe, the outrage over the homophobic nature of the graffiti does not come from one or two politically-correct-knee-jerk-bleeding-heart-communist-pinko-liberal newspaper editors with plans for world domination. A substantial section of the MIT community, including, but not limited to, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, are upset by the graffiti and the MIT administration’s long period of silence and inaction. And while I agree that we can’t cry foul every time someone takes insult about something, in this case, a considerable number of people took serious offense for the graffiti to be more than a harmless prank.

OCCASIONALLY THE PIECES ALL FIT, BUT YOU DIDN’T KNOW WHY. EVENTUALLY, IT BECAME OBVIOUS.

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