American MFA

VOL III
ACADEMIA

by Kevin Hubbard in the Digital + Media Department
Rhode Island School of Design. 2019-2020

30 pages · 7000 words
6⅞ x 9¾ in / 17.6 x 24.9 cm
college ruled

American MFA

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American mfa

Vol III · Academia

Writing presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Fine Arts in Digital + Media: Art, Technology, and Emergent Practices of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

By Kevin Hubbard 2020

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1. BLAME CANADA

They are drawn to the fame, cultural capital, and promises of developing their artistic potential in unparalleled facilities working alongside world-class creatives in an institution mythologized for its rigour and standards. Students and teachers alike come to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and schools like it, believing their experiences will pave the way for long-term success. For some, however, this prestige can be toxic when reality does not meet expectations and dream followers are left disillusioned and disgruntled. As is true in Canada, where I am from, around the world it is common opinion that studying in a well known American institution will set you apart in your home country. As such, a decade after I completed my BFA in Vancouver and years spent working as a brand, user experience, and interactive designer, as well as living at and managing a meditation centre, I pursued an MFA in Providence, RI to reaffirm a love for art and academic study and to lay the foundations for a career change. Having previously taught in informal environments which I found to be abundantly rewarding, obtaining an MFA would allow me to teach

within higher education. At RISD, the Digital + Media program appeared to be the perfect environment to combine my skills and interests. Acclaimed to be the most transdisciplinary program within the school, I could take classes inside and outside the department while capitalizing on the relationship with nearby Brown University whose contemplative studies initiative offers classes devoted to the philosophical and neurological study of meditation.

Living in Vancouver and then Toronto, I freelanced as a user experience and interactive designer where I capitalized on psychological motivators to design and sell digital products. Like Sean Parker (the founding president of Facebook), on the one hand I was tasked with "consum[ing] as much of your time and conscious attention as possible. [Creating] features such as the [Facebook] 'like' button that would give users 'a little dopamine hit' to encourage them to upload more content. [...] Exploiting vulnerabilities in human psychology" [and creating products with] "social validation feedback loops" (Solon). Yet, on the other hand, I was regularly taking part in ten day silent meditation retreats and supporting my practice by informally studying the effects of meditative practice. As I am of the micro-generation between 'Gen X' (those born after the baby boomers - roughly from the early 1960s to late 1970s) and 'millennials' (born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s), now affectionately known as 'xennials' (1977-1983), I grew up without social media but adopted it early enough to be familiar with it, to work with it professionally, and to witness its ability to change social relations. I observed troubling online harassment campaigns (Ask.fm bullying, the Fappening, Gamergate, Operation Lollipop), 'doxing' (the practice of searching for and publishing private or identifying

information about a particular individual on the Internet, typically with malicious intent ("dox"def. Oxford)), and the proliferation of 'virtue signaling' (the expression of moral outrage and feigned righteousness through public online shaming of others who purposely or accidentally misbehave on or offline), to name a few. I was simultaneously designing digital products to push people apart so they would stay online, and developing a meditative practice proven to increase connectedness and empathy for others. I was at odds with myself. So, I applied to the Digital + Media department in order to:

> [...] interrogate my own subject-position [...] against larger cultural trends; namely, the ethics of representation; truth and reconciliation; oppositional discourse; and the ethics of emergent online social-media subjects confronting cyber victimization, shaming, and virtue signalling, et cetera. I will also examine how developing technologies and digital upbringings create new cultural identities, both physical and virtual. (Hubbard, as submitted in original RISD application).

Soon after starting at RISD I noticed a contentiousness between community members for which I was unprepared. I was confronted because of my feminist identification, challenged for addressing Indigenous Truth & Reconcilliation in my work, and had writing and artwork censored so it would not "disrupt the harmony of the department" (Anon). I experienced the ramifications associated with having one of my artworks flagged as posing a possible threat to another (the *Just you wait* slideshow currently on my personal website) where I

was forced to present my case to the head of counseling and the dean of student services. Here I gained firsthand familiarity with the institutional conflict resolution process. Afterward, when I began talking with educators, administrators, and students about their similar experiences, very few were willing to speak candidly for fear of repercussions.

I wanted to share these stories, and although I saw the worth in transcribing their heartfelt admissions, I was unsure how to protect their interests enough to encourage them to disclose their personal experiences. I settled upon a journalistic approach where I guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality for my sources regarding their experiences with conflict resolution in higher education.

I began collecting material from people at RISD as well as others in American, Canadian, and European schools. Drawing upon my experience in interactive design usability testing, I interviewed thirty six educators and administrators (and had casual conversations with many students) using an open ended, exploratory methodology. With as few leading prompts as possible, I asked them to share experiences regarding conflict between students, teachers, and administrators and how resolution was facilitated. However, in this paper the findings mostly reflect the attitudes of staff over students (most of whom come from RISD itself) which may present an opinion bias. As part of my intention was to conduct a survey of the contemporary educational landscape in relation to my future teaching aspirations, this is something I embrace. Consequently, this paper may be read as a *SWOT* analysis – a business strategy tool used to identify product or group strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. I conducted interviews that took into account

issues of diversity (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) as best I could. Interviews were conducted between September and November 2019.

The following sections present an amalgamation of feedback compiled from these interviews in order to be cohesive and comprehensible. Directly quoted sentences are in double quotations and given the citation (Anon), and specific uses of jargon in single quotations. Sentences composed from multiple sources have the plural citation (Anons). In no way is the following a complete overview, it is full of glaring omissions. Furthermore, biases and blindspots must be acknowledged in order to reflect the ambivalence, contradiction, equivocation, indecisiveness, messiness, overlapping, and uncertainty of the diverse, multiple, and plural viewpoints of those with whom I spoke. The ideas expressed within the following sections are not my own per se, but rather the opinions of those with whom I spoke intertwined with theory and existing literature they recommended. It is only within the final section of this thesis where I contribute my own perspective on the issues drawn from these interviews and conversations.

2. BLAME AMERICA

In speaking with my sources one thing became abundantly clear: faculty feel that college campuses are 'hotbeds' of emotionally volatile reactivity spurred by the social justice and social equity movements that have occurred over the last five to ten years. These multitudes of issues have created an intertwined and overlapping tapestry which makes it difficult to unpack the complexities we currently face. Some of the events, issues, and recent movements that have shaped student opinion which recurrently came up included: Black Lives Matter; climate and environmental crisis; community loss and feelings of social alienation; global financial meltdown; growing economic disparity (as evidenced by protests like Occupy Wall Street); lack of future economic prospects; racially motivated hate rallies (Charlottesville, VA); indigenous rights (Standing Rock etc.); radical individualism and a lack of trust in authority; LGBTQ+ rights, bullying, and suicides; increasing mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and isolation; #metoo; Muslim travel bans; post-Obama positivity deflation; police shootings of unprovoked and unarmed black citizens; increasingly polarized bi-partisan political animosity; racism and xenophobia (Mexian border

wall etc.); unparalleled economic recession since the Great Depression; increasing pressure to compete and succeed in school (related to getting good grades and securing employment); school shootings; mass shootings; sexual identity struggles; crippling student debt; election and presidency of Donald Trump (and the incomprehensibility of its racial, social, national, and global ramifications); unemployment and underemployment levels; and ongoing wars and state-sanctioned occupations, to name a few.

Multiplied by the speed and scope of the Internet, and the reality that these events and their ramifications are being watched in real time, nearly all the respondents questioned the effects of social media on developing minds and attitudes. They bemoaned that there is no longer in-depth analysis of issues and worried over the ramifications of young learners forming opinions solely based on 'clickbait.' "We don't read anymore," said one interviewee. "We just react to the headlines. That's it" (Anon). Exacerbated by 'fake-news' and combative politicians turning to Twitter, trust in authority figures is declining. There is no faith in leaders and the public seems to delight in 'cancel culture.' Even for those who seek it honestly, there is no redemption for those who have transgressed. None of which surprised many of those with whom I spoke, who felt there was "a joy in vengeance that pervaded American culture, a country that prides itself on punitive justice and revels in warfare" (Anons). "People love making other people their enemies" (Anon), one respondent remarked.

Clearly, this us versus them, good versus evil, binary morality is not limited to college campuses. Universities are part of a greater national crisis where, according to authors Jonathan Haidt and Greg

Lukianoff in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, "rising political polarization and cross party animosity are leading to cultures of safetyism and zero tolerance for conflicting ideology" (125). According to Haidt & Lukianoff, "identity politics amplifies the human proclivity for us versus them thinking. In educational settings it prepares students for battle, not for thinking" (90). Postulated by one professor with whom I spoke:

> "as the world has become 'smaller', and plurality and multiculturalism increased, conflict has moved from familial groups and tribes, to communities and townships; then to nation states and nationalities; and finally to ethnicities and races. [...] On leftist neo-liberal college campuses it could be argued to be presenting itself as oppositional binary discourse of white heteronormative oppression on on one side and everybody else on the other." (Anon)

On one side the predominantly white conservative right argues that social justice movements and affirmative action are themselves discriminatory and evidence of anti-white reverse racism – threats to a perceived American way of life. On the other, those who identify as anything other than white, straight, and male, see themselves as oppressed by these "physical markers of hegemony" (Anon). In either case, both extremes see their cause as good and its opposition evil. What has become known as the 'oppression Olympics', both sides perceive themselves to be victimized by the opposition and view the other as a

threat to their survival. Both sides feel morally justified in fighting for their cause.

Here, as is true with all victimage identification groups, as Sarah Shulman reminds us in her book *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, "uniting to destroy other people means you're perfect, superior, and right. Siding with victims creates a false sense of loyalty which leads to blaming, scapegoating, shunning, removing, and occupying" (61). Thus setting the conditions for where it is "okay to destroy the reputations and lives of others because, today, to be *against* means you're a good citizen" (61). This leads to systems of no self-criticism, no honest negotiation, no efforts to work towards reconciliation, and no recognition of one's own mistakes. Schulman expands, "in victim based environments it is implicit that innocent people are not (legally) responsible to protect themselves [...] Responsibility lies only with perpetrators and victims are not participators" (31). This leads to a 'powderkeg' environment on college campuses where "identity politics are reduced to narratives of oppression and oppressed" (Anon) with students self-identifying as oppressed, marginalized, or traumatized in order to "reap the spoils of victimization" (Anon).

Echoing this assertion in their book *The Rise of Victimhood Culture,* Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning detail how America is the perfect location for victimhood culture to spread. As opposed to cultures of dignity where self-worth is context independent, individual, and inherent thus less affected by social regard of others (as primarily found in Asian and Middle-Eastern countries), cultures of honor, like that in the USA, place importance on socially conferred worth, reputation, and a positive social image all of which can be granted or taken away by others

(Lehmann). People in these cultures of honour are highly sensitive to slight (both at the group and individual level), they have a tendency to seek third parties to resolve complaints and disagreements, and they seek to cultivate an image of those in need of assistance (Lehmann). By identifying as victims they avoid having to confront themselves, their individual or group shortcomings of the past, and they can use furor to override or distract from their own culpability. In speaking with educators, 'entitlement' was by far the word they used most to convey this attitude amongst students.

Whether because they paid for their education, their abilities proved them deserving (as confirmed by their acceptance to prestigious schools etc.), or because their socio-racial-economic status warrants it (coming from both ends of the financial spectrum), faculty, staff, and administrators felt a growing entitlement amongst students to make demands of their educators and institutions with the expectation to have all demands responded to, if not met. As for why this may be, some possibilities, according to Lukianoff and Haidt in *The Coddling of the American Mind* is that freshman entering college straight from high school today have spent more time alone than any previous generation (160). A result of paranoid overprotective parenting, smaller sized families, and mediated sociability resultant from isolated time spent online, they argue that young adults have had less life experiences, are more emotionally stunted, and have achieved fewer milestones on the path to autonomy than any preceding generation (160, 161). They have diminished conflict resolution skills and are more likely to turn to figures of authority to resolve their problems. Possibly exacerbated in fine art programs to which "sensitive, introspective, [and] socially

minded [...] students are drawn" (Anon), they are "charmed by tropes of the lone artistic genius that compounds their 'navel-gazing'" (Anon) – the self-indulgent contemplation of themselves at the expense of a wider view ("navel-gazing," def. Oxford). For these students, *their* offence is all that matters, no greater contextualization is necessary beyond the 'self' and any challenge to this way of thinking may be labelled violent. Furthermore, when students are encouraged to put anything "that makes them marginalized front and center" (Anon) it is understandable that these ideologies are "imbibed by impressionable minds" (Anon). As author Jill Bennett writes in her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, there is a widespread cultural obsession with wound culture, and trauma envy. There is an allure to trauma discourse in a time where "the victim has been elevated to a position of moral superiority in postcolonial society" (5).

This cycle plays itself out across the lives of students, teachers, and administrators within educational institutions. "Everyone is to blame" (Anons). As stated by Eric Adler, Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Maryland and author of *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond*, "American educational institutions are ideologically inspired spaces of intolerance, fed by students who think they know best. And the students think this for a good reason. Their schools, having given up any coherent vision of what it means to be an educated person, treat them this way" (Adler). Having no way to make sense of the seemingly insurmountable local and global complexities we currently face, students protest, blame, and scapegoat others in order to gain a sense of self.

3. BLAME STUDENTS

The general agreement amongst the teachers I interviewed and across the texts they recommended is that current students believe oppositional discourse, far leaning political rhetoric, conflicting ideology, bothersome artwork, and all forms of speech which can be labeled aggressive, hateful, racist, problematic or triggering, pose a threat to student mental and physical safety. Educators claim students who believe content to be objectionable feel entitled to remove it and feel justified in punishing the offender who circulates the objectionable material. In these cases, students demand to no longer be alone with the offending person, seeking only moderated interaction, or insist on personal protection under the pretense of feeling physically unsafe. The spaces and the educators entrusted to care for them are then labelled 'violent,' a word that was used repeatedly in my conversations with students as they recounted past incidences. Alternatively, students request to work with different teachers altogether. Relying on the bureaucratic hierarchies of the institution, students climb the ladder of

teachers, administrators, counsellors, department heads, deans, provosts, and presidents until their complaints are heard and action taken. If these demands are not met then students feel justified to escalate their demands in the form of walkouts, public denouncement via online or media sources, boycotts, singular or organized protests (both vocal and silent), calls for demotion or firing, and counter aggressive actions against fellow students, teachers, and administrators – inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, if mediation or arbitration was sought by the student and the arbitrator sided with the perceived offender, further action, self-removal (often to other departments or schools), or escalation occurred. In these instances students were likely to organize solidarity groups to protest the injustices: shouting down, calling-out, or refusing to interact with the perceived offender(s) until their demands were met. Factions commonly identified along lines of race, culture, gender, and sexual orientation, amongst others are formed. These factions lead to backup, camaraderie, solidarity groups, and co-action, typically with students on one side and those who represent the institution on the other (although factions between student groups sometimes occur). Here, to not support one's fellow student is to side with the oppressor, victim blame, and jeopardize the benefits of tribal identification and risk similar ostracization and vengeance. In these instances of 'group-tribalism' dialog becomes impossible to facilitate and engaging with the oppositional party is seen as a compromise of one's morality. Berkeley, Brandeis, Brown, Emory, Middlebury, and Yale are just a few of the campuses where these high profile student protests occurred. The details of which can be found with a quick search of the Internet.

These conditions set the stage for the *I Am Not Your Token* antiracism demonstrations at RISD in 2016. Protesting the "lack of recognition, education and discussion with regard to race, sexuality and class both academically and socially at RISD" (Panajady) the public rallies called for faculty sensitivity training, curricular reform, and a Market Square memorial to commemorate the slave auctions that occured at the nearby Crown Coffee House during the seventeeth and eigteenth centuries (the history of which is detailed in the book *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution* by author Charles Rappleye). Occurring inside the classroom as well, these protests which would become known as the 'silent room protests', saw students, mainly of color alongside self-identifying allies, refusing to participate during class critiques to mirror back the silence they experienced in response to work they produced about identity, race, racism, or oppression. Arguing that ignorance or uncomfortability led to teachers and students staying silent so as not to offend, to avoid hostility, or because they felt they lacked the vocabulary to address such work, the silent room protestors refused to do the emotional labor of unpacking artwork for an uninformed and unwilling audience. Something they argued was (and continues to be, according to many I interviewed) regularly demanded of themselves and people of color. Rather than "toning it down, cutting it out, or making work that didn't cause others to be uncomfortable" (Anon), as recommended by their instructors, these students turned to protest to be heard. Although these demands had an effect on the formation of the Social Equity Action Working Group (SEA) and the Center for Social Equity & Inclusion (SEI)

by the RISD President's Cabinet, over the following years these same students noticed a decrease in work that dealt with similar issues.

Observing that incoming freshmen, sophomores, and even new graduate students were producing less work that dealt with racial, social, gender, or sexuality issues, the students who participated in the protests with whom I spoke questioned whether this was due to shifting student concerns or something more nefarious. They posited that new students who made less provocative work were being accepted so teachers could avoid conflict within their departments and the school at large. They noticed teachers were increasingly accepting 'Mini-Me's' (smaller 'clones' of themselves – a reference to the character Mini-Me from the *Austin Powers* movie franchise) in an attempt to avoid conflict. Surrounding themselves with students who upheld their particular interests and ways of working, these professors reinforced their beliefs, shored up their relevance, and avoided uneasiness. Students expressed the hardships of existing in departments where they were discouraged from making work about themselves. Instead of receiving constructive criticism, being told their work was "bad", or if "they were making shitty work about race" (Room), something they desperately wanted (as documented in the RISD student produced short film *The Room of Silence*) they were met with faculty incapable or unwilling to speak to these issues.

When students believe that material which makes them uncomfortable equates to a physically unsafe environment, they feel justified in taking action against their peers, educators, and institutions. This leads to moral dependence, weakened conflict resolution skills, and perpetuates reliance of apparatuses of civil government including the

legal punitive system which, at its extreme, upholds the authority of the state. This inability for critical reflection when combined with kowtowing by institutions leads to cultures of victimhood. For many educators, they believe these are the conditions that make the classroom the ideal setting to unpack and undo these matters.

4. BLAME TEACHERS

In their own words, "most higher-level teachers are never taught how to teach, they pattern their methods after what they've learned because mimicry is expedient, efficient, and comforting" (Anons). As such, both new and seasoned teachers find themselves ill-equipped to deal with student opposition and increasingly adverse reactivity. At a loss for how to respond, the teachers with whom I spoke are uncertain how to handle the progressively complex situations that present themselves coming from students who are unlikely to have been shown how to manage conflict by their parents, social groups, or educators. Furthermore, these teachers exist in environments of paranoia and fear where they do not feel supported by their superiors so they do not always turn to their superiors for guidance or assistance.

I spoke with students and teachers who are frustrated that everything feels "overly-politicized" (Anon) because it makes it impossible to any longer discuss "art as art" (Anon). Upset that schools have become "environments where everything is concerned with social justice" (Anon), they argue that these issues "stifle creativity and suppress artistic expression" (Anons). Some claim this is detrimental to

what has made RISD prestigious, namely a dedication to craftsmanship, technical mastery, and technological advancement. They argue that talking about "big issues like race, gender, and sexuality" (Anon) makes students uncomfortable, creates hostile classrooms, and jeopardizes harmony within departments and across the school. They avoid once commonplace terms like "true, universal, and pure" (Anons) fearing they will be contested as oppressive, racist, or triggering. Mourning a loss of intimacy inside and outside the classroom, they miss the candor they once had with students, worrying even the simplest interaction will now be labeled harassment or a microaggression. Especially uncertain how to talk about uncomfortable work (typically adopting the adjective 'problematic') "when everything seems to make *someone* uncomfortable" (Anon), the majority do not know what scholars and subjects they are "permitted to teach" (Anon). They do not understand what it means to teach from a postcolonial or decolonized perspective; and they wonder if everything "Western or classical must be thrown out" (Anon) so as not to offend, cause controversy, or because it will be labelled violent. Furthering their paranoia, for professors with a vested interest in traditional scholarship and disciplines, they see diversification of curriculum as threats to their careers. They fear their areas of expertise will become outdated, obsolete, or deemed discriminatory, worrying that even small grievances will be used to usher them out.

Beyond feeling fearful, censored, and silenced within the classroom the belief that administrators and 'higher-ups' will not support them when controversy arises is common. Labeled "institutional cowardice" (Anon) at its worst, teachers shared stories of being baffled

by administrators who sided with students to "save face, to give good PR (public relations), and to protect the reputation of the school" (Anons).

Especially true of those high on the 'precarity index' (adjunct, part-time, sessional, critics, and those whose immigration status hinge on steady employment etc.), few without tenure feel secure in their positions. Declaring that "it's hard to maintain integrity when you are scared of being fired" (Anon), teachers "betray their morals in order to protect themselves" (Anon). They encourage one another to "cover their ass" (Anon) by discreetly audio recording conversations, journaling interactions, archiving emails, and keeping paper trails. Unsure if they are always on the record, they are less forthcoming with students and colleagues than in the past. Fearing retaliation, they self-censor in the classroom, do not speak-up on behalf of co-workers, and only offer off the record support to peers facing punitive action. In a time of rampant call-outs, public defamation, and offense archaeology (digging up old tweets, statements, or yearbooks to the end of bringing them down publicly) teachers are fearful that past actions and remarks will come back to haunt them.

According to those with whom I spoke, when conflict becomes unavoidable, teachers, like students, increasingly rely on boards, mediators, and arbitrators for conflict resolution over interpersonal solutions. Fed up with inhospitable workplaces, environments rife with gossip and backbiting, and being 'worn down' by disagreeable superiors who engage in "wars of attrition" (Anon) to encourage them to leave (by making their surroundings untenable), they use bureaucratic processes to defend themselves. They gather letters of support from colleagues, students, and alumni and fear that 'discovery', in the legal sense, will be

used as 'fodder' to side against them: to punish, terminate, or commence legal action.

For those who withstand arbitration, some thrive; whereas others become despondent, apathetic, or apoplectic. Some become invigorated and actively involved in the processes and procedures of mediation. They become advocates. Others take part in conflict resolution and peer training programs as well as social equity and social change workshops, only to find those spaces populated by "like-minded individuals talking to themselves in ironically self-congratulatory tones" (Anon). Because those who need to 'hear' are unwilling to listen.

As for the teachers who return to class nostalgic for the "good ole' days" (Anon) of free speech, student to teacher intimacy, and *l'art pour l'art* ("art for art's sake" (Anon), pure aestheticism divorced from any didactic, identity, moral, political, or utilitarian function) they strive harder to champion *The Fine Arts* and their institutionalization. They contend for atelier activity, unadulterated craft, and the privileging of vision over language in opposition to postmodern theoretical allegiance (the pedagogical approach of which is detailed in *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* by Howard Singerman and arguably still primarily valorized at RISD). "All the while they nod their heads obsequiously, conceding that, yes, the privileged must give way to the oppressed" (Anon), yet they remain resentful of the "claimed legitimate space which must now be part of their curriculum" (Anon), according to one professor. On the surface they agree, smilingly, but at the same time they populate their classes with like-minded students who ensure their self-interests.

As no familial model for truth and reconciliation (one where we care for each other as if kin employing the apparatuses of truth commissions) exists in most higher learning institutions, there is no need to rehabilitate transgressors or bring them "back into the fold" (Anon) because, like students, they will be gone soon enough if they do not conform to the prevailing institutional ideologies. As opposed to rehabilitation models of reconciliation where transgressors make broken communities whole again through their reassimilation (as typically found in Indigenous and non-colonial modes of healing), "administrators rarely see themselves as constituent parts of a larger public health endeavor" (Schulman, 31). As such, college campuses become closed systems where mistakes of the past are repeated in the name of tradition. This creates oppositional environments between members who strive for change and those who idealize the past. To avoid conflict, anxiety, and to protect their self-interests both sides employ varied coping strategies and defense mechanisms. In these environments, challenging the existing state of affairs is understandably perceived as threatening to those who benefit from these systems as their financial security and overall well-being may depend on their preservation.

5. BLAME INSTITUTIONS

According to some of the educators I spoke with, if teachers are neither willing nor encouraged to change, they run the risk of making themselves and the institutions they represent obsolete. Noticing that the majority of critically engaged artists gaining fame are coming out of studio MFA and PhD programs in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, some argue that it is already too late. Whereas these foreign schools are producing "better educated and better speaking students from free programs" (Anon), American schools like RISD are playing "catch-up – thirty years too late" (Anon). "As the most forward thinking students choose other countries and continents, American MFA programs are left to be financed solely by the children of the rich and ultra-rich who see education as a pastime" (Anons).

At RISD, classes are primarily populated by students from opposite ends of the financial spectrum. The barbell effect, as it has become known, manifests as the wealthy sitting beside those they help subsidize with their full tuition payments (approximately $10,000 more per year than the median total income of an average American household, for both graduates and undergraduates). Conspicuous in their

absence, "middle-class student enrolment in MFA programs is on a decline" (Anon). As stated by one professor, "buying space to express oneself where an audience is forced to listen without opposition is the ultimate privilege" (Anon). In classrooms occupied by a "certain kind of leisure class" (Anon) who pursue education for enjoyment and self-actualizing expression rather than economic or professional gain, these students do not expect nor want to be subjected to "messy discourses" (Anon) associated with gender, race, and social equity. Especially when these issues may implicate them in their familial profiteering from the marginalization of their classmates. "Here to be served and not to learn" (Anon), American schools are increasingly catering to the whims and physical well-being of students. According to Eric Adler of the University of Maryland, "students accustomed to authoring every facet of their college experience now want their institutions to mirror their views as well" (Adler) (a byproduct of the free elective, free market approach to education ushered in by 1869-1909 Harvard president Charles W. Eliot).

Threatening their *College as Country Club* (the title of a 2013 National Bureau of Economic Research paper) surroundings, these rich and ultra rich students from around the globe are forced to contend with students from marginalized, oppressed, and underserved communities who are receiving never before access to college from local, state, and national programs. A direct result of the American civil rights movement from the 1940s to 1960s, continuing shifts in public and government attitudes have demanded diversity in the classroom which continues today (the necessities and benefits of which are innumerable and beyond the scope of this paper). As such, institutions that have

historically benefited from serving only the leisure classes find themselves "woefully unprepared for the problems associated with new demographics" (Anons). "Caught between the extremes of the rich and 'volatile first-time learners' institutions like RISD are uncertain how to accommodate both" (Anons). On one end of the spectrum they are pressured from socially and politically astute yet reactive students, fueled by mass media and cultural movements, who self-identify as marginalized and oppressed. On the other, they face demands from culturally diverse wealthy students who expect their whims to be catered to, that, by all likelihood, directly benefit from the oppression of marginalized groups. Unaccustomed to conflict and self-reflective accountability, these students do not expect their learning environments to jeopardize their emotional well-being; and they run the risk of leaving or choosing other schools should these environments become compromised, thus "draining the financial lifeblood" (Anon) from the institutions their money maintains.

In talking with educators and administrators at RISD, most, if not all, were amazed that, as stated by one professor, "it has taken one hundred years, if not more, for this to blow up in everyone's faces" (Anon). What seems to be happening very thoroughly right now may be, in fact, extremely slow compared to national discourse and the sociopolitical advancements of the last hundred years including, but not limited to: the civil rights movement, the womens' rights movement, the counter culture movement, the antiwar movement, and the gay liberation movement, to name a few. As such, many with whom I spoke questioned the authenticity of recent changes to policy and moves toward social

equity. Of which two distinct possibilities repeatedly presented themselves.

The more cynical of the two possibilities is that institutional moves toward social equity and social justice are in response to the free market. As the art world has shifted toward socially and politically engaged art, self identifying 'applied art' institutions, like RISD, must catch up otherwise they run the risk of becoming obsolete. They are exposed to the possibility of losing status, prestige, and their name brand cachet becoming irrelevant. As stated by one professor, "there are no key white US artists rising to prominence by making abstract art anymore. The biggest names are political artists coming from Asia and the Middle-East. Even the richest kids can't buy shows" (Anon). Worsened by student activism, public protest, negative publicity, in addition to criticism from enrolled and former students, teachers, and administrators, current affiliates warn that "it can all unravel in the next ten years" (Anon). All the while, they question how many of the recent changes will revert back to "business as usual" (Anon) once media attention abates and the 'problematic' students are eliminated. Something which is especially likely when regression to old ways upholds the privilege and security of those in power.

The second possibility is that change has arisen because of a shared moral and human obligation of vital importance: to foster group empathy, compassion, equity, and interdependent interconnectivity. The more hopeful of the two possibilities, proponents of this theory argue that institutions must be seen as communities of complex individuals rather than all powerful, autonomous entities. Referring to the potential for a few determined people to effect change, on multiple occasions

teachers recited (or cobbled together some semblance of) the famous Margaret Mead quote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, organized citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (Beeman). As opposed to seeing powerlessness in the face of hegemony and institutional dominance, these educators see change as evidence of humanist progress. Furthermore, they give thanks to the persecuted, oppressed, and marginalized peoples whose efforts paved the way for future generations, and they articulate their sorrow for the burdens their forebears had to endure so others would not. Key to this second conviction is the necessity for historical contextualization and the interrogation of power and its systemic underpinnings. As well, this requires discovering ways to encourage those whose oppression is less apparent to contribute, especially those who exhibit the physical characteristics of hegemony.

6. STOP BLAMING

It was never intended for this paper to propose solutions. It was only meant to be a collection of thoughts and opinions offered by educators and administrators regarding campus conflict and the varied responses to it. Understandably, however, these educators offered some needed suggestions, many of which I have come to wholeheartedly endorse. Instead of providing solutions, the practice of scripting policies and enacting regulations, creating regulatory bodies and special positions, and relying on mediated disciplinary action often only makes matters worse. Attempts to enforce civility and efforts to create ideologically safe environments (equating mental discomfort to physical 'violence') has unintended consequences, and their intended beneficiaries can be worse off than if no intervention had been attempted.

Instead of labelling things 'problematic', as if everything is a problem that can or needs to be solved, calling things 'painful', 'uncomfortable', or 'uneasy' does not require an immediate solution and deprivileges reactivity in favour of embodied experience. Here, students can lean into complexity, contradiction, ambivalence, and uneasiness,

and allow reason to prevail. Although hate speech must not be permitted, it should be conceded that a person or fact must be regarded as justifiable if the contrary has not been proven. Everyone must be given the benefit of the doubt and be allowed to make mistakes. Speech codes and censorship guidelines stifle creativity and environments where free-speech is suppressed lead to emotionally over-reactive students who become reliant on authority figures to resolve conflict. These students are less likely to develop their own mediation skills and it gives everyday conflict a primacy it doesn't deserve. Echoed by the educators with whom I spoke, "teachers need to stop responding to half of the stuff that comes at them. The classroom is where you need to discuss the big issues from every perspective, including those who sympathize with difficult sentiments and opinions. If not, you run the risk of having the world leave you behind" (Anons).

      If the individuals who control educational institutions choose to see themselves as part of larger public health endeavors then their curriculum will focus on building community and a sense of familial responsibility for one another. Of paramount importance is teaching rigorous self-reflexive criticality, empathy, and compassion for self and others which is historically contextualized so everyone may realize the potential for change they possess. If not, cycles of repetition will only get worse. Current students who are emotionally volatile and reactive will continue to perpetuate what they have learned. Eventually they will become teachers who are incapable of empathy or compassion. They will instill moral dependency and preserve victim identification. They will have fewer conflict resolution skills and will teach generations of

increasingly threatened students to rely on state apparatuses of punitive government, police, and military vengeance.

There will always be people and institutions who oppose change but learning to appeal to their common shared humanity will be more beneficial to all parties than conflict. If influence is impossible, an influx of counter minded individuals can be beneficial to change ideology, assuming they can be retained (as I was told, RISD hired forty percent of its current faculty between 2013-2018). Of the utmost importance, these new hires must be dedicated to building community, fostering critical-thinking, and engendering empathy and compassion.

Instead of focusing on incidents, studying the causal systems, contexts, and conditions which affect the present moment and pervade society brings about personal detachment, diminishes reactivity, and encourages small incremental changes. As one administrator put it, the "long, slow, and deeply uncomfortable human centered work that builds community" (Anon).

Built upon decolonized and indigenized frameworks of truth and reconciliation students and educators must be taught to care for one another as family, despite our differences, embracing the complexities and contradictions of being whole, mortal, and flawed beings, the characteristics that make us human. No matter the original causes, from poor parenting, to social media, to systemic oppression, in order to begin undoing some of the dislocation that is endemic to late market capitalism, as opposed to focusing on media specificity, craftsmanship, aesthetics, and emergent technologies, teachers must be inspired to take up the mantle of educating what it means to be a 'decent' human being who cares for themselves and their fellow earthlings.

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