

**THIS  
IS A  
CRITIQUE**

FROM: a group of women of color at RISD GD

*Spring 2021*

**YOU CAUSE MORE  
HARM THAN  
YOU THINK.**

# INTRO

*This Is a Critique* is a move to confront the eurocentric, male-centered critique culture and erasure of women of color (WOC) in the Graphic Design department at RISD. It is located in the main hallway entrance of the Design Center from May 10–May 23 2021.

The installation acts as a space for the voices of WOC to freely speak in an institution where we have traditionally been erased or silenced. It acts to highlight and reveal the structures at play to those who are and have been complicit.

*Included in both the installation and this accompanying zine are the stories and experiences of 14 anonymous WOC in RISD GD.*

WE  
ASK YOU

TO *acknowledge what you have  
done and what you can do*

LISTEN

*to our experiences, and we  
mean really listen*

BECAUSE  
THERE IS A  
PROBLEM  
HERE

*so check your privilege  
because complicity to these  
systems has never been &  
will never be okay.*

“I wish students and faculty were forced to confront their discomfort and ignorance just as I’ve seen so many WOC do, with humility and a willingness to learn.”

ENTRY I

*Mind your own business and learn to humble yourself to be open to other perspectives and experiences. Also, why do you think I care about your opinion at all? I don't.*

All the occasions of erasure have conglomerated into a blurred memory of passing micro-aggressions and being talked over. I spent a whole semester making work about my Asian American identity only to be told by my professor in our final review that she never was that interested in identity work.

The fact that most students and faculty aren't equipped with the resources or knowledge to even approach WOC's work is disheartening and invalidating. I haven't gotten a single piece of meaningful feedback about my personal work because critique always ends up being more about the form/technique rather than my concepts.

On occasion, that lack of knowledge also manifests in complete disregard for WOC's lived experiences, trauma,

and complexity. I think this is also definitely a fault on the department and its obsession over accessibility and publication. I acknowledge their importance but also challenge the design community's priorities. Those are the reasons why I hear faculty members implying that WOC's traumas have to be publicized or disseminated to a wider audience in order to be successful—or that multilingual WOC should do extra labor to accommodate for English speakers.

What then is the point of being in class and this institution, when I don't have a community to support my ideas and research? Crit and class become time wasted without any benefit or expended effort into proving your value to white peers. I wish students and faculty were forced to confront their discomfort and ignorance just as I've seen so many WOC do, with humility and a willingness to learn.

“Mind your own business and learn to humble yourself to be open to other perspectives & experiences.”

“Be aware of the space you take up if you’re not BIPOC. Ask how you can do better. And get uncomfortable.”

ENTRY II



*It is so difficult to show up and participate when your mere identity is challenged everyday. Educate yourself, and listen to marginalized voices, really listen.*

*Be aware of the emotional labor you're asking of BIPOC students to exhaust when you ask them to educate you or talk to you about how they're affected. Be aware of the space you take up if you're not BIPOC. Ask how you can do better. And get uncomfortable.*

For me, it's less an experience of active erasure but more of an experience of feeling completely invisible. My race or ethnic identity is not ever included in conversations about BIPOC people, so for a majority of my life and specifically my RISD career, I've hidden behind my racial ambiguity.

I have always been the only Arab person in all of my classes, so for me, I did not want to perform my ethnic identity in my classes or my critiques, because I never had support or saw myself represented anywhere. Not in the design world, not in the faculty, not in the student body.

WOC voices in critique spaces are very often disregarded and not taken seriously, or when we speak up on problematic work, the conversation ends at the end of class and never brought up again, especially when it comes to critiquing the work of White men.

in critique spaces often outweigh WOC voices. I think it's on the faculty to recognize those power dynamics in their classes, and to value WOC voices when we speak up.

We are the ones taking risks when we decide to speak up, but the racial power dynamics

“What you say and do has  
a lot of impact. Don’t forget that.”

ENTRY III

*What you say and do has a lot of impact .  
Don't forget that.*

In the History of GD class, I was so happy to see that the professor was taking the time to go in to detail and be excited about the things he was teaching.

However, when we got to the ever-so-small section on Black design and designers he merely skimmed over it and told us that it was not something we had to remember because it wouldn't be on the test.

There aren't many WOC as instructors and that needs to change.

“My labor, which amounts to killing myself to have a tenth of the space, is taken as a kind of tithe, an unpleasant fee I need to pay for the proceeds of stepping in the room.”

ENTRY IV

*Resign.*

*Or make space for WOC to bring their energy and vision to radically reform your department.*

I teach here. Year after year, my contributions are sidelined or slyly not acknowledged, and my labor, which amounts to killing myself to have a tenth of the space, is taken as a kind of tithe, an unpleasant fee I need to pay for the proceeds of stepping in the room. I work constantly to support and mentor the WOC who are erased as in these accounts, to be the one person that hears and validates them because they're either being actively undermined or gaslit. But in the process of doing that work—at least 20-30 hours extra as well—my health has failed multiple times.

I keep trying to push change and critique, create the accountability culture within faculty as one the few BIPOC women here, but encounter the wall of silence, which leads me to doubt my place, my colleagues' care, whether they see or hear me at all. There are colleagues with power who listen, but will not change the culture. Like so many WOC instructors before me at RISD, I have lost the battle which can't be waged alone.

Critique is the psychological battleground where erasure begins, through the disregard of any work to do with difference, of any expression illegible to the white gaze, of whatever doesn't look like a very specific tradition of "excellence". Aesthetics and power and notions of genius and mastery are all reinforced in critique. If ten professors are white and in their fifties and have never read a post-colonial theory text or Said or any thinking written after 1990, how can they possibly be anything but violent to young brilliant people from all over the world in their critique? Critique is where faculty who haven't evolved their views enforce their violence and protect their jobs, and kill risk, and make sure the cycle continues.

Maybe most insidious: it's where the crushing doubt is seeded for WOC, that they aren't rigorous, that their work isn't good, that their work is "inscrutable," (real story), or that they should be doing this (elevated form in the vein of Dutch design masters), instead of that (oh, critical exploration of culture or history or class or \_\_\_\_.) Critique is whether whatever joy, pleasure, curiosity, and interest that one had sacrificed home, family, stability to pursue to come to an MFA is overshadowed and erased by the weight of an institution hell-bent at preserving power at all costs.

“Like so many WOC instructors before me at RISD, I have lost the battle which can't be waged alone.”

“Listen!

Let me finish my sentence!”

ENTRY V

*Listen!*

*Let me finish my sentence!*

*I know damn well I speak slowly,  
that still doesn't give you the right to  
interject, if anything, you need to wait.*

There's been way too many times where an idea is dumbed down by the class. Voices from different backgrounds have beautiful stories to tell, we must listen and provide space for their context, not everything is inspired by Hollywood, it ain't the center of the world.

Allow voices that don't agree  
with the majority, make the  
classroom warm enough to  
allow those disagreements.



“I’ve noticed this culture also persists to the professional graphic design community, and it is disappointing to think this could be just a reality for the rest of my working life.”

ENTRY VI

*I would say for people to be more mindful of how much space they take up in critique and in the department in general, because overall this leaks into the graphic design community and stays with us as a culture.*

*If you want to take, you need to be able to give, and speaking up in crit for everyone is the first and simplest way to do that.*

*I also think faculty should do more to meet students where they are at, and be mindful of their voices, opinions, and biases so that they don't influence the conversation more than necessary.*

I don't often make cultural work, but think a lot about what it would be like if I did. I'm not sure if I'm worried that the work could be considered derivative and unoriginal, or if I'm just worried about having to explain context to people who might not understand.

I also didn't really think I had experienced erasure at first, but the more I think about it, the more the smaller instances have collected. As an Asian American woman, I often feel anxious about taking up space in critique, and think over the comments I'm planning to make over and over before I make them. I'm concerned about being mistaken by a professor for one of my peers, especially in an academic culture where being more outspoken is rewarded with more recognition, even if the outspokenness doesn't amount to anything substantial.

I've noticed this culture also persists to the professional graphic design community, and it is disappointing to think this could be the reality for the rest of my working life.

I think my experiences have gotten generally better since entering the department, but the culture of foundation year definitely contributes to the

problem. I don't believe the fear that foundation year faculty sometimes use to control the situation is accomplishing anything, and the

culture of teaching students to expect to get burnt out (the sink or swim mentality) is helpful to anyone. I've slowly seen things get better as my time in the institution has passed, but I also think it's due to the power dynamics of older students and faculty getting a bit more evened out. Having to deal with the toxic dynamic of crit spaces when you first enter the institution is extremely formative though, and definitely puts you on edge for the rest of your time here.

“Faculty should do more to meet students where they are at, and be mindful of their voices, opinions, and biases...”

“If you obliterate someone’s will to talk about ideas they want to talk about or take the space away from them, then you force them to tune to your channel and I would call that oppression.”

ENTRY VII

*I don't know about erasure, but I can definitely talk about disregard. The latter being much more harmful than the former for it carries an active practice of ignorance and lack of acknowledgement.*

*Being a WOC has not been easy, especially when you don't directly come from the American context. I and my ideas, on multiple occasions, have been either overlooked or talked over just because I did not speak them as boldly as my male counterparts.*

*I feel necessitated to code-switch just to present myself as worthy and equal. On occasions when I try and talk about my country, I can see silence take over the room with no active participation from my peers. Sometimes when my ideas are not "American" enough, I have seen preference be given those whose are. I wouldn't call this erasure because it hasn't completely taken away my will to present my notions, however, I will say I have been made to feel invisible and a mere glitch in system.*

*I constantly subconsciously pose this question to my peers—"Why not be more curious about the world, and not just America? Why not learn more, educate oneself more? Why not let the roots grow out instead of just putting constraints on them?"*

*I just wish, both in the critique spaces & the department, I was shown more support, encouragement, interest, & enthusiasm (something only I do for myself) just the same way I do for others.*

If you obliterate someone's will to talk about ideas they want to talk about or take the space away from them, then you force them to tune to your channel and I would

call that oppression. This problem exists not only in GD but is prevalent across other departments.

“Your silence and ignorance directly participate in further silencing and invalidating the issues and experiences women of color are trying to articulate.”

ENTRY VIII

*Particularly to cishet white men, why do you feel the need to speak over women of color? Why are our experiences not valid enough for you to speak up on, ask questions about, and research further? While we receive nothing from you in critique, why do you expect us to praise and give your work more attention and feedback?*

*I've heard some people at this school say that "there is no space for cishet white men" when this entire institution was built by cis straight white men for cis straight white men. You push this narrative to the extremes and make it difficult for any person of color to have the space to have their voices heard. Your silence and ignorance directly participate in further silencing and invalidating the issues and experiences women of color are trying to articulate. Then to have the audacity to claim that YOU have it worse? Please check yourselves and your privilege.*

I just think that on an institutional level, RISD and RISD GD prefers to give more support to the cis, straight white male than to uplift the voices of people of color. I've seen professors give more validation and critical feedback to the work of white men and dismiss the physical and emotional labor of people of color.

And when difficult topics are brought up, students are expected to explain their trauma and educate others from beginning to end. Yet these works are not given the same thoughtfulness and criticality that our white peers receive. RISD professors are often not willing to facilitate a greater conversation about critique culture and

expect students to navigate that space on their own. I think professors should hold a greater responsibility at an institution like RISD to create spaces in which we can safely talk about and address complex issues.

Professors should also be responsible for holding students and other faculty members accountable for problematic actions instead of telling people of color basically to just "deal with it" and that "it's worse in the real world." We know it's worse in the real world. We've been living in it since the day we were born and we shouldn't have to put it up with it anymore, especially not at school.

Doing something like this is only putting the blame on the victim and abusing your own position of power. It feels like professors, when students go up to them to talk about these issues, they don't even try to educate themselves and reflect on the feelings of particularly women of color. At this point these discussions about "decolonizing design" feel more like inaccessible academic jargon rather than a genuine attempt to holistically look at all the flaws that are actively hurting women of color.

“At this point these discussions about ‘decolonizing design’ feel more like inaccessible academic jargon...”



“But how much does that matter when it’s caused my experience in the department to be defined by a desire to be “seen” rather than to explore and experiment?”

ENTRY IX

*I agree everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt and the room to make mistakes. I also understand being of East Asian descent results in privileges other POC don't experience.*

*It doesn't mean holding this experience to heart is an overreaction. The erasure I have seen within this department often manifests in small incidents like this.*

*It is the accumulation of small incidents that is at the heart of the problem, not one professor, one peer, or one circumstance.*

I was a Korean-American woman in a class with 3-4 other women of Korean descent. We had a white professor who had returned to teaching after years at an administrative position. During the first few classes, they couldn't figure out who was who at all, calling us by the names of the other Korean women in the class only to be hesitantly corrected that, no, I'm not *Tiffany*, *Tiffany* is the one you just called *Jae*.

This incident underlines the through-line of my experience at RISD GD. Despite being in the numerical majority among students, my interaction with teachers and administrators, almost all who are white, always led me to feel indistinguishable from the rest of my peers. The frustrating part of all of this has been the erasure of that experience, mostly from well-meaning students who want to give benefit of the doubt to their teachers.

*It was probably because it was their first semester back.*

*They're really nice once you get to know them.*

But how much does that matter when it's caused my experience in the department to be defined by a desire to be "seen" rather than to explore and experiment?

It's difficult to feel your work is worthy of recognition and critique when your name and presence are overlooked.

“My interaction with teachers & administrators, almost all who are white, always led me to feel indistinguishable from the rest of my peers.”

“White dudes are always able to bring in half-assed work and the teachers don’t get mad or they rationalize the work.”

ENTRY X

*I wish that WOC would get the same opportunities as their white peers to explore other parts of their identity that isn't tied to race because it felt tokenizing and limiting.*

I was fortunate enough to not experience intense erasure, but I did encounter micro-aggressions here and there about where I'm from/my ethnicity.

I felt like it was hard to make culturally specific work OR if I did make culturally specific work, then that's all the teachers would want me to make? Like it would add to their diversity quota?

White dudes are always able to bring in half-assed work and the teachers don't get mad or they rationalize the work.

“ Well...what about me? What about my creative spirit? Don't I deserve to be protected too?”

ENTRY XI

*I've never felt like there was space here in GD to ever make work about myself or my lived experience. As someone who grew up in white schools, a white neighborhood, and with white peers, it felt normal for me to not be important or considered as equal to any of my white classmates.*

*I have lots of internalized racism and subconsciously elevate my white professor's and white peers' opinions over my own. GD perpetuated that mindset for a long time.*

If you think you aren't part of the problem, you are actively contributing to the problem.

I met with two professors over Zoom after a particular incident that happened in critique where I felt incredibly unsupported and invalidated by the professors when I pointed out that a white male student's work was potentially harmful and dangerous. During our conversation, I had made it clear to the professors that even if they didn't agree about the image that had been made, the main issue was that I felt unsupported and invalidated during the critique conversation by the professors instead of having them mediate the conversation.

As soon as I pointed out the racial dynamics of the

professor's whiteness and the power dynamic of their authority as professors, they became extremely defensive:

*Actually, YOU were the one who made US uncomfortable.*

But it's not my job as your student to make you comfortable.

*We felt protective over this student because we felt like you were trying to censor him.*

*We didn't want him to lose his creative spirit or his desire to make things.*

Well...what about me? What about my creative spirit?

Don't I deserve to be protected too?

I found myself apologizing multiple times and soothing their ego. I was terrified because not only were they professors of an extremely popular class, but were also well-respected designers in their field. I didn't realize I had been gaslit by their white fragility.

For them to take advantage of their power to tell me that in fact, I had been the villain in the situation was ludicrous. How dare they try to place the responsibility of mediating a critique on me. It is THEIR job to make EVERYONE feel comfortable in the classroom, not just the white students.

“I didn't realize  
I had been gaslit  
by their white  
fragility.”



“I am not a student who doesn’t know better. Now I could see the sheer laziness in their pursuit of knowledge crystal clear.”

ENTRY XII

*I would say that being more experienced doesn't guarantee one some sort of authority. Please learn, try to learn about anything that you never know.*

Every time I wanna make a piece about something Chinese, something philosophical, something profound, and profoundly Chinese, some professor at that time (this happened on/in more than one occasion or one class) would deliberately use superficial symbolism to exemplify the route of making that they would recommend. In my mind, I was comforting myself and actively making excuses for them, thinking *Oh, I'll just give them the benefit of the doubt since they probably never heard this concept before and it is hardly easy to understand.* OH MY WAS I WRONG.

If I am still at that time, I would generalize these horrible experiences into my own responsibility that I was the one, choosing to do things culturally native and philosophical to myself, while foreign to them, but it isn't that time anymore, and I am not a student who doesn't know better. Now I could see the sheer laziness in their pursuit of knowledge crystal clear. The race or gender factor is certainly the obstacle for them to understand foreign subjects, but it is the act of giving up learning that prevented them from ever sharing space with cultures other than theirs.

I feel that RISD GD has the tendency to advocate for large scale, regardless students' personal preference. For me, it's not necessarily the critique space that was the problem, it's more on the part that happens before the critique.

It's how they planned the course; it's how they put words like large scale/"accessible"/immersive on a pedestal for every assignment, while stepping down on anything intricate, anything thoughtful, anything intellectual. It is like a parody of colonialism in a design format: "correct" things, which take time and unique to the maker, into things that are just large, invasive, and bland.

If the parody would go on further, WOC feeling the erasure couldn't just be any coincidence: Asian cultures in particular have the quietness within; expressing femininity for some people simply requires more time, which

the GD department seldom encourages.

I wanna roughly quote Janine Antoni from memory here on what she thought about her experience in RISD sculpture MFA. To her, the program didn't tolerate things that take time and it was all rushed; to her, graduating is a relief.

“It is the act  
of giving up  
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“Disrespectfully, fuck you.”

ENTRY XIII

*Disrespectfully, fuck you. I work too hard not to reap the same engagement and critique that you give to white cis men. Do better.*

Every critique is an act of erasure, especially in this white, cis male dominated field. I hate walk around critiques because non-black people do not take the time or effort to sit with my work they do with other peers.

I don't want to make work about my blackness because I won't get what I need, for multiple reasons at that: there aren't enough black professors, there aren't enough black students in my classes, there aren't people who are being educated about how to talk about topics that correspond with my experience (and it's not my job to teach you that either). I feel like I've never been able to explore my identity through graphic design like other peers have because they're simply too lazy to listen to me.

I remember in Design Studio during a walkthrough, my friend, a WOC, work was plagiarized from a piece of work she presented the

previous week. It was tied to specifically black hair culture (if I remember correctly.) The resemblance was uncanny and was obviously copied.

When she presented her problem to the person running the unit, he (a white cis man) said it wasn't plagiarism and that work can simply be inspired by other pieces. He told her not to take it 'too seriously.' In a space where we are told to fuel our own ideas, having her work and essentially her experience copied and benefit a student who didn't share that experience was disgusting and disheartening.

“I work too hard not to reap the same engagement and critique that you give to white cis men. Do better.”

# This is a Critique

THE ESSAY  
THAT INSPIRED  
THIS RESIDENCY

I keep thinking about what it means to be a WOC in this institution instilled with patriarchal and Western (Northern European) values, and my thoughts keep going back to the expectation of work: work above and beyond what is asked of my male counterparts to even just be known by my name; work above and beyond my non-BIPOC peers to frame and reframe and recontextualize for the system I have been dropped into; work that is added to my load when my peers refuse to contribute in a way that feeds back into the community (unless it serves themselves).

I think the first four weeks of the last semester of my BFA education have been fruitful. I've gotten a lot of work done. I am so grateful to have been given the opportunity to do it because I enjoy being able to help others. Through it all, I feel so grateful to have received support and to see how I can support those around me.

However, I am also looking back at the sheer amount of work that I had to do to even receive these opportunities — and through that I remember that I am a body that is deemed lesser in the context of the institution I attend, and the society we live in. So, I am tired.

I think about the idea of giving and taking within the structure of coloniality a lot. It's probably because my entire childhood was spent in spaces that were colonized. Inherent to the system of colonization is that the people in power take from those being colonized. They take resources, take advantage of generosity, take the validity and voice from the colonized. On the other hand, those who have been colonized are expected to constantly give. Give space and time for the imposition that the colonizers make upon them culturally, physically and historically. Within the institutional context of the critique space this idea of give and take is activated.

Over time, I have noticed that there are small groups of students (more often than not composed of cis straight males) who actively disengage from their peers' work. Around themselves they have built a system of elitism and exclusivity. There is an expectation on their end for all other students to give them time, give them opinions, give them feedback to continue building. But when the coin is flipped they sit in silence. **They do not give, they only take.** This kind of behavior may seem passive in the moment, however, it is an active engagement in a system of oppression.

Society expects WOC to input an insane amount of work towards just being seen, a (seemingly small, but actually impactful) privilege that the men in our spaces benefit from. The silence that these cis straight men engage in takes advantage of this privilege as they take resources and energy from their peers without giving back, thus, putting them at a direct advantage over their



peers who are expending energy to give and take simultaneously. The sentiment of power hierarchies and advantages that come into play in this kind of behaviour harkens back to those within colonization. Never did I expect to step into an educational discussion space and to experience these colonial-like exchanges.

On March 16th 2021, there was a shooting. 6 women of Asian descent were killed in a massage parlor in Georgia. My parents called me that day astutely telling me to take more care than usual. This message parsed out to more than just my engagement in public spaces.

The very next day, I was in a critique space. A cis white male student had made a piece of work that could possibly offend or harm others. A fellow Asian female peer in my class decided to speak out and warn about how this might negatively impact the intended audience of the work.

The student responded with “*Well that’s your opinion, I don’t really care if I offend anyone, I think it’s funny*” as if that would make it okay. The students in the room who looked and sounded like him nodded their heads in agreement.

No, it’s not okay. To completely invalidate and not acknowledge a voice in a room that does not reflect your own is not okay. The lack of consideration and the closing of space is not okay.

It is an act of dehumanization and a lessening of the worth of one’s peers. It was an act that was especially harmful after the killings and media response that devalued the lives of Asian-Americans only the day before.

To make it worse, our professors did not back up nor acknowledge the opinion of the student of colour in the room, instead they validated and coddled the man who had devalued her opinion.

After speaking to the others in that space, I know for a fact that every other person who did not fall into the category of a cis straight white male felt uncomfortable, unsupported, and unseen by those in authority in this moment. I thought to myself: *this is a critique?*

This is simply one event from one perspective, however, it is not an isolated occurrence. It is entangled in a web of oppression and bias. I have listened to so many instances where my peers are harmed by these systems that exist in the structure of our critical spaces. Moments of invalidation, oppression, and erasure are completely unacceptable and yet we are expected to continue enduring them. It's so emotionally draining to have to deal with alongside all the other work that we are expected to do. It is unfair and disadvantageous. Those involved must be held accountable whether they are our professors or our peers.

There must be times when we stop in the moment and talk about the behaviours and structures that we are all participating in, and ask for empathy and care from all those around us.

Those involved must acknowledge the harm they have done and put in the necessary work to understand. It is unacceptable to ask those who are othered to do the work of meeting those in power (and privilege) where they stand. Instead, those with power should take the step of putting in the effort to move towards those around them who are marginalized.

This is a critique of the educational institution. This is a critique of the immediate happenings I have seen around me. This is a critique happening at RISD, but it also must happen everywhere else.

“I so wish that...care would  
be a more fundamental tenet  
in the pedagogy.”

ENTRY XIV

*There is so much neoliberal bullshit this institution will feed us, like maybe if racist/sexist faculty attended inclusivity seminars or if our curriculum was more progressive things would be better and more tolerable for us. But unless we take seriously the complaints and demands of the most marginalized people in our community and commit to listening and caring for the students who are most struggling, nothing will change. (I sincerely believe that the class of '21 should have undergone a group therapy session in our sophomore year. There was such negative energy that was circulating—competition, snarkiness, the worship ((by both faculty and students)) of a select few male students—that led to a culture of alienation and disillusionment.) I so wish that mental health was taken more seriously by faculty, and that care would be a more fundamental tenet in the pedagogy.*

Because RISD GD favors a very specific type of work (that which is legible to white audiences, that which is pristinely packaged and polished for consumption) I don't think I have ever felt validated or truly seen in a critique space. Without proficiency in software from the get, without the capacity to work long hours and commit to pulling several all nighters a week, I have often been made to feel as if my work doesn't matter because it lacked the polish or package of work from my more privileged peers. Why am I essentially being trained to make work a very specific type of way as to receive a basic level of engagement with my work?

Work that is highly palatable to capitalism tends to fare better in crit. And usually people with more means and better access to software and skills will be the people producing

that work and receiving more praise and institutional recognition, while students without access to those resources won't be highlighted as much.