

LETTER TO THE RISD TEXTILE DEPARTMENT

6.4.20



["Slave Cloth" manufactured at one the Hazard's mills in Rhode Island](#)

There is one mythical history of Providence that is lauded: Roger Williams and his fellow Rhode Islanders framed a colony government devoted to protecting individual "liberty of conscience" and all was 'copacetic' with the Native Americans.

"What Cheer."

However, with the least possible effort a Google search of ['Textiles,' 'Providence,' 'Slavery'](#) there is an abundance of information that points to the central role Providence played in the Atlantic Slave Trade. RISD's earliest benefactors were Textile manufacturers and Rhode Island was at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution with its power-driven textile mills. To live in an eternal present allows for a collective amnesia; The 'slave cloth' pictured above is a plain reminder that our present is premised on a history that has yet to be acknowledged.

Not confronting both the explicit and implicit history as a department perpetuates a culture of 'White Silence' and allows the faculty and staff to avoid doing the necessary, collective work. The Textiles Department has an opportunity to be change-leaders in confronting RISD's connections to slavery and Black oppression. An inadequate lack of acknowledgement of these roots on an individual and departmental level has established a current environment of anti-Blackness and is, in effect, an act of aggression.

The premise of this document is to bring into full light the conversation that has already been happening within the Department amongst the Black students and alumni and to help empower their perspectives. Our role as authors is to facilitate the conversation; ultimately, the work falls squarely upon us, the RISD staff and faculty to do more.

We believe that suggested attendance at RISD's Center for Social Equity and Inclusion workshops are in no way sufficient to affect sustained and comprehensive change within the Department and amongst the individual faculty. Systemic change requires a willingness to participate as an interconnected group; to commit to delivering the education and environment that all students deserve and that currently only some students receive. There is a demand for change and accountability from current and former students that must be addressed immediately.

RISD is in a precarious and fragile place because of COVID-19 and the department is day-by-day trying to find footing under difficult circumstances. This is understood. That said, the pandemic has truly laid bare the reality of racism and inequity for Black people. The Textiles Department needs to prioritize this commitment to change; to focus solely on one area of vulnerability brought on by the pandemic is not enough.

This document gathers recent comments from social media and private messages and has been vetted by these same students and alumni; this document wishes to uphold a transparency that helps foster the necessary growth, truth-telling and work that still needs to be done.

The time and energy students have spent this week engaging in dialogue with faculty can not be squandered. The Department is effectively parentifying these students by ignoring individual and systemic issues on a departmental level and placing the onus on the students to speak up. Staff and faculty are not fulfilling our obligation as educators by asking the students to educate us about Black culture and design and then compounding this failing by not being able to critique their work effectively. It has been stated multiple times that constructive and honest feedback in evaluations has not been addressed in a manner that could've prevented successive students from shouldering these burdens. We have perpetuated an environment where students do not feel they can speak up effectively or safely. We have not properly protected the students from overt or covert anti-black racism from their peers or faculty.

We demand anti oppression training for the entire department with full, mandatory participation. Secondly, the faculty evaluation process needs to change. Follow-up procedures need to be revised in order to demonstrate to other students that voices are being heard and these issues are being dealt with in a way that prevents all students from being dismissed or further harmed.

The following list was compiled and edited (with approval) from RISD Textiles student and alumni commentary and private messages following the RISD TEXTILES [Instagram account post](#) 6/1.

The Instagram post was written by Gina and posted after consultation with Anais.

- There is not a departmental culture of solidarity regarding issues of anti-Blackness and racism.
- There is a culture of both subtle and overt anti-Blackness that non-Black students and faculty don't really do much to combat. If anything it's reinforced as Black students fear retaliation as a consequence of the white fragility of individual faculty for speaking out about this.
- There is an intense erasure of Black and Indigenous Textile traditions
- Curricula is primarily founded on European Textile traditions and occasionally some East Asian and Indian traditions
- A course in the History of Textiles is not required
- There has never been any historical analysis or even any mention of the role that the Rhode Island Textile industry played in the Atlantic slave trade in any of my classes including ones taken on the History of Textiles.
- There are not (nor have there been in known history) any Black faculty
- The department consists almost exclusively of white or white-passing faculty members
- Students are not productively included in the vetting of potential hires
- Regarding faculty, curriculum, and health:
 - "Imagine this was happening when there wasn't a pandemic, Black students would be expected to labor while carrying the burden of state sanctioned violence upon our bodies; weaving and knitting into dawn."
 - "The culture of the labor is also anti-Black. To then be fed artists and references upholding the ivory tower sits upon."
 - "Some students work just to have money for school while others may simply devote themselves to their work."
- There is a low enrollment of Black students in the Department.
- There is an experience of being the only or 1 of 2 BIPOC in all their classes, and feeling a layer of discomfort in not being used to attending white classes and crits 24/7 for 4 years

- The Department does not take student concerns seriously about faculty who consistently show their racist and micro-aggressive behavior. The commentary outlining this in student evaluations is not taken seriously and acted upon.
- Professors in the Textiles Department do not have the critical capacity to engage with or advise Black students around their work. This often results in critiques in which neither students or professors are prepared to give critical feedback or they give boring advice around how to make your work more accessible to a white audience.
- Student work has been referred to as 'primitive' on multiple occasions. When alerted, the Department has not acknowledged or acted upon this effectively.
- Students are prompted to participate in 'social issue' based assignments resulting in students performing emotional and unpaid labor; teaching many professors about Black, Indigenous, and Latinx textile histories and contemporary artists. This without the professors doing the work to research and understand the context or history in order to effectively respond to the students' work. The student is then forced to relive trauma and endure critique that says that "their work doesn't display their trauma well enough."
- The Textiles Department does not facilitate the necessary conversations with Afro Diasporic work and invalidates it constantly
- Many non-white alumni and students are not comfortable speaking up, or just gave up trying
- "When I was a student I only heard about the business design industry side of textiles. 'There are so many anticapitalist beautiful aspects of textiles, and spiritual practices with textiles. In ritual and its history. In life and afterlife. We are connected in passing through those halls. I love being an alumni in part. But those halls are filled with colonial ghosts too, that are very heavy for some, too.'"

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