

Meme Discourse on Systemic Oppression: 101 – Lecture in Room 27B

What does it mean to bring the language of the internet into academic settings – especially when dealing with discussions on identity?

This past Wintersession, eleven students at the art university, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), ventured to Haida Gwaii, aiming to study the realities of creative practices of the Haida people in modern day settler states. But upon arrival, the students were instead surprised with a course load fixated on moralizing ethical egoism and praising their university's hegemonic stances on artistic intellect.

Sruti Suryanarayanan, one of the eleven students on the trip, was affronted by the simplistic ways in which the course approached its stated goals. She condemned the course's justification of cultural appropriation, and stood appalled by the course's declaration of both colonial mindsets and classical Haida art forms as "dead". Evidence of the social inequities that the university fails to address, "Haida Made" was deemed a course in need of critical analysis. Thus, Suryanarayanan ventured into the realm of curricular reform, studying the ways in which syllabi are produced and the ways that sociopolitical inequities are discussed in academia. She produced a lecture in response, presented like a typical RISD art history lecture...but with her own twist: Suryanarayanan designed a series of fifty memes that informed the "Haida Made" class about her understanding of the history of Haida Gwaii, systems of oppression, and the university's relationship with those subjects.

Through the use of memes, Suryanarayanan brought up topics of emotional labor, savior complexes, and institutional reform, with RISD-specific references and popular culture allusions. The following is an excerpted series of the original fifty memes, curated here by Suryanarayanan herself, presented alongside a summary of the original lecture itself. This series presents a brief look into the course, as well as the systemic issues faced by the RISD community.

Suryanarayanan introduces the class to the topics she wishes to discuss with the well-known "iconic duo" meme. Originally a tweet, this meme style encouraged its challengers to find a better pairing than that of Kylie Jenner and Kendall Jenner, two celebrity entrepreneurs. Both Jenners have been under scrutiny for their lack of sociopolitical prowess, being accused of cultural

appropriation and white savior complexes. Here, Suryanarayanan pits the sister duo against the Batman and Robin couple of RISD Global (the international studies office at the university) and Ethical

Egoism. Batman/RISD Global represents the savior complexes with which the office has approached study abroad trips. At this point in her lecture, Suryanarayanan detailed the ways that the RISD Global office describes their programs, as "helpful for the RISD students, as it grants new exposure, and helpful for the [people whose country they are visiting], as they see RISD students learning from them" (Suryanarayanan). This belief, that helping oneself is helping

name a more iconic duo.. I'll wait.



"Name a more iconic duo...I'll wait!", Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

others, is simply that of Ethical Egoism – the Robin to RISD Global’s Batman. Just like Batman, RISD Global was not granted a magical superpower, but *chose* this pursuit. Suryanarayanan draws comparisons to popular cultural icons, and asks the audience to question the role of superhero figures just as much as they question RISD.

She then moved to a meme format popularized by the tangentially-related reality television show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. The image features one of the show’s central



figures, Kim Kardashian, as she reiterates her romantic availability. Here, the meme maker has reapplied this idea of constant echoing, instead speaking about the fatigued university community, with respect to the treatment of global sociopolitics. This critique aims to bring attention to the many qualms that have been raised against the university’s handling of sociopolitical issues – and the lack of response from the administration. Like Kardashian’s original statement, Suryanarayanan’s is equally blatant in its call for acknowledgement. This idea of ignored emotional labor is a consistent message throughout the series.

With the third meme, Suryanarayanan further specifies her focus, critiquing the course’s failure in researching or teaching local and

“I’m like dropping hints”, Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

global histories of settler states in First Nations’ land. The allusions with this meme are to *Parks and Recreation*, a popular sitcom that itself commented on issues of indigenous land ownership in the American settler state. The use of unaltered captioning in the final image is essential – its abruptness in tone conveys the alleged urgency with which this course was planned and delivered, despite such a rush being detrimental to its educational goals. This meme specifically discusses the course curriculum’s shortcomings and actively tries to make up for said errors, by creating space for the educational conversations lacking in the original curriculum.

The next meme moves into a different visual level, following the “athlete” format. Named after athletes who use emojis and cite Bible verses in their social media statements, this style is beloved in the satirical meme universe for its use of colloquial digital icons. Suryanarayanan’s use is unique, in that it combines athletic, digital and RISD-specific lingo to create one ubiquitous language. The use of emoji jargon is an ode to Suryanarayanan’s own artistic background, citing here her knowledge of colloquial imagery and its cultural

"I don't have time!", Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.



connotations. For instance, the use of the “money bag” emoji beside the word “RISD” is a reminder of the university’s financial standing, as well as the socioeconomic abilities of its community. The reference to the “Social Equity Inclusion Action Plan, 2:2” mirrors that of the original athletes’ Bible chapters. In contrast, Suryanarayanan draws attention to the diversity plan that the university has been working on, built off the backs of student leaders in RISD club, BAAD (Black Artists and Designers), during a “Not Your Token” protest in 2016. This detail, as Suryanarayanan mentioned in her lecture, asks the “Haida Made” students to question their role in the course, and how their work related to the tokenization of the Haida people. Suryanarayanan makes a specific reference to chapter two, part two, which details the diversity training protocols that the university will implement to better prepare professors for discussions on the sociopolitics of marginalized identities. Such protocols had not yet been put in place, as Suryanarayanan reminded her peers, and could have led to the counterproductive atmosphere in “Haida Made”. This note requires the audience to not only read the presented meme and understand its context, but also encourages a deeper dive into the institution’s identity and the principles it claims to worship.

SHOP TECH: THE DRILL PRESS --

ME: DID U SAY o-PRESS-ion? 🏪 THE
 COLONIZATION 💰 NEVER STOPS 💪 NO
 FREEDOM 😞 😡 WE STAY BOUND 📖 BY
 YT ○ SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION 🗝️ &
 RISD 💰 🎨 DOES NOTHING 😞 TO STOP 🧑‍🚶
 IT! SOCIAL 🤝 EQUITY ⚖️ INCLUSION
 🧑 🧑 🧑 ACTION 🧑 PLAN, 2:2 🙏 🙏

"RISD Athletics", Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

The lecture quickly transitioned to the topic of institutional reform. Suryanarayanan lays the ground work in the previous meme, by introducing a text with which she has issues – the Social Equity Inclusion Action Plan – and then describes the ways in which she and her peers can analyze and engage with the plan. This “texting acronym” meme focuses on the ways in which the RISD community discusses and deals with its inequities. Overarching acronyms, like “lol”, speak to the

community’s communal passion for learning, but also hint at the fact that both institution and individual have room for improvement. The terms “jfc” and “omw” are specific to the “Haida Made” course, dissecting the unproductive means of response incited by the class, and the lackluster provision of context. The second-to-last acronym, “stfu”, is a call to action for the meme maker’s audience – a reminder of the roots of systemic inequities; “idc”, which follows, reminds the individual to stand up for what they believe in, without relying on institutional support.

“RISD Globella 2018” marks a change in the tonality of Suryanarayanan’s lecture. This is the first meme in the series to label and lay out – in full detail – the topics that the “Haida Made” course, RISD’s community, and the creative world unsuccessfully examine. It is perhaps the most easily applicable to the original intent of curricular reform. The layout of this meme mimics the line-up announcement for the music festival, Coachella; instead of headlining artists, Suryanarayanan provides a series of headers and subtopics. The subtopics have contributed to the creation of the larger heading – for instance, when Suryanarayanan explains, rather crudely, the intention of the meme series within the “RISD Globella” meme, it is meant to elicit a critical response from the audience regarding the creative and emotional labor performed by the meme maker. She claims that the process of making memes is emotionally laborious, and deserves an actionable response – the same can be said about the other subtopics. With this line especially, Suryanarayanan does not leave room for the jovial topic of memes to be interpreted as solely a joking matter – she uses this humorous language to more colloquially convey her grievances, but still demand critical responses, be they with humor or not.

As the lecture continues, Suryanarayanan depends more and more on this comedic element, using it to describe the perpetual “laughing, but crying” feeling evoked by unproductive emotional labor. In “the floor is...”, Suryanarayanan alludes to the popular children’s game, “The Floor Is Lava”, in which children keep from touching the ground, pretending it is hot molten rock. Here, the floor is a metaphor for global preparedness provided by the RISD Global office – that same office attempts to keep from touching the ground. The meme maker brings up

is your child texting about institutional reform?

- *lol: lots of learning*
- *fyi: facetiously yapping institutions*
- *lmao: look, my aspirations - obsolete!*
- *ffr: freakin’ “financial” “reform”*
- *jfc: jeepers, fruitless curricula!*
- *btw: (read) between the words*
- *omw: over the meaningless withholding*
- *omg: organize matriculative gibberish*
- *smh: systems of minority harassment*
- *tbh: to believe heedlessness*
- *stfu: study the foundations of unjustness*
- *idc: institutions don’t care*

“What is your child texting about?!”, Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

RISD↓ ↑GLOBELLA

EMOTIONAL LABOR

NETWORK FATIGUE SAVIOR COMPLEXES
TOKENIZATION CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

FRIDAY APRIL 13

QUESTION RISD'S DEDICATION TO BETTERMENT PASSIVITY LISTENING TO REPLY IGNORING POC
TOXIC PRIVILEGE TOXIC HEGEMONIC IDEALS LACK OF CRITICAL CONVERSATION
UNPRODUCTIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS EXPECT MINORITIES TO EXCUSE/EXPLAIN UR BEHAVIOR
UNPRODUCTIVE RESPONSES FIX THE "REST" NOT THE WEST ASK A POC TO DO RESEARCH, THEN IGNORE IT WE HAVE THINGS TO OFFER THEM!
NO, REALLY, WHAT WAS THE AMERINDIAN PERFORMANCE PIECE? NOT BELIEVING IN MODERN-DAY RACISM
LAUGH ALONG WITH YOUR CRITIC, BUT FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THEY ARE CRITIQUING YOU
NO, REALLY - I'M NOT JOKING - YOU DO UNDERSTAND THIS IS A CRITICISM OF THIS CLASS AND GPP, RIGHT?

SATURDAY APRIL 14

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

NEOCOLONIALISM MONEY OVER MIND
IGNORANCE "VISITING" UNCEDED TERRITORY EXPLOITATION
LOVING CAPITALISM RISD'S HEGEMONIC POWER SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR ETHNOTOURISM
HELP RISD/DISREGARD OTHERS DISRESPECT COYNESS BUSINESS
USING BODIES & MINDS UNDER THE GUISE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

ASKING OFFENSIVE QUESTIONS NOT DOING RESEARCH BEING SELFISH IN THE NAME OF RESEARCH MAKING EXCUSES NOT LISTENING TO POC'S COMPLAINTS
IMPOSING YOURSELF IGNORING PRIVILEGE KNOWING THEIR CULTURE BETTER THAN THEM! MANSPLAINING YTSPLAINING
IMPROVING OTHERS' TRADITIONS RISD FIRST ATTITUDE NO, REALLY, WHO IS GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK?

WHITE NOISE (INEQUITY)

YET ANOTHER PAINTING ON THE COLOR BLUE
THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL EXPLAINING PEOPLE'S HISTORIES TO THEMSELVES
TAKE RESOURCES FROM MINORITIES CONTINUE TO PROPAGATE INSTITUTIONAL OPPRESSION
I CAN'T HELP IT IF I WAS BORN WITH PRIVILEGE! ALL LIVES MATTER
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES MATTER MORE THAN STRUCTURAL RACISM THE L WORD (LA LA LAND)

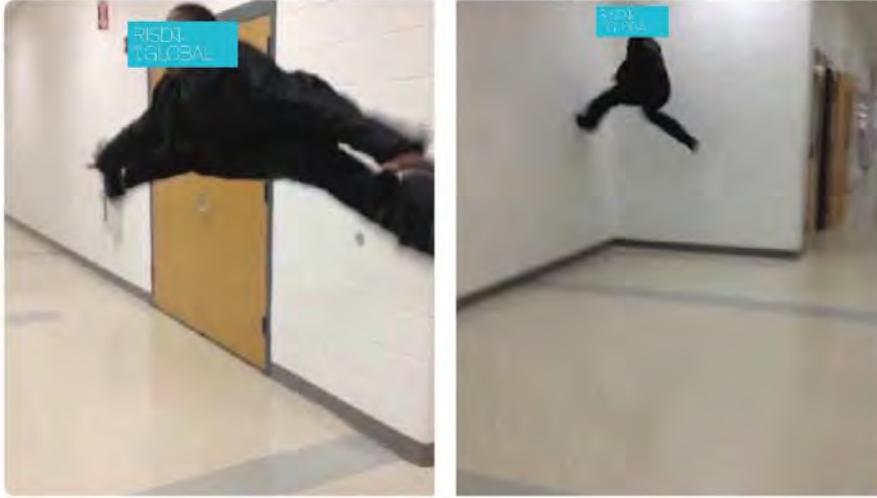
SUNDAY APRIL 15

WASTE POC'S TIME 2018 THE BACHELOR BUT LIKE ART DATES BELIEVING IN HIGH ART + LOW ART HATING THE SELLOUTS!!!!!!!
INACCESSIBLE ARTS EDUCATION ("JUSTICE FOR ALL!") LUCK...JUST PURE EFFIN' LUCK GETTING AWAY WITH LITERALLY ANYTHING & EVERYTHING OFFENSIVE
WHAT_IS_SUCCEEDING_BECAUSE_SYSTEMIC_OPPRESSION_AND_STRUCTURAL_RACISM_HAS_NOT_FAVORED_OTHERS_AND_ELIMINATED_ANY_COMPETITION.JPG



"RISD Globella 2018", Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

The floor is developing learning tools that are specific to global educations and help RISD students navigate their privilege as makers and American residents



“Child’s Play”, Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

compiled list of songs to be read as one consecutive message. Suryanarayanan’s reads as follows:

I created a playlist for my crush...



“Will U Fix Systemic Issues w/ me? Check Yes or No <3”, Suryanarayanan, Sruti. Digital media. 2018.

childhood memories in an attempt to lighten the weight of the subject matter at hand – an ineffective global education.

The final meme in this excerpted series is a playlist screen-capture, of a playlist Suryanarayanan made for her “crush”, or romantic (in this case professional) interest, RISD Global. The “playlist” meme format uses a strategically

“The way you treat education makes me wonder...what does it mean to be in and out of art school, when no one care about anything besides capitalism, exploitation, and ‘justice for all’? RISD, how long...how long must this go on before you change?”

This meme acknowledges the passion with which Suryanarayanan is critiquing the RISD Global office, as they share an interest in global sociopolitics. This playlist is an offering to the institution, asking them to rethink the ways in which they deal with educating RISD students, and the priorities they assume those students have. The final statement within the playlist reiterates the points that Suryanarayanan began the lecture, that these complaints have been continuously lodged with the administration for years, with no fruits to show.

Suryanarayanan concluded the lecture with an open call for critique – this time of her presentation and the memes she made, bringing her lecture full circle to the very act of constant education and improvement. She asked of her peers,

“What have these memes shown us? What does satire do? How can alternate forms of education be helpful? What is a productive critique? Is it best when not emotionally laborious, or when it produces tangible results? Why didn’t the meme maker continue with the pursuit of strict curricular reform? What does a non-academic approach provide?”

We caught up with the meme maker to ask about her approaches to the act of making, the act of criticizing, and the act of educating, as they relate to the realities of global sociopolitics in institutional settings. Suryanarayanan had nothing to say but this entire article.

Sruti Suryanarayanan
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