

CALLING YOU IN: REFLECTIONS ON THE EQUITY GAP IN JEWELRY ACADEMIA

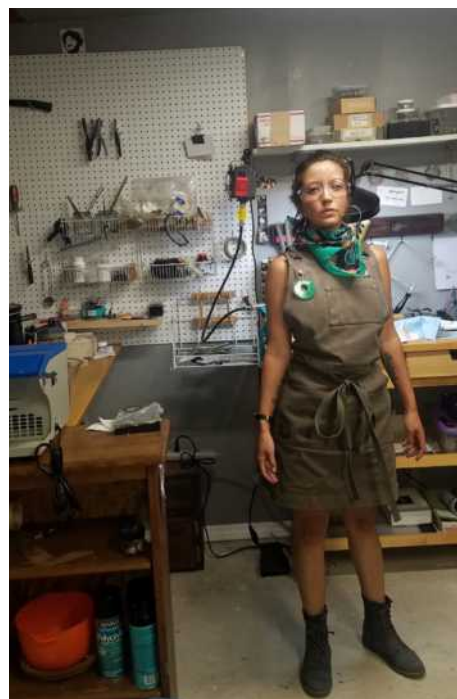
BY LESLIE D. BOYD

AMONG THE HARDSHIPS resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent school shutdowns, and social distancing mandates was the exacerbation and exposure of massive equity gaps in higher education. As an art professor at a public university, I witnessed this firsthand when lockdowns forced my classes online. There are various causes for such disparities, but socioeconomic standing and community support structures stand out most. Among the statistics available on K–12 schools on the Department of Education’s website, “45 percent of high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than was typical for other schools in their district.” With the sudden shift to remote learning, lack of access to a computer, internet, childcare, transportation, material goods, tools, and physical space became issues

even for the most privileged students.¹

Equitably delivering a jewelry education should include no-cost equipment, hardware, software, and internet availability for all students. Thinking of these resources as anything less than meeting a student’s most basic needs suggests that only students from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds deserve a formal education. Many school faculty and administrators are beginning to address how to solve such issues as they return to on-campus education, but such fixes must not distract from the need to address more pervasive inequities in these institutions. I posit that with the unavoidable shifts in academic paradigms that will come in a post-pandemic society, educators must consider how the systems that we rebuild will aim to dismantle these inequities. During this time of transition, we must examine how our curriculum, teaching methods, and the institutions we operate within are failing to serve students outside of the white, middle- to upper-class, able-bodied individuals for which most institutions of higher education in the US were constructed. This topic is enormous, and by no means do I believe it can be fully covered in a single article written by a white middle-class woman who has benefited vastly from unearned privilege within these spaces. The first step in addressing an issue is to identify it in all of its nuances, and I hope that this text will encourage other white educators and administrators to reflect critically on our role in upholding institutions of systemic racism, ableism, and oppression, so we might use our privilege to help build an inclusive and equitable field.

Doing this important work must include self-education so that



Artist Amy Solis in her studio, 2020

Photo courtesy of the artist



Amy Solis
Nameplate Hoop Earrings, 2020
Brass, copper, sterling silver
3 x 3 in.
Photo: Sara Ray

we might begin to understand the diverse identities, perspectives, passions, learning styles, and needs of our students. It is crucial that this understanding is built on close listening, genuine inquiry, and meaningful relationship building. Unconscious biases, assumptions, and stereotypes have a pervasive ability to manipulate one's understanding of the unique characteristics of each student and shift the way one engages with and treats them. Harm is most often caused through regularly occurring, passive, implicit biases in the form of *microaggressions*: subtle acts of bias towards a marginalized individual.

Although microaggressions can be intentional, they also happen unintentionally.

Amy Solis is a queer, undocumented woman of color who studies jewelry at Long Beach City College in California. When speaking to hardships she has experienced when navigating academia, she highlights the impact of microaggressions: "If these paper cuts happen to you often, then it starts to be incredibly painful, and at a certain point it is hard to deal with each small instance. These experiences occurring when I re-entered academia brought back the idea of, What am I doing here? Why am I even trying to fit in? Why is my goal to be part of this platform that isn't welcoming to me?" Solis's account contextualizes just how harmful these slights can be. Within academia, they may invalidate students and reinforce a message that their identities are neither accepted nor valued. To abolish these negative habits, we need to first understand how they have developed and how to identify them. This requires self-reflection, identification, reconditioning, and lots of practice.

Jewelry programs within colleges and universities tend to be quite small, and students are often relegated to a single mentor in their studies. When exposing students to the historical and contemporary practices within the jewelry and metals field, it is that mentor's responsibility to ensure the resources are representative of a diverse range of artists, cultures, bodies, and perspectives, and not restricted to their own interests or expertise. There is a lot of unlearning to do in this arena, as many current

educators' own education did not reflect these principles, and omission of such representation can be a detrimental action that invalidates the passions, goals, and lived experience of our students. Marcelo Ferreira Gustafsson, who studied jewelry at Konstfack University of Arts, Craft, and Design in



Marcelo Ferreira Gustafsson
Diaspora, 2018
Antique Edwardian mourning
textiles, poems, antique
archive cabinet
50 x 50 x 180 cm
Photo: Johan Lindberg



Marcelo Ferreira Gustafsson

Self Portrait, 2021
Photo courtesy of the artist

Marcelo Ferreira Gustafsson
Opisthotonus, 2018
Antique Edwardian mourning
textiles, roots, branches,
glass beads, concrete
Photo: Johan Lindberg



Shani Richards
 #2 from the *Hanging Cabinet Series*, 2015
 Hair, burnt wood, rope
 84 x 5 in.
 Photo by the artist

Sweden and now works as an educator, spoke with me about his experience as a person of color entering an MFA program where there were only four non-white people (including students and staff) in the entire craft department. “It was very much a struggle for me to find my place as a student,” Gustafsson says. “When I graduated, I totally stopped making jewelry. I felt like the discourse in the jewelry field was really lacking, especially in terms of representation. Why do I not feel like I am a part of this contemporary craft scene, and what needs to be in dialogue in order to make more people feel a sense of place?”²

No one’s identities or circumstances should prohibit them from accessing or feeling included in the education they desire.³ Additionally, when marginalized individuals are systemically excluded from spaces of higher education, then those spaces miss out on entire perspectives, experiences, and embodied knowledge.⁴ In a panel discussion during the College Art Association conference in 2016 entitled *‘The Black Craftsman Situation’: A Critical Conversation About Race and Craft*, artist, craftswoman, and educator Sonya Clark noted that educators must “revisit how blinding your privilege has been, and then let’s figure out how to get these notions of other cultures and other ways of thinking and being, and making, and evaluating, and critiquing into the classroom.”⁵

In her article “Flashpoints of Artist Identity Formation” in *Art Education*, Sarah Travis, Assistant Professor of Art Education at the University of Illinois, acknowledges the important role of an instructor to “support students in their efforts to create previously unimaginable futures through the arts.”⁶ People may come to study jewelry with varied career and creative aspirations, all of which are valid. Our curriculum content and teaching methods should encourage highly individualized support while also providing our students with the necessary and pragmatic resources to support themselves outside of the

EXPANDED DEFINITIONS + FURTHER RESOURCES

Cultural humility

Cultural humility starts with an awareness of the unique qualities of one’s own cultural identity and those of other individuals or communities. It requires an individual to possess the skills and motivation to hold cross-cultural dialogue, free from implicit and explicit bias. Paramount to this concept is the understanding that one will never be able to truly know the lived experiences of another individual and accepting those individuals’ truths when they recount their experiences to us. It is important to note that this concept is evolving. Although this humility can signal an understanding of a power imbalance, it can also be applied and/or used by individuals of a dominant culture to maintain dominance or control (either knowingly or unknowingly).

Equity gap

An equity gap is a disparity in achievement aligned with a demographic such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, or disability. These gaps are generally linked to a resource disparity such as funding, quality educators, pre-K programs, food, etc. Equity gaps in K–12 schooling influence post-secondary school enrollment and retention.

Implicit bias

Implicit biases are automatic unconscious attitudes, opinions, and stereotypes that inform our interactions and decision-making process. These can be both positive and negative and are informed by identities, upbringing, media consumption, and all other aspects of our lived experiences. No individual is without implicit biases. It is important to regularly engage

in self-reflection and questioning to process biases out of our unconscious mind and ensure that they do not cause harm.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle acts of bias towards a marginalized individual. These can be both intentional and unintentional. Microaggressions can be harmful in a singular occurrence, but their ability to accumulate due to their subtle nature can create traumatic or negative environments for the individual at the receiving end.

Privilege

Privileges are the unearned benefits that someone possesses due to an identity that they belong to such as gender or race. For example, White privilege is the benefit that White individuals hold simply due to the color of their skin. These include benefits such as the ability to move throughout life without fear of racist rhetoric being used against you, whether explicitly or implicitly. I highly recommend reading the short essay *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* by Peggy McIntosh to achieve a deeper understanding of this concept.

Reading and resources for inclusive teaching:

- <https://www.current-obsession.com/decolonise-contemporary-jewellery/>
- <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/InclusiveTeachingStrategies>
- <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/ClassClimates>
- https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf



academy. While it is essential to encourage students to dream to their fullest potential as artists, we must also provide practical training, post-graduation mentorship, and connections to industry resources. This level of support is necessary for all of our students to thrive post-graduation, especially those who may not have the social or financial safety net of their more privileged peers.

As you reflect on these ideas, I urge you to consider the flexibility and grace that came to be a silver lining of the pandemic semesters of teaching, and should be kept as we continue forward from this moment. For our efforts to have a real impact, we must visualize and aspire toward an inclusive jewelry and metalsmithing community, and move swiftly into action to make it a reality. This will undoubtedly be both difficult and uncomfortable, challenging our privileges in the very system that has likely led to our success. But it is only through these challenges that we can grow. We must look at our course outlines and learning objectives, take the opportunity to update or re-write them, and see how and where variation and flexibility in course contents, structure, and delivery can be implemented. Ask yourself: How do you define value or importance?

What structures do these definitions uphold and what individuals do they favor?⁷

There is little doubt that once academic institutions fully resume in-person classes, classrooms will look a little different. I hope that in this time of great change, we don't lose sight of these efforts. A more inclusive, diverse, accessible field is possible, but we need to fight for it. The equity gap certainly does not begin in higher education, and it doesn't end there either. Museums, gallerists, curators, and adjacent content creators in our field and beyond all have a role to play. As the prolific artist Joyce Scott stated in *The Black Craftsman Situation* panel discussion: if you feel that you are already doing this work, then "get close to a person that's not doing it...Help people with what could be perceived as an academic shortcoming. It really is all of us working with each other... that's how change happens."⁸ We must hold one another accountable.

As we shift to living in a post-pandemic society, let's not just get back to normal. We can, and should, do better than that.

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Shani Richards
Branded, 2016
 Steel, jeans, paint
 36 x 6 x 18 in.
 Photo by the artist

¹ "Inclusion, Equity, and Access While Teaching Remotely," Rice University Center for Teaching Excellency, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://cte.rice.edu/blogarchive/2020/3/13/inclusion-equity-and-access-while-teaching-remotely>. / ² Marcelo Ferreira Gustafsson, virtual conversation with the author, December 2020. / ³ It is worth noting that higher education is not the right path for everyone and that there are an increasing variety of alternative models for jewelry education. These facts do not negate the need for accessible and equitable higher education for those who would like to pursue this path. / ⁴ Byron P. White, "Beyond a Deficit View," Inside Higher Ed, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/04/19/importance-viewing-minority-low-income-and-first-generation-students-assets-essay>. / ⁵ Sonya Clark, Wesley Clark, Bibiana Obler, Mary Savig, Joyce J. Scott, and Namita Gupta Wiggers, "The Black Craftsman Situation: A Critical Conversation about Race and Craft," in *The New Politics of the Handmade: Craft, Art and Design* (London, England: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 261-262. / ⁶ Sarah Travis, "Flashpoints of Artist Identity Formation," *Art Education*, 73:5 (2020): 16-25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2020.1781438>. / ⁷ Jillian Hogan, Diane Jaquith, and Lauren Gould, "Shifting Perceptions of Quality in Art Education," *Art Education*, 73:4 (2020): 8-13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2020.1746161>. / ⁸ Sonya Clark et al, "The Black Craftsman Situation: A Critical Conversation about Race and Craft," 263.