

Unmasking the University: An Interview with Corinne L. Mason and Irene Shankar

by Tawany Aguiar, Corinne L. Mason and Irene Shankar

Authors:

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Corinne L. Mason (they/them) is a Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Mount Royal University (Alberta, Canada). Their current research program focuses on the "anti-gender" movement and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ policies and rhetoric in Alberta. Mason is also working on projects that explore the dismantling of EDI and increasing anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in post-secondary institutions. Mason is the co-founder and co-director of QriTical: queer + trans research centre at Mount Royal University.

Dr. Irene Shankar's scholarship and teaching is embedded within the critical intersections of marginalization and inequality. A Professor of Sociology at Mount Royal University, Dr. Shankar's main areas of research and teaching are Feminist Theories, Sociology of Gender, Critical Race Theory, Qualitative Methodology, and the Sociology of Health and Illness.

Tawany Aguiar, who began her work at *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* as an Editorial Assistant and later became Media Coordinator, speaks with Corinne L. Mason, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, and Irene Shankar, Professor of Sociology, both at Mount Royal University. Mason and Shankar are the co-editors of *Unmasking Academia: Institutional Inequities Laid Bare During COVID-19* (University of Alberta Press, 2025), an edited collection that examines how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified inequities in higher education. Conducted by email, the interview explores institutional power, hidden labour, the contradictory possibilities of academic life and pathways toward structural transformation. Mason and Shankar provided their responses jointly; the responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Tawany Aguiar: Your edited collection challenges the perception of academia as a neutral space of knowledge production. How do you see institutional norms shaping who is visible, who is heard, and who remains marginalized within academic structures?

Corinne L. Mason and Irene Shankar: Black Feminist and Critical Race scholars (such as Ahmed 2021; hooks [1984] 2000; Collins 2014; Puwar 2001) have long pointed out that universities are not neutral spaces. Rather, they are spaces constructed around the needs and lives of somatic norms of who originally occupied these institutions. Although policies and practices have shifted, post-secondary institutions (PSIs) still largely serve those original inhabitants. This extends beyond universities to the broader education system, which is powerfully demonstrated by Carl E. James' contribution to our book. In "We Missed Out on a Lot: The Pandemic, Schooling and Black Youth," James highlights the experiences of Black students in K-12 public education who had to complete their schooling during

the pandemic without adequate support and often had to deal with teachers and administrators who were not culturally conversant. These structural constraints can limit marginalized students' access to higher education. James' analysis shows, importantly, that long before marginalized students "show up" at the university, there is a structural and systemic suppression of learning.

Pressure from Black Lives Matter organising pushed PSIs to respond to racism. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies and practices became visible within PSI institutional mandates and goals. However, public declarations and policy commitments to EDI did not always lead to substantive institutional changes in relation to the structure of the university (University of Alberta 2026). Canadian university leadership continues to privilege white men (Smith and Bray 2019); in 2024, only 2.3% of senior leaders at Canada's universities were Black (MacLatchy and Goel 2024). If everyone has equal access and mobility within these institutions, why are PSIs still run by people who look the same? Questions of visibility and recognition become especially complicated through the performative dimensions of EDI where Indigenous and racially minoritized faculty and students become "the face" of the institution in marketing and communications but continue to experience erasure within the institution.

Beyond leadership, we continue to see the prevailing hierarchy. Some voices and forms of knowledge are affirmed and prioritized, and "others" are often precariously situated and subject to cuts and dismantling due to institutional and political pressures. Sara Ahmed (2021) uses the term "window dressing" to explain how the institution is dressed up for external view and how those dressings simultaneously hide the internal aspects of institutional functioning. Looking at institutional budgets rather than institutional messaging reveals that marginalized faculty and their students remain consistently under supported and directly targeted for removal. A recent example is budget cuts at York University that impacted programs such as Women's and Gender Studies and Indigenous Studies.

TA: You address the often-invisible labour that sustains universities. How do gender, race and precarity intersect in this hidden labour economy?

CLM and IS: Sara Ahmed writes that "the more precarious you are, the more support you need. The more precarious you are, the less support you have" (Ahmed 2017, 238). Within PSIs, Indigenous, racially minoritized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ faculty are more likely to experience institutional barriers and take on additional labour to support students, change policies, and challenge discriminatory institutional practices. Although this work is necessary, it is rarely recognized as legitimate academic labour and seldom receives institutional support or resources. In our collection, Ayesha Miran Akram's chapter, "Critical Reflections of Workload and Labour," explores her experiences navigating graduate school as a Muslim parent during the pandemic. She shows labour intensified through formal committees and working groups that were responding to structural racism, especially during the height of Black Lives Matter organizing in 2020. While formal EDI labour expanded, informal labour also continued. This dual burden disproportionately fell on precariously positioned faculty, including contract instructors and graduate students. Similarly, Sepideh Borzoo, Isabel Fandino and Pallavi Banerjee's chapter, "Struggles of International Graduate Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic," highlights how international students were largely excluded from EDI policies and were affected by the campus closures during the pandemic. Although international students financially sustain universities through high tuition fees, they often remain invisible within institutional support structures. This became even more evident following federal restrictions on international students, which led to budget and staff cuts at universities across the country (McDonald 2024).

Political attacks on EDI have also led many universities to rename or restructure EDI offices (Liddle 2025). As Enakshi Dua discusses in the chapter "Exposed and Exacerbated: The Social and Institutional Conditions Underlying the Years of the Pandemic," the invisibility of gendered and racialized labour has intensified in recent years. EDI work is increasingly being renamed and reorganized to avoid political backlash. In this political climate, where institutions are hesitant to publicly foreground EDI mandates and goals, there is little indication that those performing this labour will receive adequate recognition, support, or resources.

TA: Many scholars describe academia as both a site of empowerment and harm. How do you conceptualize this tension and what does it reveal about institutional power?

CLM and IS: For those of us who do not embody the somatic norm, academia often occupies contradictory roles. Academia allows us to research and teach subjects that matter to us and engage with timely and relevant issues. It provides many of us with tenure, financial security and institutional stability. At the same time, academia remains structured around the somatic norm and therefore continues to exclude many “others” (Ahmed 2010). However, we remain hopeful that critical work on institutions can still lead to meaningful change. Our collection offers several examples of this transformative work.

In the third section of our collection, “A Future Otherwise,” faculty write about the classroom as a site of potential empowerment while holding onto the tension between the possibilities of this space and the harms that too often occur within it. Gabrielle Ellen Weasel Head, in her chapter titled “Resisting Racism Through a Pedagogy of Blackfoot Resilience,” writes about the problem with deficit-model teaching that too often positions Indigenous people as resilient against historical and contemporary harms of white supremacist settler colonialism. By offering an embodied Blackfoot understanding of resilience, Weasel Head explores what a classroom can look and feel like outside of Eurocentric frameworks, one that can be empowering to both faculty and students.

Similarly, Hee-Jung S. Joo, Erin Keating and their student Nardos Omer, in their chapter titled “Abolishing Grades,” position traditional assessments and grading as a harm to learning and a limitation on the potential of the classroom. Focusing on the carceral relationships produced through grading, the authors explore ungrading as a relational practice capable of transforming both classrooms and institutions. Together, these chapters remind us that structural transformation remains possible through rethinking our relationships with institutions and with one another.

TA: In what ways does your work invite readers not only to critique academia, but to imagine structural transformation?

CLM and IS: Meaningful transformation requires a careful and honest assessment of existing institutional conditions. However, as we noted earlier, there is a long genealogy of Black Feminist and Critical Race scholars writing about institutions that hold power in our society and about the changes that are needed. Building on this genealogy, our collection foregrounds voices, forms of knowledge and experiences that are often marginalized or insufficiently acknowledged within academia. Furthermore, while large-scale transformation may or may not occur within our lifetimes, the chapters in this book show the places where institutional changes can be more equitable and inclusive. Two chapters, in particular, provide recommendations for transforming research partnerships with marginalized communities. In her chapter titled “Nobody’s Gonna Talk to You About That: Methodological Considerations in Research with Undocumented Caribbean Care Workers During COVID-19,” Carieta Thomas offers specific recommendations for ethics boards, that, if implemented, would support better research relationships with undocumented communities. By critiquing how ethics boards evaluate research involving vulnerable communities while also proposing community-grounded approaches, the chapter demonstrates how smaller institutional changes can still produce meaningful transformation. Fawziah Rabiah-Mohammed and Leah K. Hamilton’s chapter titled “Community-Engaged Research with Refugee Communities During COVID-19” critiques funding structures, including timelines for grants and expectations of outcomes, by illustrating how community needs and institutional priorities are often misaligned. By questioning how universities define and brand “community-engaged” research while also addressing the realities of this work, the chapter highlights what can be done to create more ethical and equitable future research practices.

TA: For early-career scholars navigating increasingly unstable academic futures, what critical awareness or forms of solidarity feel most urgent today?

CLM and IS: Academia, like every other institution, often rewards silence around inequity and encourages work that enhances institutional reputation. As a result, it can become easy to prioritize institutional image-management over

transformative work. This dynamic often encourages individualism and isolation rather than collective community-building.

Critical scholars (such as hooks [1984] 2000; Lorde 2007) have long cautioned that our ability to do transformative work requires our survival, which in turn is facilitated by social relationships and a community. Patricia Monture's (2010) advice to “find your people” within PSIs remains an essential survival strategy. We need communities that care for one another and affirm realities institutions often deny. We also need collective strength to effectively challenge institutional policies and practices. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, addressing our societal inequities requires “... connection, a coded layering of intimate interconnection and interdependence that creates a complicated algorithmic network of presence, reciprocity, consent and freedom” (Simpson 2017, 185). Community requires moving beyond transactional relationships and consistently showing up for others. However, finding “your people” within neoliberal institutions can be difficult. Too often, alliances are built on expectations of perfection rooted in white supremacy culture (Okun 1999). Social movements are built on relationships and relationships are messy. Organizers like Dean Spade call on us to “hold each other with tenderness and realistic expectations” (Spade 2025).

Our co-authored chapter, “Institutionalized Feminist Loneliness: An Exchange on Pandemic Disruptions to Research,” illustrates how academia creates the conditions of loneliness and isolation that were further intensified during the pandemic. The chapter explores both the desire for and the obstacles to building relationships and community through research. Similarly, Ethel Tungohan, in her chapter “Dissident Friendships During COVID Times,” explains how she fostered communities of care to survive structural erasure and toxic institutional cultures. Together, these chapters remind us: “Survival can also be about keeping one’s hope alive; holding on to the projects that are projects insofar as they have yet to be realized. You might have to become willful to hold on when you are asked to let go; to let it go. Survival can thus be what we do for others, with others. We need each other to survive; we need to be part of each other’s survival” (Ahmed 2017, 235).

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