Five questions for Nisha Shanmugaraj[1]

Nisha Shanmugaraj had always been captivated by the power of language, a passion that served her well in earning her master's degree in English from Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in 2013. That led to a role as associate director of the CMU writing center, where she worked for five years.

"Writing center work is where I first fell in love with the art and science of teaching," she said. Intrigued by research being done in the CMU English department, she decided to pursue her Ph.D. in Rhetoric.

"After receiving my doctorate, I was thrilled to receive a job offer from CU Boulder's renowned Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR), one of the few programs in the country with focused expertise in the subfield of cultural rhetorics," said Shanmugaraj, an assistant professor who has held a joint appointment in PWR and the English Department for the past three years.

Shanmugaraj[2] is at work on a book, under advance contract with The Ohio State University Press, titled "Bootstrapping Identity: Indian American Women and the Rhetorics of Internalized Racism." The project is being made possible with help from a 2026 President's Fund for the Humanities[3] grant; a course buyout means she is teaching one course this semester rather than two.

"Teaching is incredibly rewarding but also requires a good deal of mental and emotional energy," she said. "I teach small, seminar-style courses that are discussion- and writing-intensive. A lot of labor goes into planning tailored lessons, facilitating impactful class discussions, working with students one-on-one and offering feedback at each stage of the writing process. With a course release, I am able to dedicate some of that time to writing my book – and hopefully submit the rough draft to the publisher by the May deadline!"

1. When people hear the word "rhetoric," they might think of politics or speeches. How do you explain what rhetoric means in everyday life to someone outside of academia?

Rhetoric is often colloquially thought of as dishonest or insincere political talk. Rhetoric as a field, however, is a bit broader. We are interested in studying how meaning gets made, how people make sense of the world around them, especially through language and communication.

So, for instance, when you walk into an unfamiliar social setting and decide who to approach for conversation: That's rhetorical. You are reading the various bodies in the space, using your previous social schemas to make some subtle decisions, then deciding how to present yourself – what to talk about, how to respond nonverbally – in ways that persuade the other person to judge you positively. So a rhetorical analysis is interested in all of these persuasive elements, including the communication strategies, the bodies, the spaces – and the social histories and consequences of these interactions.

2. What first drew you to study the everyday communication of Indian American women? Was there a moment when you realized this is the work you wanted to pursue?

I have always been intensely fascinated by the everyday communication of Indian American women, largely because of my own identity as an Indian American woman. Indian American women are an incredibly complex demographic, given that we face unique social discrimination, but also simultaneous advantages related to racism, sexism, classism, casteism and xenophobia. I elaborate on this complexity in my book, but suffice it to say that young Indian American women often struggle to understand their identity and where they are positioned in a social imaginary.

Now, I always knew this complexity existed, but I didn't realize I could actually make a career out of studying it – until I met an important mentor. A professor, Dr. Stephanie Larson, introduced me to scholarship from intersectional feminist rhetorics, disability rhetorics and Asian American rhetorics. I realized there was an opportunity to use the methods and theories from the field of rhetoric to better understand and support Indian American women's complicated lived experiences. I decided to embark on that research agenda – though it did take me a minute to decide to take on such a deeply personal career direction.

3. Your research focuses on what you call the "everyday rhetorics" of Asian American women. What does that look like in real life? Could you share an example that surprised or moved you?

Everyday rhetorics are really just the mundane interactions and meaning-making that make up our day-to-day life. These things shape how we come to understand the world and our place in it.

An example I like to use from my research is related to microaggressions. Indian American women are often faced with the same questions over and over, questions that imply we do not really belong in the United States. For instance, "Where are you really from?" is a common inquiry, generally from white strangers. Sometimes, you hear a sentiment often enough and start to internalize it, to believe that it is true, that you really don't belong.

However, one of my favorite findings from my research is that many young Indian American women are no longer hearing this question and internalizing it, feeling like they don't belong. Instead, they are hearing the question, realizing that this repeated inquiry is harmful to their sense of self, and then coming up with creative responses – even ones that are a little snarky – that subtly communicate their annoyance. For instance, some of my participants preferred to ask the interrogator where they are "really from," even if that individual is white, to highlight the racialized logics at play. To me, this is just such a funny and inspiring response from younger folks in my community because it decenters old-school notions of civility and white innocence and instead insists that the affective needs of women of color also matter.

4. You are working on a book you've titled, "Bootstrapping Identity: Indian American Women and the Rhetorics of Internalized Racism." What can you tell us about the project?

This project is an outgrowth of my doctoral dissertation and has been my main pursuit for the past five-plus years. Essentially, the book explores how, in the aftermath of the 2020-2021 Black Lives Matter protests, Indian American women began having widespread conversations about "unlearning" their internalized racism. This idea of unlearning, as I began to investigate it, seemed to suggest that these women were deconstructing or undoing negative beliefs about themselves and other Black and Brown racial groups. This was fascinating to me. How does one counter-condition themselves out of implicit bias? How can we understand bias against one's own racial group, against one's own self? Why were these discourses of "unlearning" so explosively popular with my demographic? Thus, I began a project of using what I call "intimate interviewing," a new interview methodology that embraces my own proximity to the community I'm studying, to talk with young Indian American women around the country.

In the book, I describe how the important historical moment of Black Lives Matter contributed to Indian American women rewriting their individual and collective relationships to Whiteness, Blackness, coloniality, caste and power in India and the United States. Yet even as young Indian American women were able to cultivate personal and political empowerment by turning to progressivism, their stories nonetheless fell back on the same seductive national logics of rugged individualism (i.e., "pull yourself up by your bootstraps") they were trying to renounce, just this time in the realm of self-growth.

So the findings are both inspiring and a little messy. I analyze this phenomenon of identity bootstrapping in the realms of body image, academic success/failure and family political education.

5. How do you hope your work might influence conversations — on campus or beyond — about belonging, identity and how people communicate with one another?

What a great question. First and foremost, I hope my work helps diasporic women of color feel more seen and better supported. I also want these communities to be further empowered and mobilized as forces for positive (and bold!) social change.

Second, I hope all readers better understand the ways in which the personal is political: Our identities, our preferences, our beliefs are all shaped by systemic forces of power. Folks on the CU Boulder campus tend to hold a great deal of privilege. As a result, our choices – including when we pay attention and when we look away; when we choose to speak and when we remain silent – have powerful consequences.

With a greater awareness of how power works in our everyday lives, we can more intentionally and ethically move through the world. I hope my work contributes to that effort.

CU Boulder and Techstars announce partnership to accelerate Colorado's entrepreneurial ecosystem [4]

State recognizes CU Denver as a First-Generation-Serving Institution [5]

Pull up a chair at the Benefits Bistro: Open Enrollment begins April 20 [6]

Changes to three systemwide administrative policy statements approved[7]

The Office of Policy and Efficiency (OPE) announces updates to the following administrative policy statements from the Technology Transfer and Finance functional areas:

Technology Transfer
1013-Intellectual Property Policy on Discoveries and Patents for Their Protection and Commercialization[8] (Effective March 12, 2026)
Revisions to APS 1013 were made to:
Be consistent with Regent Policy 5.I: Intellectual Property Related to Discoveries and Patents for Their Protection and Commercialization, which was implemented in June 2024; Reflect how the management of technology transfer at the University of Colorado has changed in practice since APS 1013 was last updated in 2006; and Allow each campus to determine procedures for the implementation of technology transfer appropriate for that campus.
Finance
7010-Red Flag Identity Theft Prevention Program[9] (Effective April 1, 2026)
This APS aligns requirements to detect, prevent and mitigate the risk of identity theft in connection with sensitive financial account data, and serves as the university's Red Flag Identity Theft Prevention Program. The program sets parameters that must be followed by organizational units with responsibilities for collecting and managing financial account data when conducting business with students, employees and other customers of the University of Colorado, and to provide for continuous compliance with federal law and regulations.
7003-Collection of Personal Data from Students and Customers[10] (Effective April 1, 2026)
Revisions to 7003 were made to:
Remove sections relating to the university's Red Flag Identity Theft Prevention Program, which is now contained in the stand-alone APS 7010-Red Flag Identity Theft Prevention Program; and Striking the section on collection requirement exemptions, which was deemed to no longer be needed in this policy.
For more detailed information, go to https://www.cu.edu/ope/aps/latest-changes[11]. For additional information on systemwide APSs, go to: http://www.cu.edu/ope[12].

Exploring a potential transition to 'CU Colorado Springs' [13]

Cardiothoracic Surgery team performs region's first robotic aortic valve replacement [14]

Federal update: FY26 government funding, FY27 president's budget request, more[15]

From April 3, this update from CU Federal Relations and Counsel includes information on FY26 Government Funding, FY27 President's Budget Request, New EOs, HHS and CMS Healthcare Advisory Committee, ED and DOE Headquarters Moves, and Extended Deadline for IPEDS Data.

Click here to read the post.[16]

For the latest communications and federal memos, please visit the CU System Federal Updates and Actions[17] page.

Bliss named Citizen of the Year by World Affairs Council [18]

Johnson to lead pediatric emergency medicine [19]

Jiménez named assistant vice chancellor of admissions and precollege[20]

The Artemis 2 astronauts just flew by the moon. Lunar scientists can't wait for what's next[21]

Dr. Reiland Rabaka highlights impact of CU's $2M CAAAS commitment[22]

Army combat veterans transforming historic church on Colorado Springs' west side into child care center[23]

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