

## How Universities Gaslight EDI&I Initiatives: Mapping Institutional Resistance to Structural Change

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## How Universities Gaslight EDI&I Initiatives: Mapping Institutional Resistance to Structural Change

Megan MacKenzie, Özlem Sensoy, Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Nathalie Sinclair, & Laurel Weldon, *Simon Fraser University*

### Abstract

Despite the visibility of equity, diversity, inclusion, and Indigenization (EDI&I) discourses within large institutions, such as post-secondary institutions, research has chronicled only modest advancements on these stated values. Blocks to advancements in EDI&I stem, in part, from the structural nature of racist and sexist domination, and especially its embeddedness in both formal and informal norms of institutions. Based on a close examination of two EDI&I initiatives in university contexts, and direct experiences of “pushback” against these initiatives, this article conceptualizes institutional gaslighting, whereby universities paradoxically both embrace EDI&I discourse, on the one hand, while simultaneously deploying strategies that prevent dismantling systemic inequalities, on the other. A conceptualization of this dynamic is designed to help others identify and address forms of resistance, especially in settings of high stated value, and ultimately advance these values within large institutions.

### Résumé

Malgré la visibilité de discours sur l'équité, la diversité, l'inclusion et l'indigénisation (EDII) dans de grandes institutions telles que les établissements postsecondaires, la recherche n'a relevé que des progrès modestes dans l'instauration de ces valeurs pourtant prisées. Les entraves à ces progrès ont pour cause le caractère structurel de la

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domination raciste et sexiste et surtout la persistance de cette domination dans les normes formelles et informelles des institutions. Cet article, en se fondant sur un examen attentif de deux initiatives EDII dans un contexte universitaire ainsi que sur un témoignage direct de résistance contre ces initiatives, décrit le détournement cognitif paradoxal par lequel les universités appuient d'une part les discours sur EDII tout en employant d'autre part des stratégies qui perpétuent les inégalités systémiques. Cet article présente une conceptualisation de cette dynamique afin d'aider les personnes impliquées à identifier et appliquer des moyens de résistance, surtout dans des contextes reconnus comme étant importants, et, au bout du compte, à promouvoir EDII au sein de grandes institutions.

**Keywords / Mots clés :** equity, diversity, inclusion, Indigenization, higher education policy / équité, diversité, inclusion, indigénisation, politiques en enseignement supérieur

## Introduction

Looking at the formal rhetoric of institutions of higher education, like other large institutions, it is difficult to find one that does not profess a commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and Indigenization (EDI&I), expressed in mission statements, strategic plans, and other high-level documents. Despite the visibility of the EDI&I discourse, research has chronicled, at best, modest advancements on practices related to these stated values, including, but not limited to, the following areas of university work: hiring practices to advance the successful recruitment of minoritized faculty, leadership, and staff (Henry et al., 2017; Kaplan et al., 2018; Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017); retention practices to support minoritized faculty (Zambrana et al., 2015); work to address persistent glass/cement ceilings for minoritized faculty limiting career progress and remuneration (Cukier et al., 2021; Johnson & Howsam, 2020; Smith, n.d., 2010, 2022; Wijesingha & Robson, 2022); efforts to draw attention to and reduce ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and local Nations and Tribal authorities (Brown, 2019); and endeavours that address everyday occurrences of anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, and anti-Asian racisms (Barber et al., 2020; Mirza, 2018), the myriad of barriers facing disabled and neurodivergent individuals (Lorenz, 2022; Yerbury & Yerbury, 2021), and the aggression against trans and non-binary people (Potter et al., 2020; Siegel, 2019). The literature converges on the conclusion that institutions have not only under-delivered, if not outright failed, to live up to their professed EDI&I commitments but have also persistently *resisted* efforts to prioritize structural changes that would advance these initiatives. This creates a paradox whereby institutions display a high level of discursive commitment to EDI&I yet underperform on most meaningful EDI&I initiatives and actively resist change to the everyday practices of the institution and related efforts to address inequity, combat racism, and enhance diversity.

As researchers who have committed scholarly and service work to advancing EDI&I efforts at the universities where we have worked, we join others who have noted persistent forms of resistance to initiatives that could result in meaningful progress against various forms of oppression, that is, the systemic forms of intersectional

racism, colonialism, hetero/sexism.<sup>1</sup> Instead of attending to evidence-based strategies for structural remediation, many universities exhibit a range of resistance strategies to counter efforts to enact structural change related to various forms of oppression. These common forms of resistance, while widespread, may not be immediately apparent, even to seasoned EDI&I advocates, because they grow out of the standard operating procedures, the taken-for-granted everyday institutional practices and priorities of institutions of higher education.

This article explores these forms of resistance to institutional change, centering on resistance to gathering intersectional data related to EDI&I in particular. Scholarly EDI&I data gathering is a critical area to examine because the absence of consistent, reliable, and long-term data subjected to peer review (as opposed to corporate “diversity” audit packages) hinders efforts to identify and analyze problem areas, design solutions, and monitor institutional progress. It is critical to institutional transformation. Further, a lack of such data can enable and legitimize shorter-term initiatives focused on personal education and training to the exclusion of structural change. Without institutional, structural transformation, the challenges of “baked in” systems of oppression remain unaddressed. Structural EDI&I work requires evidence-based initiatives for the long-term study and correction of deeply embedded normative foundations of institutional practices, policies, and systems.

Drawing on our experience with resistance to such data gathering, we conceptualize strategies of institutional resistance as institutional gaslighting (Grant, 2021), a form of manipulation using strategies such as denial and misdirection to create doubt in the targeted individual/advocate and/or to create doubt about, undermine, or sideline their own perception of events. While our analysis focuses on the everyday institutional practice of data collection, we use this focus to make broader claims about institutional resistance to structural change. We argue that the institutional strategies of resistance explored in this article could be useful in understanding resistance to institutional change in other areas of EDI&I work in higher education and beyond.

Part 1 of this article argues that institutional transformation must be understood as a form of normative change. We then provide a brief overview of common EDI&I initiatives that actually serve to reinforce rather than challenge existing norms. We then highlight data gathering as critical to transformative projects. In Part 2, we share our experiences from two examples of our attempts at large scale intersectional data collection to illustrate patterns of resistance. In Part 3, we explicitly name specific manifestations of institutional resistance to this kind of data as a form of institutional gaslighting. We explore four forms of institutional gaslighting, including the push-back, slowdown, shutdown, and blowback. In the final section of the article, we draw out our conclusions, including how engaging in acts of refusal against institutional gaslighting can contribute to structural change.

## **Part 1: Institutional transformation as normative change and the importance of robust data**

Within universities, there are many obstacles to institutional change, especially change necessary for advancing EDI&I. Extant policies and procedures are rigid and this adherence to existing norms, values, and practices tends to reinforce extant hier-

archies. The organization and standard operating procedures of most academic institutions reflect the biases of groups that are socially, politically, and economically dominant, both at the time of founding and now. Examples of such practices include rigid “tenure clocks” that fail to account for family care, mental or physical health challenges, or professional pathways that appear to deviate from white, cis-male, ableist norms (Banerjee & Pawley, 2013; Beddoes & Pawley, 2014). Policies advancing “merit-based” reviews typically devalue Indigenous ways of knowing and community-based research, and discount service and advocacy by and for members of marginalized communities (Hanasono et al., 2019; Rideau, 2021). Such policies create inhospitable environments for members of many minoritized communities, including Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous peoples, women, and gender fluid or gender non-conforming peoples, thus perpetuating the isolation if not outright exclusion of members of these and other marginalized groups (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Williams, 2019).

Institutional transformation can involve changes to formal policies. Yet, in many ways, changing the informal practices, the “secret garden” or “hidden curriculum” of institutions, is a much more challenging task (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Calarco, 2020; Margolis & Romero, 1998). Even newer institutional systems, including ones developed to advance EDI&I, can fail because they are nested within existing problematic institutional practices (Chappell, 2014; Mackay, 2014). In other words, even if academic institutions were to hire only Black and Indigenous women, women of colour, non-binary folks, neurodivergent peoples, and folks experiencing multiple marginalizations, without deeper change, these new institutional workers would continue to operate according to existing norms and systems of governance. It is those existing norms and systems that we are most invested in changing.

The challenge of recreating academic institutions as anti-racist, specifically, and anti-oppressive, broadly, is fundamentally a project of institutional transformation; that is, of changing both formal policies and practices and informal institutional norms. Studies of normative change suggest several elements are required for success. First, problematic norms must be identified, analyzed, and subjected to discursive scrutiny, so that they are no longer invisible. The ways in which norms contribute to maintaining power structures and oppressive relational dynamics have to be understood. Raising awareness of how the informal practice or norm is racist, creates harm, and needs to be altered is an important part of motivating change (Legro, 2000; Raymond et al., 2014; Schmidt, 2008). But merely exposing a norm as harmful or problematic will not produce change. Human behaviour is deeply habitual, and adopting a new norm is a behavioural challenge. Thus the second element is that an alternative practice must be available to replace the problematic practice, and there must be a constituency or political agent pushing for and demanding change (Legro, 2000; Raymond et al., 2014). In the absence of such pressures, extant norms function as well-traveled pathways and become resilient; decision makers become comfortable defaulting to something that feels familiar (Edelman, 1990; Fligstein, 1987; Raymond et al., 2014; Risse, 1999; cf. Dobbin et al., 2011). For example, the persistent use of student teaching evaluations to assess quality of instruction—assessments that are often tied to tenure, renewal, and career advancement—demonstrates

the difficulty of replacing a common systemic tool, despite well-established research on the biased nature of student evaluations, which often results in particular forms of aggression toward minoritized instructors.

Two common features of institutional ED&I initiatives actually often serve to sustain rather than challenge problematic structures. The first is an over-reliance on individual as opposed to institutional transformation (Applebaum, 2019). Most equity work within universities attends to individualized attitude or behaviour change, often through training opportunities such as professional development workshops on implicit bias, cultural awareness, inclusive teaching, and anti-racism. There is good reason, of course, for institutions to address individual action and to encourage culture change through continuing education. Addressing problematic interpersonal dynamics of racism in the workplace, whether indirect or direct, subtle, or overt, and encouraging new practices, such as developing relationships of trust, engaging in meaningful land acknowledgements, and modeling the sharing of pronouns, can be invaluable to creating a more inclusive and welcoming climate. However, these approaches have their limitations, especially when interpersonal work is focused on present behaviours rather than systemic patterns that are entrenched in institutional structures. For example, although many hiring committees now require their members to undergo anti-bias training, there often remains a focus on bibliometrics, including citation rates and impact factors, despite knowledge of how these indicators can be influenced by racialization and racism. This focus is often justified with reference to the need to uphold “academic standards” and “academic excellence,” without the recognition that these metrics, in many disciplines, are part of a larger pattern that privileges certain kinds of research over others, and often devalues research done by racialized and minoritized scholars (White-Lewis, 2020). In a way, then, anti-bias training—or the façade of anti-bias training—serves to uphold existing practices around how academic work is evaluated.

The second common feature is an overreliance on staff, students, and faculty who do the bulk of EDI&I work, in addition to other work responsibilities. Often referred to as “shadow” work, this labour typically takes the shape of short-term, inadequately resourced initiatives, such as one-off townhall meetings on racism, “Courageous Discussions” speaker series, or ad hoc EDI&I advisory committees. If they are not tied to any commitments or structural changes, the temporary, often hasty, nature of these initiatives ensures that they remain fundamentally disconnected from the normative practices of the institution. They become “add-ons” contingent on having the time/money/interest/people. When such volunteer work appears to produce little change, or even to legitimize merely symbolic action, many engaged in these initiatives become demoralized and discouraged, and abandon efforts to change the university. This common aspect of EDI&I work thus serves to exhaust and alienate individuals with the lived and learned expertise to engage in meaningful work toward systematic change. Thus, in addition to presenting a veneer of change, initiatives bearing this characteristic uphold the status quo by burning through the personnel capable of charting the course toward change.

In contrast to initiatives that are individualized, short-term, and dependent on volunteer labour, there are initiatives vital to advance an institution’s transformation

agenda. Among the most vital is the collection and analysis of robust intersectional and longitudinal data to help reveal systemic patterns. Remediating how institutional norms harm marginalized groups requires evidence about how these harms constitute patterns over time—work that can benefit from strategies including qualitative, longitudinal tools of the academy. As Indigenous scholars Walter and Andersen (2013) argue, “quantitative data play a powerful role in constituting reality through their underpinning methodologies by virtue of the social, cultural, and racial terrain in which they are conceived, collected, analysed, and interpreted” (p. 9). Such data can provide a powerful form of immanent critique by using the tools of academic inquiry to establish the lack of neutrality in academic review processes (Marsh et al., 2008; Easterly & Ricard, 2011). Close to 20 years ago, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2005) determined that “appropriate data collection is necessary for effectively monitoring discrimination, identifying and removing systemic barriers, ameliorating historical disadvantage and promoting substantive equality” within workplaces (p. 42). Establishing whether such patterns exist requires intersectional identity data gathering (such as the intersection of gendering and racialization) that is correlated with career-progress indicators (such as time to promotion and rates of salary increase) and that is collected over the course of many years.

Although necessary for meaningful EDI&I work, there is little consistency among organizations in terms of such data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Henry, et al., 2017). For example, Frances Henry and colleagues note, with respect to the Canadian post-secondary context, that there “is no comprehensive source of data or demographic profiles of the professoriate and no institutional efforts to generate knowledge about the everyday lived experiences of racialized and Indigenous scholars in the academy” (p. 6). Not only is there little data on the career progress patterns and patterns of lived experiences of racialized and Indigenous scholars that tracks pay ranges and promotion rates, frequencies and durations of paid and unpaid leave, and entry to and attrition from leadership positions, but there is also a dearth of anything other than data that “celebrates diversity,” typically in terms of unidimensional, non-intersectional, and depoliticized identities (such as the numbers of international graduate students enrolled at an institution). Such information is typically untethered from practices around awarding scholarships, experiences of mentorship, incidents of discrimination, and other important contextual factors that have different consequences for differently positioned individuals and groups.

## **Part 2: Two examples of data collection and analysis for institutional structural change and institutional resistance**

We offer two case studies of attempts at gathering the kind of data needed to identify, scrutinize, and, ultimately, change problematic patterns and structures. Not only do these cases illustrate the kind of data collection and analysis necessary for normative and institutional change, but they also highlight forms of resistance to this kind of data and to this kind of change.

### ***Case 1: Intersectional demographics leadership audit—Canada***

The first is an intersectional diversity audit of the leadership pipeline at five Canadian

universities (Johnson & Howsam 2020). This study was initially proposed while Johnson was a senior advisor to her university's provost. During the two-year appointment, she was focused primarily on developing data collection tools that would be helpful in identifying racialized and gendered patterns and in addressing discriminatory practices and procedures underlying the more problematic patterns. Throughout her work toward this end, she was met with various kinds of pushback and obstacles from individuals in leadership positions. The feedback on her work included concerns around the privacy of employees (even though all of the data proposed to be collected was publicly available), establishing impossible expectations (even though the purported goal of the EDI initiative at her university was to address, for example, sexism and racism), and the resources necessary to implement her studies (even though the university had made expressed commitments to identifying and addressing issues related to EDI). Ultimately, the work she developed on tracking demographics and career advancement for faculty and staff and for developing knowledge about the experiences of racialized faculty and staff within their work environment were shelved by her university's administrative leadership.

Upon leaving her position, Johnson developed a methodology, similar to that of Malinda S. Smith (e.g., 2010, 2022), to analyze publicly available headshots and biographies of 1,299 administrators, from departmental program chairs to the senior executive. This broad scope enabled Johnson to determine if administrators are hitting ceilings, and if these ceilings are at different heights for different people. A percentage comparison with Statistics Canada data on professor and lecturer income recipients showed that white men and women are overrepresented at senior administrative ranks, suggesting that, while white men have ready access to all administrative ranks and white women appear to be making it through to senior administrative ranks, racialized women and men do not make it past middle ranks. In particular, the study revealed that racialized men are represented among departmental program chairs and directors, departmental chairs and directors, and associate deans just under their representation in the census data; they are more clearly underrepresented within the ranks of deans and senior executives (4.6% and 7.2%, respectively). Racialized women appear underrepresented in the ranks of senior executives, deans, and departmental chairs and directors, relative to the census data. They appear most clearly underrepresented among senior executives and deans (2.4% and 2.3%, respectively).

In contrast, white women and men were found at every administrative rank, with white women appearing to be overrepresented among associate deans (43%) and senior executives (43%) levels and represented among deans about on par with their representation in the census data (34%). They were somewhat underrepresented among departmental and departmental program chairs and directors. Generally, white men persist in their significant overrepresentation in the central and senior leadership of universities relative to their representation in the data on professor and lecturer income recipients and in the data on earned doctorate degree holders. These findings indicate that about 90 percent of senior executives and deans are white, which is a significant contrast with population distribution data reported by Statistics Canada. It has long been established that white men dominate the administrative structures



of Canadian universities (Smith, n.d.). If only in terms of securing positions, white women have succeeded in pushing through gender barriers while racialized women and men continue to face obstacles in the pipeline to senior administration.

The patterns revealed by this study are problematic for a range of reasons. As stated by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2005), “numerical data showing an under-representation of qualified racialized persons in management may be evidence of employment systems that have the effect of discriminating and/or of decision-makers having an overt bias toward promoting White candidates into supervisory roles” (p. 32). This kind of data can offer concrete metrics for both plotting institutional starting points for any recruitment and retention initiatives (i.e., making visible the systems of the institution that reproduce itself), but also for measuring change over time. Yet, this kind of large-scale data collection is relatively uncommon in the Canadian context and not well integrated into EDI&I institutional efforts in either Canada or the United States.

### **Case 2: “Milkman” style implied racial identity email study—Australia**

The second case study is of bias among faculty members in their responses to emails from prospective students. In 2017, Megan MacKenzie and her then colleagues Ben Goldsmith and Thomas Wynter set out to replicate a study of bias in higher education that had been conducted by Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh in 2015. The Milkman study included emails from what seemed to be prospective students sent to a range of academics across the United States. These emails were identical, except for the name of the prospective students. These names had been vetted and tested to ensure they consistently signaled different gender and racial identity. Milkman et al. found faculty members—particularly those from higher-paying disciplines and private institutions—were most receptive to email inquiries sent by applicants having white male names. Building on this work, MacKenzie, Goldsmith and Wynter created an email-based audit experiment that included fictional prospective-student emails seeking information and a meeting with faculty members. The emails were sent to over 7000 faculty members at eight different universities in Australia and differed only in the name of the fictional prospective student, which were randomized using names that were associated in pre-tests with male/female and white/European, South Asian, Australian Aboriginal, Chinese, or Arab identities.

The study made four empirical contributions. First, it includes a diversity audit, which provides descriptive data on gender and racial diversity in faculty members across eight of Australia’s top universities, known as the “Group of Eight.” While diversity audits rely on a methodology with acknowledged limitations, MacKenzie and her colleagues argue that, in the absence of available data collected by institutions themselves, such audits produce valuable and reliable data on gender and racial diversity in Australian higher education. Second, the audit experiment assesses the causal impact of racial and gender indicators on the likelihood of obtaining a meeting with a prospective PhD supervisor. The study found that there was a significant difference in both response rates and positive responses to prospective students, depending on the implied racial identity of students’ names. While emails from *Thomas* or *Melissa Smith* received positive replies in 47–49 percent of cases after 24 hours,

those from *Rahul* or *Priyanka Kumar* received only 34–35 percent positive responses over the same period. It was possible to measure both the simple response/nonresponse rate, and the proportion of responses that nevertheless decline a meeting. Both measures show similar bias, such that the passive bias of simple non-response is compounded by the active bias of negative response, robustly demonstrating the existence of bias based on the students' names. Third, it was found that, unlike racialization, the perceived gender of a prospective student does not seem to significantly impact response rates or content. In short, while the study finds evidence of bias regarding race, it does not find evidence of significant gender bias. Fourth, in exploratory analysis, the project includes an examination of differences in bias among academics based on gender, rank, and discipline; the findings indicate that individuals in institutions with greater diversity on average show less bias, which, we argue, can provide insight into potential processes of change.

In addition to the important findings, a key part of the story of this research relates to the process and reactions it received. The project required a lengthy ethics process. Moreover, after follow-up emails were sent out to faculty explaining the nature of the study, a significant number of faculty members raised complaints related to the study; over 200 were formal complaints, raising concerns about the methods, use of data, and nature of the study. The authors also received several emails from agitated faculty members and MacKenzie received several threatening phone calls from faculty members warning her that the study would be detrimental to her career and prospects for attaining funding in the future. As a result of the high number of complaints, the university initiated both an internal and external review of the ethics protocols, both of which found the researchers had complied with their ethics guidelines. During this time, the study was put on hold, and an announcement was made to all of the over 7000 participants indicating that reviews were taking place. Ultimately, the university leadership allowed the study to go forward, with the caveat that the authors should both remove the data of just over 200 participants who had requested their data not be included in the study and show that the removal of such data did not jeopardize the study. The authors complied and research is in the process of being published.

These examples illustrate institutional resistance to the forms of EDI&I research necessary for institutional transformation. In the first, the resistance was prior to data collection while, in the second, the resistance was subsequent to data collection. The data sought from both examples were scaled at relatively large degrees and intended to shift focus from the individuals to the collective, from personal beliefs to institutional structures that pattern systemic barriers. Ironically, this work could only be pursued through a systematic study of the bodies and attitudes of individuals complicit in these systems. The data sought in both projects was not only intersectional, but also aimed at demonstrating bias in and providing the basis for transforming institutional processes. In the remainder of this article, we theorize the prior and post resistance to this form of data collection and analysis in terms of institutional gaslighting.

### **Part 3: Institutional gaslighting and four specific forms**

Universities have both embraced EDI&I discourse and paradoxically deployed mul-

multiple strategies of resistance to implementing practices that could dismantle systemic inequalities. These paradoxical positions can be better understood through the concept of institutional gaslighting (Ruíz, 2020). *Gaslighting*<sup>2</sup> originally referred to a phenomenon within intimate relationships whereby the gaslighter takes advantage or abuses trust. Gaslighting is widely described as a gendered phenomenon in which feminized subjects are made to question their positions (their perceptions, views, and interpretations of events) by those with more power, typically men. More broadly, Petric (2018) defines gaslighting as a form of manipulation using the strategies of denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying to create doubt in the targeted individual or group making them doubt their own perception, memory, or even sanity.

Black feminist scholars (Berenstain, 2020) use the term *structural gaslighting* to describe the systemic efforts (i.e., group-level actions) launched to sustain existing power structures by denying or obscuring the “patterns of harm they produce and license” (p. 733). While structural gaslighting refers to broad strategies that maintain patriarchal and white supremacist systems, institutional gaslighting may include the roles that specific institutions play in such strategies within a particular institution.

In academia, institutional gaslighting may include strategies to resist critiques of the institution or discredit evidence that undermines the authority or the carefully crafted image of the institution. Kennedy-Cuomo (2019) argues that institutions, particularly trusted institutions like universities and militaries, use a range of tactics to respond to any evidence that undermines their image, including distracting, trivializing, and denying. Focused on institutional responses to sexual violence in particular, Kennedy-Cuomo (2019) concludes, “when someone expects to trust the judgement of an institution, but the institution then betrays justice, survivors are gaslighted” (para. 4).

Studies of the experiences of minoritized faculty and administrators within higher education reveal gaslighting behaviours targeting minoritized faculty. For example, in a 2019 study, Mohamed and Beagan examine the experiences of racialized and Indigenous faculty and describe the impact of subtle, normalized racist practices of the institutions. These subtler forms of racism plant seeds of self-doubt among racialized and Indigenous faculty who report relying on each other for “sanity checks” (p. 339) about their interpretations of daily normalized, verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities. Berenstain’s (2020) research on Black and Brown students’ experiences illustrates how institutional gaslighting operates and its impacts on minoritized students. Their work shows that Black and Brown doctoral students also reported “questioning their sanity” as a result of the ways their experiences were denied or sidelined, even while universities made claims to take diversity seriously. In this example, the university does not gaslight racialized students by denying racism entirely; rather, an adjacent set of discourse are deployed, ones that acknowledge the significance of diversity yet construct an understanding and set of policies to address diversity and inclusion in ways that completely refute Black and Brown students’ actual experiences. Students of Colour are thus gaslit by being made to question their own experiences of ongoing racism *as racism* by institutions that are relentlessly declaring their anti-racist commitments (see also Ahmed, 2012, 2016).

In this landscape, meaningful EDI&I-focused data collection and analysis can play a role in resisting such forms of institutional gaslighting by contributing to the visibility, voice, and legitimacy of the experiences of marginalized groups. As our two examples show, rather than embracing the evidence of such data collection and analysis activities, the data become the subject of power struggles around their legitimacy.

In the next section, we describe four specific ways that institutional gaslighting works to frustrate EDI&I initiatives, explaining how these gaslighting phenomena are enabled or embedded in the hidden norms and practices of the academic status quo.

### ***Four specific forms of institutional gaslighting***

The concept of institutional gaslighting is helpful for understanding the forms of resistance that universities mount against institutional transformation efforts such as robust data collection and analysis. Working with this concept and drawing on our experiences, we identify four forms of institutional gaslighting we call: the slowdown, the pushback, the shutdown, and the blowback.

#### **The slowdown**

The slowdown captures a range of discursive tactics communicating “we can’t do that, yet.” We mention slowdown first because it can be one of the most common and powerful types of institutional resistance. The slowdown can take the shape of prolonged public or stakeholder consultation, endless environmental scans of programs, comprehensive reviews of policies, entrenched barriers to accessing to data, and requirements for approval from a large number of individuals and offices. Slowdown is powerful because it can be framed as supportive, reasonable, and necessitated by principles of peer-review and faculty governance, yet it ultimately serves to delay structural changes, often indefinitely. Given the common features of EDI&I initiatives outlined above, delay can often mean permanently frustrating a particular initiative. Slowdown strategies are powerful because they constitute an effective veto of structural change in the form of requests that appear reasonable.

There were a range of slowdown tactics used by the universities in both the leadership audit and the email study outlined previously. In the case of the leadership audit, the slowdown Johnson experienced during her time as EDI advisor took the shape of requirements for approval from senior administration on both the faculty relations and the human resources sides. With respect to the email study, slowdown included a lengthy and complex ethics process, the requirement for an internal and external review of the study, and the requirement that some respondent data be removed from the study. The ethics process associated with this project took two years. To be clear, having an ethics process is incredibly important; however, in the context of this project, there was beyond normal efforts to slow the project down, rather than assist its progress by ensuring compliance with all ethics protocols. For example, members of the ethics committee continually raised questions about the use of deception and the perceived stress or loss of time that the study might cause for participants. MacKenzie, Goldsmith and Wynter had to continually point to university policies and guidelines as well as Australia’s national statement on ethical research to affirm that the research project did indeed meet all stated requirements. Other re-

searchers might have abandoned the project or taken the first rounds of rejection as evidence that they needed to substantially revise their methods. Not everyone has time, resources, or the endurance to press through slowdown tactics.

### The pushback

Pushback captures tactics that undermine the intellectual, methodological, or ethical validity of the research or researchers and can best be captured with the phrase, “you are doing it wrong.” Similar to slowdown tactics, pushback may come in the form of messages of support that nevertheless raise questions, add requirements, or give rise to changes altering the nature of the project. Clearly, pushback and slowdown tactics overlap; what distinguishes pushback is the questioning of legitimacy. Pushback can convey a message that “diversity is important, but this is not the way to do it.” Pushback can come in the form of questioning particular methods or raising concerns about the rights of those implicated in research, including their privacy and consent. As such, the pushback is frequently a message to the researcher that they lack the expertise to conduct their study. Pushback tactics may question the expertise or motivations of the researchers and point away from EDI&I scholars and towards designated EDI&I committees as the legitimate experts in such initiatives whose approval is necessary for the research to move forward.

For the leadership audit, pushback took the shape of requests from senior administrators to Johnson to do an employment census as opposed to a leadership audit. The former, which is in place at many institutions, captures the diversity of the institution’s workforce but does not capture trends in career advancement as the latter does. The former provides a description of the diversity of the employee population but does not provide any indicators of equity in terms of progress through career ranks. For the email study, there were a number of distinct methods of pushback, including faculty complaints focused on participant privacy and consent and institutional questions about whether the appropriate experts on diversity and inclusion at the university had been consulted in the study.

### The shutdown

The shutdown as a tactic of resistance is captured by the phrase “we can’t do that, ever.” The shutdown captures forms of institutional pressure put on researchers to stop their work immediately. The clear message is that the work is not acceptable, appropriate, or permitted. The message is often that it does not adhere to established policies, rules, or norms in higher education. Shutdown can take the form of institutional suggestions or directives to stop, based on decisions that effectively discredit the research methodology and/or findings. While there are overlaps among the various forms of gaslighting, shutdown tactics are distinct in that they are more definitively aimed at stopping a conversation, halting a project, and distancing and delegitimizing research in ways that are silencing. An additional deployment of shutdown tactics occurs when EDI&I research is used in everyday practices of an academic unit. For example, in the work of search committees, such as recruitment, or in the work of tenure and promotion committees, such as retention, shutdown can occur through explicit claims that equity and excellence are mutually exclusive

values, and that prioritizing equity is to sideline excellence. More generally, it also occurs by punishing those who speak out about EDI&I, for example, by imposing penalties on a committee member who raises EDI&I issues to highlight microaggressions or manifestations of oppression.

In the case of the leadership audit, Johnson's study, which was in its proposal stage at the time, was shut down through the silence of "ghosting." She never heard from senior administrators why they would not proceed with the study, but she did clearly understand that the study, which has since been published in a peer-reviewed journal, was unacceptable in the context of her advisory work for her university. For the email study, shutdown came in the form of several rounds of rejections from the university research ethics committee and threats from faculty members that the research was illegitimate and could damage the researcher's careers. The message in both these instances was that this research should stop.

### **The blowback**

Blowback captures forms of harsh social pressure for scholars to abandon their work and to stop talking about it. In short, blowback conveys the message, "you need to stop doing that and you need to shut up." Unlike shutdown, which refers to the institutional obstacles designed to stop research initiatives, blowback refers to the forms of peer or public pressures on scholars to stop what they are doing and to "pipe down." Tactics take the form of threats, overt or perceived, that either one ends their work or there will be consequences for one's career. Tactics may also include "cooling effects" from colleagues resulting from their disapproval of the work, as well as forms of community and peer isolation. The frosting of professional relationships constitutes both shutdown of the work itself—work that is now seen as a barrier to collegiality—and blowback because of the isolating impact it has on those doing meaningful EDI&I work. Again, gaslighting tactics overlap. What distinguishes blowback is that the focus is more on punishing and threatening the individual researcher, questioning their legitimacy as a scholar, and limiting the reach of their work.

Blowback tactics may also involve questioning and attempting to delegitimize the professionalism of individuals engaging in EDI&I work. Such tactics are expressed in accusations of being too "personally" or "emotionally" invested in a research project to lead it effectively. These expressions of blowback are thus based on the faulty assumption that research is either personal *or* rigorous, either equity-oriented *or* scientific. In some cases, scholars doing work related to structural change are cast as "troublemakers," "difficult," having an "axe to grind," or seeking only to validate their personal experiences through the legitimizing power of the institution. Sometimes blowback is expressed in the attitude that EDI&I experts are narrow minded and focused solely on issues of racialized and gender-based discrimination or moral policing. In all cases, the clear message to those doing this work is that it is in their best interest to stop what they are doing and to stop talking about it.

With respect to the leadership audit, Johnson experienced blowback from another advisor on EDI issues in terms of questioning her professionalism and isolating her from senior administrators under whose portfolio the work was taking place. Although a major part of her role was to act as an interface between faculty

members and members of the team working on the university's EDI initiative, she was often accused of leaking too much information to faculty members. Although working collaboratively with other social scientists was essential in developing the methodology for the audit, while she was an EDI advisor, she was pressured to work alone. She was never told directly to limit her communication with faculty members about the initiative, but she was made to feel that she would be overstepping professional boundaries if she did not.

In the case of the email study, blowback took the form of personal threats made to the researchers about the career implications of the work. MacKenzie received the following advice from a colleague in her department: "don't shit where you eat." The clear message was that the work MacKenzie and her colleagues were pursuing would be personally detrimental to their careers and should stop immediately. During the investigation process, the notification sent by the University of Sydney to all 7000 participants announcing that the study was put on hold also functioned as a form of blowback for the researchers. The announcement did not indicate that the project had already received ethics approval (which it had) or that the review was not due to any evidence of breach of protocol (which there was not), but rather from the high number of complaints. Thus, the message implied by omission some level of problem, non-compliance, or failure on the part of the researchers that had potential reputational damage and emboldened and reinforced peer blowback.

### **Conclusion: Towards a politics of refusal**

Drawing on our experience as EDI&I researchers and advocates within research universities, we aimed to illuminate the mechanisms by which EDI&I initiatives, adopted by supportive leaders, and even when well-resourced, are frustrated, not by exceptional or unusual practices, but by the everyday processes of academic administration and faculty governance. These provide a uniquely empowering environment for those who feel uncomfortable with or otherwise concerned about EDI initiatives. They are a rich resource for those who consciously seek to stymie progress. Drawing on two specific examples of data gathering initiatives, we characterized familiar forms of institutional resistance to EDI&I initiatives as a form of gaslighting.

Many feminist scholars have articulated a politics of refusal that may be helpful to thinking about the scope and impact of EDI&I work in the context of institutional gaslighting. When imagining ways forward, we draw on Bonnie Honig's (2021) notion of the "arc of refusal," which she elaborates by re-reading Euripides' *Bacchae*. Normally read as an attempt by women to challenge patriarchy, who then become crazy when they fail (which almost certainly happens in some cases of resistance), Honig outlines three acts of refusal that include "leaving the city" (when the *Bacchae* abandon Thebes to protest the labour imposed upon them), "re-tooling their use value" (resting, cavorting, breastfeeding animals), and "returning to the city" (as transformed women wanting to impose their new ways on Thebes).

A politics of refusal in our context may involve, for example, leaving the institution, either metaphorically (going off campus), or, more drastically, resigning, as Sara Ahmed (2016) did. It may involve engaging in new practices that do not support the patriarchal habits of the kingdom (examples here are numerous, such as collect-

ing data that deans do not want, finding ways to induce “nice” colleagues to expose their biases). Finally, it may also involve returning to the institution to claim new spaces. If, like the Bacchae, returning to the city means being expelled and left to wander waywardly, Honig (2021) proposes reading the third act of refusal not as a failure of the bacchants/researchers, but as a failure of the city/institution. Institutional gaslighting is a failure of the institution, and not a failure of the individuals engaged in EDI&I research. Like Black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman, Honig wants to rework the archive through fabulation—the women are not mad or wayward, they created new practices, new sororal kinships that exceeded the possibilities given by Thebes, given by the institution.

How does understanding the embedded nature of academic systems in broader institutional structures (such as disciplines) help us to see ways not only to understand, but also to overcome such resistance? Again, we point to data gathering, albeit a “re-envisioned” form of such an initiative, for possible solutions. Specifically, building partnerships with those “outside the city” (or in different cities) may provide the political pressure needed to counter attacks on the reputation or to give in to internal critics demanding slowdowns. In addition, the data gathering process itself (asking questions, generating new insight) may provide a sanity check and prompt change.

Data collection is one of many tools available for shifting university culture and pushing EDI&I initiatives beyond rhetoric. Showing *that* and *where* “glass ceilings” or “sticky floors” are (as the Johnson and Howsam, 2020, study does) helps institutions see that the lack of diversity in leadership is not simply a problem of qualified candidates. By so doing, this kind of data can help validate the perspectives of racialized members of the academy that they are being passed over for leadership positions in favour of their white counterparts. Doing so also reveals how narratives of a lack of qualified candidates are a form of gaslighting. Similarly, experimental work like MacKenzie, Goldsmith, and Wynter reinforce the reality that academic selection processes of hiring and mentoring are importantly influenced by stereotypes of race and racism, and are unlikely to be based solely on merit. This kind of evidence undermining institutional claims that it is those who draw attention to race who are undermining academic values. In this way, both data gathering projects have the potential to frustrate strategies of institutional gaslighting by revealing the partial and distorted perspective that is represented by the supposedly “neutral, meritorious” system of academic administration.

## Notes

1. We recognise that there are other significant oppressions not taken up in this discussion that require specific attention.
2. The term derives from the 1938 play *Gas Light*, which was later adapted into a movie, in which a husband tries to trick his wife into thinking she is mentally ill so that he can have her committed to a mental institution.

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