

2020 Mandelbaum Fellowship Award

Citation for Prerna Subramanian

The logo for OCUFA, consisting of the letters 'OCUFA' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The 'O' and 'C' are connected, and the 'U' and 'F' are connected. The 'A' is a simple, blocky letter.

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This year's Henry Mandelbaum Graduate fellowship award winner at the PhD level of study is Prerna Subramanian. Prerna is a doctoral candidate at Queen's University in Cultural Studies where she has proven herself a promising scholar, dedicated activist, and community leader. The ninth PhD candidate to win this fellowship, she embodies the spirit of the Mandelbaum award as she is a true leader, community organizer, and activist.

Prerna's doctoral research explores the tensions between race, sexuality, location, and visual narratives. Using a critical lens, her research interrogates the production of spatial relations around the public toilet by considering how representations of transgender and non-binary communities in India are taken up in newspaper reports, advertising, and online videos as it relates to public policy initiatives. Her research aims to contribute to the resistance in India against ongoing systems of oppression and marginalization of queer and transgender people.

Prerna's academic work builds on her remarkable leadership and advocacy with sexual minority and gender justice groups, both within academia and in civil society more broadly. Her contributions have taken several forms, ranging from activist cultural production (plays, poetry, visual art), to community-based research, to developing sites of knowledge production and transfer (conferences, journals, organizations), to participating in activist organizing and action. She has been a central force in multiple political organizing efforts in India, including coordinating the first Pride March in her community and the first queer conference in West India. Since moving to Kingston, Ontario to begin her PhD, she has become involved with local organizations, including as a Board Member at the Kingston chapter of the Public Interest Research Group, and a volunteer at a local sexual assault centre.

In addition to her impressive commitment to social justice, Prerna has demonstrated equal dedication to her academic pursuits. As a second year PhD candidate, she has been honoured with many academic awards, published a sole-authored article, and presented papers at a number of international conferences. As expressed by one of her referees:

She is one of the most insightful, theoretically rigorous, motivated, and politically principled graduate scholars I have encountered in nearly twenty years of teaching.



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These sentiments are echoed by another referee who notes that:

[Prerna speaks] about her own research questions with a degree of enthusiasm, passion, and confidence that is not just rare but almost impossible to find at this stage in a career. Her thinking is original, and none of the questions she asks seem derivative. She talks with equal passion about current politics and the social inequalities in India – and these indeed would inform her work as she begins to work on her dissertation.

All of Prerna's references spoke to the importance of her academic and community work in advancing queer and transgender rights both nationally and internationally.

Prerna's academic passion and extracurricular work is an inspiration. The committee finds that her social activism, academic promise, and leadership truly exemplify the spirit of this award's namesake. Prerna has a deep understanding of how the personal is political. It is our pleasure to add the OCUFA Henry Mandelbaum Graduate Fellowship to her growing list of accomplishments and we look forward to hearing more from Prerna in the coming years.