

been excluded from official canons, often because of their embrace of the body. Is canonicity itself inherently patriarchal? To what degree is the act of drawing lines of influence complicit with dominant paradigms that seek to name and order—and thereby control—what we make, write, receive? Perhaps Freytag-Loringhoven's status as a "peripheral figure" in the history of art and literature may not be such a bad thing after all.

We should take our cues from Djuna Barnes, Freytag-Loringhoven's most dedicated reader. Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) is a masterpiece of

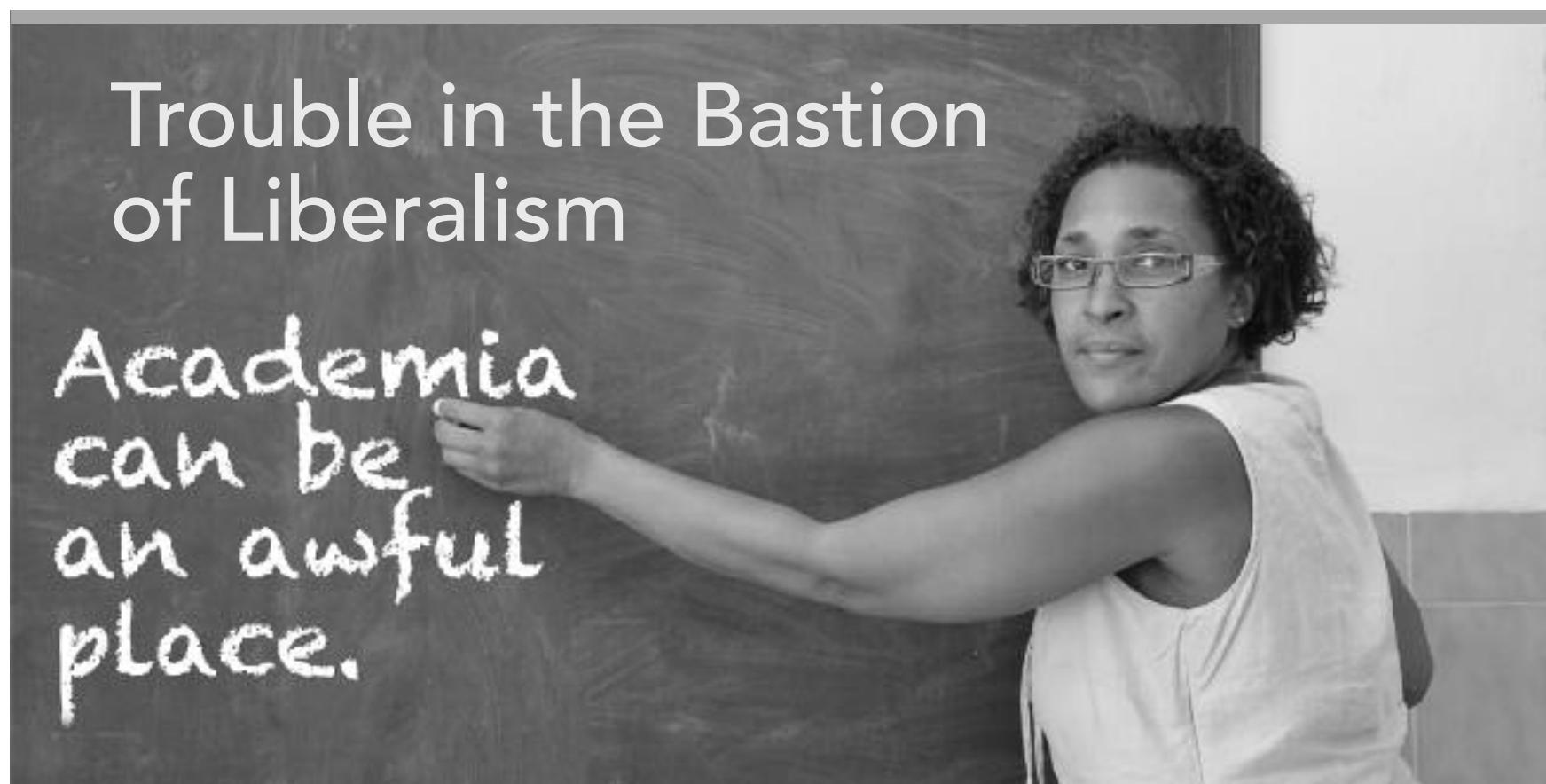
modernist literature, and while it is generally accepted that Robin Vote, the main character in the novel, is modeled after Barnes's lover Thelma Wood, some believe that Freytag-Loringhoven inspired the character. In one of the novel's central scenes, Barnes describes Robin as a figure who appears, and then vanishes:

The louder she cried out the farther went the floor below, as if Robin and she, in their extremity, were a pair of opera glasses turned to the wrong end, diminishing in their

painful love; a speed that ran away with the two ends of the building, stretching her apart.

Just as Robin is perpetually lost to Barnes's narrator, so too is Freytag-Loringhoven to us. As tough as it may be, we should read Freytag-Loringhoven's work in this same spirit: as something physical, passionate, and out of our control. 

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Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia

Edited by Gabrielle Gutiérrez Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2012, 588 pp., \$36.95, paperback

Academia can be an awful place. The conniving, disrespect, and meanness cut across class, gender, racial, and generational lines.

In graduate school, I learned the hard way that the perpetrators of bad behavior aren't always the usual suspects. Mine were tenured women professors with brown skin like mine. It's taboo for younger female (and male) academics to call out our "sisters" for being complicit in the perpetuation of subordination in academia and the workplace. Instead, we whisper our stories, gossip, and feign respectful silence while listening to some of these elder stateswomen vent about how they feel unappreciated, get treated like modern-day "mammies" and "mules," and fight long, lonely battles against racism and sexism in an academic community that, until recently, was dominated at all levels by white men.

These days, women outnumber men at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and they are earning more degrees. There are more women adjuncts than men, although men still outnumber

Reviewed by Stacey Patton

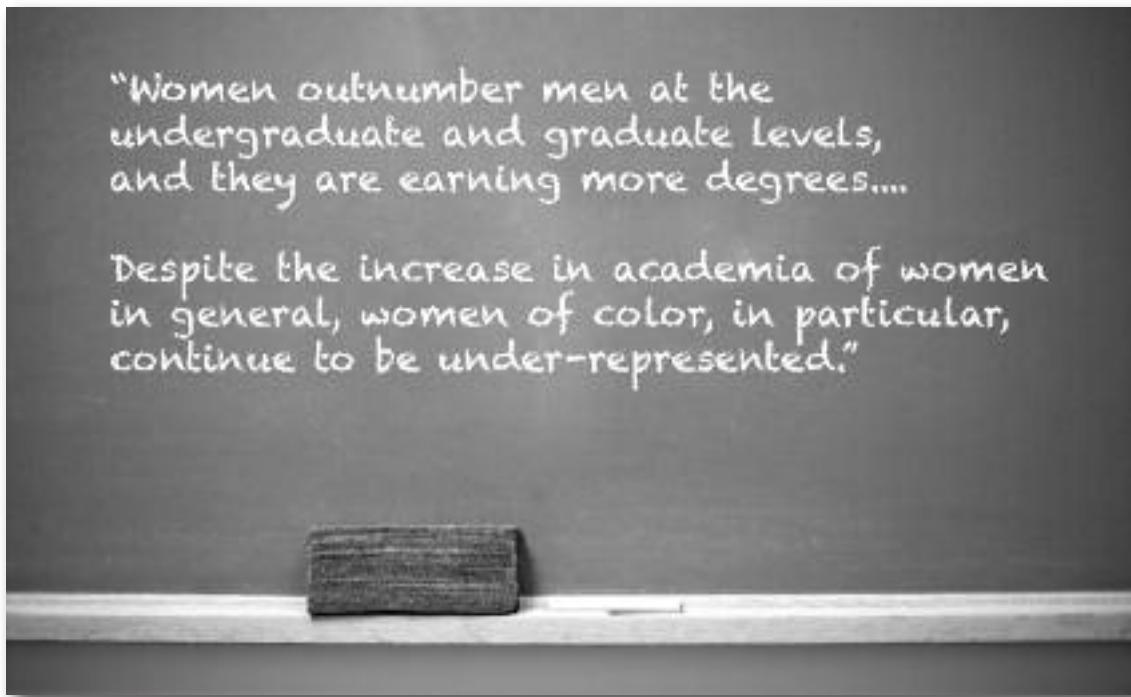
women in tenured and tenure-track positions. Despite the increase in academia of women in general, women of color, in particular, continue to be under-represented. According to the US Department of Education, in 2007, women of color held only 7.5 percent of full-time faculty positions. And as academic rank rises, the percentage of women of color steadily declines.

Because of my personal battles, I'm not drawn to academic diatribes, unless they include a practical focus on solutions, rather than rehashing negative episodes simply for the sake of venting. So, to be honest, when I saw the cover of *Presumed Incompetent* posted on friends' Facebook threads, I scrolled on by. I resolved that the world does not need another tome by women of color complaining about sexism and racism in US higher education.

Fortunately, *Presumed Incompetent*, edited by Gabrielle Gutiérrez Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P.

Harris, is not a diatribe. This nearly 600-page anthology collects first-person narratives and empirical studies by forty contributors from various class, ethnic, racial, and sexual backgrounds. They include both junior and senior faculty from a range of public and private colleges and universities of various sizes across the United States (and one from Vancouver, British Columbia). The writers share their often-similar experiences of the obstacles they've faced on the road to tenure, offering useful insights into the reasons why colleges have not adapted to the nation's demographic evolution, thus indirectly contributing to the imbalances in economic and educational access that undergird so many of today's social problems.

Presumed Incompetent must be situated in the context of the larger crisis in US higher education: economic stress, changing technologies, the \$1-trillion student-loan problem, growing questions about the value of college degrees, the mismatch between education and the demands of the labor market, and the growing influence of conservative



forces in academe. Add to these challenges academe's chronic resistance to change; the rise of for-profit colleges; a new business model of higher education that deemphasizes liberal arts in favor of science and health fields; the emergence of online learning, which is reshaping teaching; and attacks upon affirmative action and diversity efforts. All this change has turned the academy into a crucible of anger, confusion, and frustration.

While the influx of women into higher education since the 1980s is a notable feminist achievement, the "feminization" of academia has occurred alongside the gendered labor exploitation of students and faculty, and debt peonage, which is disproportionately high among women of color. Across higher-education disciplines, women are over-represented in the poorest-paid fields. In the book's introduction, Angela Harris and Carmen González discuss the corporatization of higher education and the growing use of adjuncts, who nationally make up seventy percent of instructional faculty and who often face tenuous employment and hostile work environments. Contributor Delia Douglas describes in intimate detail the daily, lived experiences of adjunct professors in Canada, as she interweaves her own experiences with the country's troubled racial history.

Meanwhile, universities talk a great deal about diversity and equality, but don't usually deal with campus climate and policy. The dominant ethos is that the academy is a bastion of liberalism, "political correctness," and meritocracy. But, as the editors explain in the book's introduction, "higher education reflects and reproduces—yet also sometimes subverts—the social hierarchies that pervade American society, including race, gender, class and sexuality."

Against this backdrop, the contributors to *Presumed Incompetent* address issues of tokenism, class privilege, and class-based obstacles, and the intersections of these with race and gender. The varied essays describe systemic forms of bias in hiring, classroom and departmental interactions, curriculum and pedagogy, evaluation of scholarship, and promotion and tenure. They highlight the contradictory nature of US higher education: "The university champions meritocracy, encourages free expression and the search for truth, and prizes the creation of neutral and objective knowledge for the

betterment of society—values that are supposed to make race and gender identities irrelevant," says the introduction. But women of color, the editors argue, "too frequently find themselves 'presumed incompetent' as scholars, teachers, and participants in academic governance," simply because they are not white men.

The devaluation and presumed incompetence of women of color is nothing new. Similar anthologies have documented our experiences with microaggressions, prejudice, and institutional forms of discrimination. So what does this anthology add to the conversation?

It is different from earlier works that focus on black women or other single, racial or ethnic groups. *Presumed Incompetent* acknowledges and then builds upon such works as *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001); *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* (2008); *Paths to Discovery: Autobiographies from Chicanas with Careers in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering* (2011); and *Transforming the Ivory Tower: Challenging Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Academy* (2012). This anthology's strength and appeal is in the diversity of its contributors—black, Asian, Latino, American Indian, white, male, and transgender. The editors write,

By widening the lens, it helps to dispel the stereotype of black women being the only—or main—ones to bear the brunt of systemic inequities. The contributors to this book find themselves disciplined by colleagues, students, or administrators whenever their assigned and/or claimed identities do not match cultural stereotypes. Given a climate of shared cultural stereotypes and images, it is not surprising that although each of these stories is unique, the authors also describe strikingly similar barriers to their success.

The book's sections focus on campus climate, faculty and student relationships, social class in academia, and tenure and promotion. Beyond "presumed incompetence," the subtext of the anthology is the omnipresence of white privilege and superiority throughout higher education.

"Although intellectually we understand institutionalized systems of domination, study them, and teach their details and histories, in our hearts

and innermost selves we may also ... somehow internalize the ideas about our presumed incompetence that are so pervasive in our everyday lives," writes Bettina Aptheker, a professor of feminist studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. "We prevail, but sometimes it is at enormous costs to ourselves, to our sense of well-being, balance, and confidence." Aptheker hopes that *Presumed Incompetent* will affirm women's sanity and renew their determination.

Thus, Dean Spade, the first openly transgender law professor in the US, in his essay, "Notes Toward Racial and Gender Justice Ally Practice in Legal Academia," explains his commitment to being an agent of change. "As a white person and lawyer, I want to provide support to social movements, not take resources (in the form of salary, for example) from them." He adds that he seeks "to incorporate tools for developing a critical race lens based in a personal exploration of trauma, oppression, and dominance" into his activism and teaching.

An important recurring theme in this anthology is the expectation that women of color will go way above and beyond what white faculty, male or female, would do to nurture, guide, and support their (mostly white) students. In her essay, "They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain," Sherrie Wilson writes:

I always felt that many of [my students] kind of underestimated me ... They wanted me to be their mammy. "Oh, Mammy I feel bad; take care of me. ..." But they forgot Mammy had a brain and the same kind of Ph.D. as others. ... You're supposed to always be chuckling and nurturing no matter what they do. You're not supposed to demand the same level of performance.

Providing an alternative perspective on the selflessness so often expected of women of color in the academy, writers Serena Easton and Beth Boyd discuss the rewards of their profession, which often go beyond intellectual engagement and academic achievement. In "On Being Special," Easton writes of

the extraordinary privilege and opportunity to educate a new generation on the complex manifestations of inequality so that the world may be a little bit better for their children and grandchildren ... When my students of color thank me for helping them to understand their own lives better through a sociological lens, for not giving up on them, for not letting them hand in substandard work, or for helping them stay on track when they want to throw the towel in, then I have my reward. When my white students write me at the end of the semester asking what they can do to make things better for students of color on campus, or when they decide they can no longer abide by the racist and ethnocentric comments they hear from their friends and family, then I have my reward.

And in "Sharing Our Gifts," Boyd, a Native American, brings up the huge impact simply of her presence on campus:

As it turned out, just being there became very important in ways I had never imagined. Native American students across campus stopped by my office just to meet me or to visit. They ... just wanted to meet me and

know it was possible to get through school. Having never experienced a Native American faculty member, I ... was surprised by how much it meant to Native American students that I was just there.

The prejudice, bias, stereotypes, and assumptions created and nurtured by the presumption of incompetence, which grows out of notions of white superiority, "manifest themselves in a multitude of ways," writes Nancy Cantor in her introduction to Part III, "Network of Allies." "[T]hey operate simultaneously at overt and subconscious levels that are both deeply personal and profoundly political." Thus, this section outlines a variety of survival strategies, including forging a strong support system and sense of community; remaining grounded in a sense of purpose; and viewing oneself on a continuum from past, through present, to future. There are frequent mentions of the need both to have and to be a mentor—although the contributors provide no specific plans for senior black women in academia to actively support and mentor their younger counterparts—historically an issue, particularly in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

The final chapter, "Lessons from the Experiences of Women of Color Working in Academia," which references and analyzes various passages from the contributors to provide recommendations, looks to the future. It is arguably

the most important section of the anthology; its focus on tangible steps toward progress keeps readers from feeling overwhelmed with feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

A limitation of the book is that while some essays mention the seismic demographic shift—or "browning"—of the US population, it avoids discussion of the widening gap between rich and poor, which is redefining the middle-class pursuit of traditional four-year degrees. *Presumed Incompetent* has an ivory-tower ambiance that feels out of touch with the options increasingly being considered by students and families of color, who are moving beyond the limitations of that paradigm, not by choice, but out of economic necessity. A disproportionate number of students of color are turning to for-profit and online degrees, which have a high risk of being debt traps and professional dead-ends.

The power of the collection may also be limited by the density of some of the writing. While many of the essays are candid and personal, others are more scholarly. The book as a whole comes across as earnest and well-documented, but I wonder if this might actually reduce its appeal and effectiveness. Though current and would-be academics of color will be attracted to the topic, some white educators might mistakenly think—from the book cover alone—that it will not be relevant to their experience in the academy. In fact, it would be beneficial for them to read it, both for

their own edification and for the future of American higher education. As John F. Dovidio writes in the introduction to Section II, "Faculty/Student Relationships":

This book is for people other than women of color, too. It is for people like me, a white male, because no matter how long I study bias, I can never really experience and understand it until I listen to the voices of those who are victimized daily by it. This book is about our future: what it can be, and ways that we, as the academy and a society, can embrace the profound benefits of diversity.

If *Presumed Incompetent* helps white academics, particularly men, gain insights into the realities of these intersections, then it will have served a positive purpose. Meanwhile, it provides a service by diversifying the chorus of voices speaking varied truths and provides a resource with which many can expand their understanding of the realities and evolutions that define our society, inside and outside of higher education. ☀

Stacey Patton is a reporter who covers graduate education and diversity issues for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. She is the author of *That Mean Old Yesterday: A Memoir* (2007), which explores the historical roots of corporal punishment in African American families.

POETRY

Burnt October

1. diaries my declawed
denatured brushes with intimacy
2. ashen frayed
words centered on *not*
3. we began (and finished)
as a question in part
4. point of origin (perfectly) limited
half-life of two
5. assumed if at first we couldn't we can't
6. and you saying *of course*
I know it (every bit) my territorial insult
7. equidistant parallel lives running
on without end
8. stop/go/wait another few
days or years
9. who's to move squirm leave
10. our house partitioned (postwar) entity
11. tissue shaved from the congested we

12. listening *time for what's said* whoever
heard that heard wrong
13. blame taking/at root
14. given we're all we know
small private selections
15. subtexts emerge squabble
hey now say that again
16. talk
not a sunlit (pre)occupation
17. I am logically
that am I
18. time's up the bottom line
19. dawn crimson smeared waking
sleep a way out
20. term for not-wonder *you* in italics
21. another dizzying rejoinder billows
22. your proverbial ship coming almost
but not quite
23. sailing silently sailing
24. red-rimmed stomped on horizon
25. who's to jump ship our star-crossed
threshold
26. numerical fact two proven impossibilities
you
me
27. chalk it up figures screech on the blackboard
28. crosshairs steady calibrate
so how could you have done
29. did it
30. versions vermillion revisions
catch fire flit
31. October about the end
ghost mouth on the window moist

Katherine Soniat's fifth collection of poetry, *The Swing Girl* (2011) was selected as Best Collection of 2011 by the Poetry Council of North Carolina (A.O. Young Award). Her sixth collection is *A Raft, A Boat, A Bridge* (2013). New work appears in *Hotel Amerika, Antioch Review, Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel, Superstition Review, and Image: A Journal of Art, Faith, and Mystery*. She teaches in the Great Smokies Writers Program at the University of North Carolina-Asheville. Her website is www.katherinesoniat.com.