

Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia

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Title: Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia
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Readers of *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, the first volume, were touched by the compelling narratives of the ways race and class intersected in the writers' experiences of academia. Their stories were of pain and persistence, stories of shame and success. The dichotomy of these experiences resonated with many personal reflections of countless women of color. We learned from these accounts of academia that in spite of the challenges these women experienced, their stories reflected survival and, in some cases, the ability to thrive. The stories from the book have sparked numerous conference presentations, symposia, and panels, along with motivating other publications, research studies, and analyses since the first volume's debut in 2012.

The second volume is imbued with just as many stories of trial and triumph. *Presumed Incompetence II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia* provides for women of color readers "the precious knowledge that they are not alone" (p. x). A unique aspect of this volume centers on exposing the harm that comes from travailing academia's rocky terrain, and how some women do not make it out alive, let alone physically, emotionally, or spiritually unscathed. These accounts of diminished mental and physical health, and even death, are sobering reminders that academia is part of the racist, patriarchal, capitalist machine. And at the end of the day, we are all replaceable.

Women of color represent only 12% of the professoriate (NCES, 2019) and 9% of the higher education workforce (McChesney, 2018). Because of the limited, although growing, numbers of women of color in academia, women of color are often one of a few, or the only, women of color at their institutions. With this status comes the well-documented effects of cultural taxation (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012) due to increased service or advising demands (Shaver et al., 2014), structural or intellectual tokenism (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018) when there are no others who share your perspectives or engage in similar research (Turner et al., 2008), and the isolation that comes from women of color firsts in 2020. All of these demands, plus the broader implications of racism and sexism, take a collective toll on women of color, inciting physical and emotional stress, anticipatory stress of possible future incidents, and overall racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004).

Unfortunately, absent of individual physical or psychological evidence, oppression can be subtle and can cause women of color to question whether they have experienced racism, sexism, or some combination of both in certain situations (King, 2003; Remedios & Snyder, 2015). Attributional ambiguity is a concept that describes these situations in which women of color cannot determine with accuracy whether positive and/or negative interactions have occurred because of their race, gender, or another reason (Brower et al., 2017).

Presumed Incompetent II is organized into five thematic sections illustrating the stories of women of color in academia. Each of the five sections of the volume contains stories of the ways intersectionality complicates the clear explanation of why an incident occurred or the meaning to be made from the event for women of color. The 32 chapters are a mix of empirical research articles, personal narratives, and conceptual understandings of racism, sexism, classism, and the like that only serve to provide further evidence of "it's NOT just me" for women of color encountering oppression in the academy.

The first section on "Tenure and Promotion" contains seven chapters. Tenure and promotion experiences are natural progressions within faculty life, yet are experienced differently for women of color due to systemic bias and the ever-present dominant White, patriarchal norms of academia. Narratives highlight an array of touch points within these journeys, noting the ways students, colleagues, and institutions collude to perpetuate harm for and diminish the contributions of women of color. Years of community organizing, junior faculty status, and pregnancy failed to prevent inequitable teaching and service responsibilities, sexual harassment, and micro- and macroaggressions. Through these stories, the authors provide advice on how readers can stand up and overcome these hurdles for successful tenure and promotion.

In Section Two, the authors demystify the experiences in “Academic Leadership.” Authors offered insight into the often-untold realm of senior-level pathways and the even less understood realities of women of color in these roles. Detailed stories bring forth the tension between pursuing and obtaining hard-fought career milestones and upholding mendacious institutional missions. These reflections highlight the well-calculated strategies women of color employ to overcome silencing and tokenization to achieve personal, departmental, and institutional wins. However, the success of bridge-building work comes with great sacrifice. Stories shared offer intimate insight into the toll academic leadership takes on women of color’s capacity to foster community, maintain healthy self-concepts, and an overall resilience to persist another day in the ivory tower.

Section Three contains four chapters and focuses on “Social Class.” Narratives of women of color from working class backgrounds seek to remind institutions of their presence and crucial contributions to the academy. The ongoing negotiation between their lived experiences and socialization practices often demand that women of color academics uphold elitist, classist, and, frankly, violent norms. Resistance frequently leads to questioned competence, devalued contributions, and being labeled an outsider. Despite these attempts, few can deny their value in the midst of an increasingly first-generation, working class student population. As institutions begin to slowly reckon with the need to evolve, these women and their stories serve as canaries in the mines of institutional harm.

The four chapters in Section Four, “Bullying, White Fragility, and Microaggressions,” explore what is lost and gained when we exist in a field that normalizes this behavior. The long-lasting influence of institutional harm on women of color in academia is painted in detail. Namely, the loss of life by suicide, deteriorating mental and physical health, and miscarriage are offered in an effort to look behind the curtain of shame and hopefully disrupt these practices. Reflections remind readers that the impact of harm is not always direct, yet still destructive. Offerings of self-care and healing to mitigate institutional trauma are provided by the authors and serve as reminders of the need to consistently put them into practice.

Lastly, the largest section with nine chapters, Section Five, “Activism, Resistance, and Public Engagement,” reminds readers of the inherent spirit of leadership, activism, and defiance living within women of color academes. This uprising occurs beyond departmental realms, pouring into digital, legal and broader institutional areas. In spaces where representation, policies, and standards normalized systems of violence, these women chose to stand in the gaps. Essays steeped in courage, by way of Twitter fingers or legal action, move beyond personal intolerance for racist and sexist behavior and actualize the lengths many women of color go through to be seen, heard, and validated. Multifaceted strategies for confronting and coping with the stress and fatigue of traversing bias encourages readers to take the route that best suits their needs.

Despite the depth and breadth of these women’s chronicles, the text missed the opportunity to provide insight into the graduate experience. The book names the exploration of women of color in academia as its focus and thoroughly colors the many ways these narratives are constructed from the perspective of multiple identities. Nonetheless, it paints a partial story within these women’s careers and makes few connections to potential socialization incidents throughout their graduate education. As the academy seeks to strengthen the pipeline for women of color at the graduate level, additional attention to these aspects of the authors’ experiences would further strengthen the text.

Likewise, numerous iterations of womanhood are brought to life; however, additional centering of the lived experiences of transgender women of color in academia was lacking. The amplification of the triumphs and barriers of women of color must fully capture the vastness of the community, including transgender women who actively contribute to the academy.

Overall, the stories in this volume not only provide mounting evidence of the scores of encounters women of color have on a semester, weekly, or daily basis in higher education institutions, but point to more systemic issues in academia. Racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressions are endemic to higher education and must be addressed in order to create space for and fully embrace not only women of color, but people of color more broadly. The authors remind women of color of their agency in enacting resistance to the shenanigans of the academy and in developing ways to hold institutions liable for their actions. *Presumed Incompetent II* reminds us that “rhetoric without accountability ends up being meaningless” (p. 4).

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