
Book Review

Presumed incompetent, the intersections of race and class for women in academia

Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris (eds.)

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The significance of *Presumed Incompetent* is that it engages in a sustained dialog about the struggles that women of color endure within institutions of higher learning. *Presumed Incompetent* relies on an interdisciplinary approach that looks at the experiences of over 40 authors utilizing varying methods from personal narratives to qualitative empirical studies. Cecilia Burciaga's concept-metaphor of the dense, impenetrable "adobe-ceiling" in academia for Latinas (as opposed to a more penetrable, see-through, "glass ceiling" encountered by white women) encompasses the overarching thematic of the anthology (501). Geared toward an academic audience of scholars, faculty and administrators, it offers a telling portrayal of our hierarchical society and the inequalities faced regularly by women of color in the academy. In this instance, a higher degree of knowledge does not equate to achieving equality and respect for producers of knowledge within the ivory tower. Women of color academics often live within the margins of the university and within those margins build community to find solace and the strength to persevere.

Tackling themes from campus climate to networking, promotion and tenure these 30 essays decenter a white-feminist approach to

understanding women of color in academia. Utilizing diverse methodologies, their work weaves a thread that resonates with previous scholarship that emphasizes the significance of experiential knowledge, the relevance of strategizing within institutional constraints and the intersections of race, ethnicity and gender. In the following three essays the authors interlace these methodologies. First, "Present and Unequal: A Third-Wave Approach to Voice Parallel Experiences in Managing Oppression and Bias in the Academy," by Kimberly R. Moffitt, Heather E. Harris and Diane A. Forbes Berthoud, explores the voices of African and Latina academics by having them share their narratives as people of color in the dominant culture of the academy (82). Women of color scholars live within the margins trying to be seen within the university based on their academic credentials and not as tokenized representations of their particular ethnic group, race and/or gender:

I dream of the day that nobody will ask, on a form, "what is your gender?" and "what is your ethnicity," ... I mean, I am a human being. What else do you need? Smart enough to have a PhD in chemistry, what else do you want? (87)



This participant's narrative speaks to the persistent tokenism evident in universities and the intersections of race, gender and ethnicity as seen through a Third-Wave lens of women of color's experience.

Similarly, Francisca de la Riva-Holly's essay, "Igaladas," reflects her journey from alienation to self-celebration while achieving tenure at a conservative institution. She gets a harsh wake-up call when she connects, via Internet, with women of color scholars who despite bringing huge sums of funding and cutting-edge research to their universities are alienated and not tenured for being "non-collegial" (292–293). Her department is defining "collegiality" not as the respectful manner in which colleagues work side by side, but by social norms revolving around class, gender, race and ethnicity. An "apartheid of knowledge" that marginalizes the scholarship of faculty of color is embedded in higher education. Thus, being labeled "non-collegial" would deem her unfit for tenure (293). She discusses the strategy of celebrating the self – despite alienation from the top down; it is important to be transparent, proud and align yourself with allies. She shares with readers a pragmatic tool kit that will help other women of color scholars combat alienation on their path to tenure.

Building on this theme, Yolanda Flores Niemann's often referenced essay, "The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe," was reprinted for this anthology with an added epilogue. Niemann's essay speaks to the dangers of: (i) The stereotype threat: As women of color scholars in the margins we are resistant to positive feedback, rather a negative self-perception is embedded; (ii) Identity integration: Self-doubt, tokenization and marginality make it hard to fuse academic accomplishments with success and pride; and (iii) Tribulations: Challenges transform the naïve politically

insulated person into a palpable consciousness about the many forms of marginalization women of color scholars experience within the university (347–350). In the epilogue to her essay, Niemann discusses that on occasion, hiring committees did not appreciate this message and it cost her potential jobs. (353). The irony of her essay is that it serves as both a positive and negative reflection of the perils of documenting the marginality of women of color scholars within the academy.

Presumed Incompetent could benefit from an intergenerational dialog between the new scholars included in this text and past scholarship that has focused on women of color working within the margins of the ivory tower (for example, Zinn *et al*, 1986; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Segura, 2003; Stanley, 2006). I call the reader's attention to this because at times *Presumed Incompetent* seems to claim that this is the first scholarship of its kind since *This Bridge Called My Back*. If only it were the case that we have not been down this road already.

As an emerging scholar working her way through a doctoral program, I am both humbled and honored to know that there is a legacy of women of color scholars who have documented their struggles with marginality in academia. *Presumed Incompetent* makes an important contribution to this legacy. I recommend this volume to those embarking on their journey through institutions of higher learning and encourage them to chronicle their triumphs and struggles for the next generation.

References

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