

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

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Carmen G. Gonzales, and Angela P. Harris (Eds.)

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Presumed Incompetent brings together the painful experiences of women of color as they navigate the academy. Employing concrete stories and detailed research, the authors describe the prevalent racial, gendered, and class-based discriminations they have to endure as minorities in a white male-dominated space. Core to the book are two major themes. The first is that the harsh effects of race still manifest in the lives of women of color in higher education and this makes the working environment uncomfortable and frustrating. The second theme is that institutional policies replicate the power imbalances and inequalities already ingrained in society by favoring mainstream members and disfavoring minority groups. In spite of this challenging situation, the authors portray a renewed determination to fight the situation by drawing on their survival strategies and offering suggestions that are useful for transforming the academy.

Presumed Incompetent is composed of five sections: "General Campus Climate," "Faculty/Student Relationships," "Networks of Allies," "Social Class in Academia," and "Tenure and Promotion." Each of these sections is composed of compelling essays, personal narratives, research, and interviews that expose the shocking realities of being branded incompetent in one's profession. This review will begin by highlighting the focus of each of the sections in the book in an effort to map the areas covered. This will be followed by an examination of the recommendations offered in the last chapter.

In "General Campus Climate," the essays come together to argue that "academic institutions are not neutral racial and gender spaces" (94). The authors in this section discuss the realities of working in an unsupportive and biased environment. For instance, administrators, faculty, and students tend to label African American women and Latinas with stereotypes that diminish their identities as professors. One interesting account is from Kupenda's chapter where she describes the academic dean's insistence that she "nurture" and "mother" students for the summer while ignoring her request to be allowed to focus on her own research work (23). This experience reveals also the extra burden institutions place on minority women.

The second chapter, "Faculty/Student Relationships," unpacks the maltreatment and discrimination endured while working with mainstream members. Among the issues addressed are the invisibility and exploitation of minority groups, discriminatory institutional policies, and the effects of unfair student evaluations. A representative example is from Easton's narrative of the painful treatment received from her supervisor and how this challenged her academic progress. Another example is from "Visibly Invisible" in which Bowen's research exposed the struggles of female students of color in science programs and their frustrations with male supervisors who questioned their qualifications and interacted negatively with them.

Titled "Networks of Allies," the third section decries the "culture default of whiteness" and the perpetuation of classism that results in the exclusion of minority groups. In their chapter, Armstrong and Wildman argue that presumptions of white male competence are persistent in higher education and that these play out in evaluations where women of color are deeply scrutinized and any minor flaws found are unfairly seen as "professional failure" (230). The authors show that the existing norms of academe seem to reflect only the needs and experiences of mainstream members. In her chapter, Jacobs details how Native women face the harsh consequences of this situation in that they often feel unsupported, excluded, and unappreciated for their community services within a space that pays more attention to individuality.

The fourth section addresses "Social Class in Academia." The chapters here explore the ways through which institutional systems of hierarchy contribute to discrimination against and disregard for people from underprivileged backgrounds. Several themes surface within this section, including the negative effects of affirmative action policies and practices, intersectionality, and classism. Riva-Holly's chapter describes how she had to endure scorn and disregard from faculty who believe Latinas are not fit to work in the "ivory tower." Her account shows that gender, ethnicity, and class-based discriminations persist within academic walls. In "The Port Hueneme of My Mind," Anthony also elucidates the obstacles that working-class academicians face as they navigate a space dominated by white middle and upper-middle class members. Hence, the strict hierarchy and rankings within institutions create inequalities rather than promote a comfortable climate.

The last section focuses on "Tenure and Promotion," illuminating how hiring policies more often than not perpetuate tokenism and disrespect for women of color. An example illustrating this situation is the discussion in "African American Women in the Academy: Quelling the Myth of Presumed Incompetence." Authors Wallace, Moore, Wilson, and Hart aptly note that the multiple oppressions that African American women face are due to their historically underrepresented and marginalized positions. For example, they are often stripped of positions they have worked hard to attain in favor of other white faculty (434). For this group, their very racial, gender, and class identities elicit unfair promotion and organizational policies.

Deserving special mention is the chapter, "Working across Racial Lines in a Not-So-Post-Racial World." Here, Armstrong and Wildman discuss the importance of race in the workplace and how the notion of *color blindness* reproduces racial separation in law schools. They assert that women of color suffer presumptions of incompetence due to dominant stereotypes that label white men as competent and others as less competent. This manifests in the lives of African American women in law schools who had to "prove they were outstanding" before being considered for hiring (p. 227). They argue further that rather than being *color blind*, a concept that ignores issues of race as though they do not matter anymore, society must embrace *color insight*. Color insight means acknowledging race and learning about its impact in people's lives, especially in the professional environment. This, the authors believe, can produce a more open and healthy environment where individuals recognize the existence of race-based inequalities and thus, work together to combat them. The idea of "finding the me in each individual" rather than the race of the individual is invaluable advice from this chapter.

Niemann's chapter, "The Making of a Token," is also invaluable in showing the correlation between the presumptions of incompetence and affirmative action. In her experience, being hired based on the affirmative action policy brought into her career challenges that threatened her professional success. She became an object of tokenism and stigmatization, an indication of the negative effects of affirmative action in the lives of women of color. Affirmative action leads to a disrespect of the intellectual capabilities and qualifications of racial/ethnic minorities, and especially when their research involves ethnicity studies, their efforts are undervalued. Niemann's experiences illustrate that instead of promoting diversity, affirmative action can be a threat to the academic success of women of color.

As a book that focuses on the intersectional lives of women of color, *Presumed Incompetent* includes several chapters that highlight the manifestations of intersectionality. Worthy of note is "They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain," in which Wilson describes the feelings of alienation and hostility that come with being regarded as a woman from a marginalized background. This "double minority" status makes navigation within the academy difficult for women of color who are constantly viewed as inferior and sometimes denied access to managerial opportunities befitting their positions. Lugo-Lugo's essay adds the classroom experiences of intersectionality to the conversation by noting that students often regard women of color in terms of racially gendered positions, challenging their authority and demanding stereotypical expectations from them. The gendered racism as experienced by women of color emphasizes how gender and race simultaneously work to hinder faculty women of color from progressing in their academic careers.

In spite of these sad revelations, *Presumed Incompetent* is filled with resilient achievements and survival strategies displayed by these women in the face of institutional oppressions. The women also offer recommendations and suggestions to administrators, faculty, and minority groups in the academy. Recurring among these is

the provision for mentorship for women of color and the creation of social collectives among women. Tenured faculty of color are also advised to be the voice for junior members while offering guidance and training to them. Furthermore, workers in the world of higher learning are advised to balance academic quests with love, compassion, empathy, and feelings of community among faculty in order to make the academic climate comfortable.

As the last chapter summarizes all the suggestions provided, one can see that the transformation being called for in the academy covers a wide range of areas. However, I believe one striking recommendation can be deduced from Gordon's words, "... this battle is at the margins, and it is somewhat puzzling to me why the system as a whole remains unchallenged" (328). The world of academe, as well as society as a whole, needs a revision of the structures and policies that bind them in order to ensure equity for all.

Presumed Incompetent is useful for faculty, students, administrative staff, leaders of higher institutions, human rights activists, and any other persons who desire to make a positive impact in the lives of those working in this space. Teachers of courses in diversity studies can also use this book to show students how race and class matter, and help students understand better what the experience of intersectionality means. To such teachers, aside from using the illustrations in the chapters that focus on the manifestations of intersectionality, the reference list also proves helpful in that it provides a large number of materials that can be used for further studies. These references are highly recommended for teachers and researchers in areas of ethnicity, race, and diversity.

Ultimately, *Presumed Incompetent*, from the Foreword to the list of references, shares insider knowledge about the lives of faculty women of color. This collection provides a wealth of academic resources for everyone who is interested in promoting a rewarding and inclusive environment in the academy.

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