

Review:

Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia. Edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González and Angela P. Harris. (Utah State UP, 2012)

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If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crushed into the other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Out in the middle of nowhere, there lies a bundle of buildings and in this bundle of buildings lies a space to discuss sensitive subjects safely. The door opens, the class begins, the time passes and the question gets asked: "How do you feel when someone calls you a wetback?" Blank stares look back at me. White faces, brown faces, delicate faces and perturbed faces look up at me, but one face stood out eager to speak. She answers, "It hurts, I don't know, it's like . . . it makes you feel bad . . . I don't know why (her voice starts to tremble)" She looks at me intently and her eyes well-up with tears; she looks at me as if I can save her. I feel that I can't, at least not the way she wants me to. The hour grows late, and she begins to step out of the door out into the vast space of grass, but then turns around and enters, instead, into my space. She wants help and, yes, I think I CAN help her.

This event recently took place in one of our very own ivory towers in the midst of an almost omnipresent belief that we are living in an era of post-racialism, and that race is no longer a factor to be taken seriously. We live in an era of anti-Affirmative Action, where the resounding narrative is that no one is deserving of preferential treatment regardless of their last name or skin color. After all, the President is African American; he made it to the top and that means ANYONE can. Those who vehemently disagree with this position are forced to be on the defensive and explain why the President's racial identity has nothing to do with discriminatory practices in wider U.S. populations and institutions such as higher education. Indeed, the academy is exacerbating the plight of women academics of color in the 21st century as starkly illustrated in *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academics*. *Presumed Incompetent* reveals, to a striking and sometimes shocking degree, that within our most treasured educational institutions, racism is alive and well.

The editors of *Presumed Incompetent* work within the context of U.S. institutions of higher education, which are still vastly unequal and operate in a society that is also unequal. By extending critical race theory's aim to highlight the complex role of race in seemingly objective contexts, this book adds a gender framework for understanding the contradictory culture of the academy. The study focuses on the 'counterstories' of women of color through a compilation of narratives told by women who have encountered various forms of racism in the academy, most especially pronounced during the process of achieving tenure. Although the culture of the academy is perceived as free, nurturing, and a place where many see the possibility to achieving a more egalitarian society by being "a mechanism for change," the editors claim that the university is impervious to change ". . . because of its power structures are designed to reproduce themselves" (7). Traits that remain constant and inhibit such change, according to the editors, are brilliance, rigor, seriousness, rationality, and objectivity because these traits have no color. However, as this book shows, there is a dominant culture in the academy, and that culture is not one that reflects women of color. Indeed, the voices of women of color are often silenced and, therefore, left silent in the realm of civic and public rhetoric.

Yet, these voices often speak directly to the mission of the *Reflections* journal, which is to both foster and feature public rhetoric and civic writing and to highlight contributions of individual voices. Such a mission continues to bring marginalized female voices out of the cracks and crevices of tradition and silence. For example, one of the book's contributors, Carmen R. Lugo, who writes of being treated as a "Prostitute, A Servant, and a Customer Service Representative" even though she is a college professor, while Sylvia Lazos breaks the silence that surrounds the tenuous process of student evaluations and the role of gender and race in their outcomes. As it paves the way for important dialogue, this book deserves wide and varied attention due to both its subject matter and the possibilities it provides for intervention for other women of color.

Through the inclusion of fifty or more female voices who are often silenced in annals of academia and its scholarship, this critical text challenges most recent critiques of university social dynamics, which are centered on economic plight and increasing fear of university corporatization. Although *Presumed Incompetent* might get relegated to the margins of academic scholarship if the poignant and honest testimonies are poorly received, the book forges ahead based upon two premises: (1) "The culture of the academy is still extremely white" and (2) "American colleges have embraced the business model" (6). For the editors of this volume, these premises are tantamount and become the backdrop for examining racial dynamics in the 21st century university, where more women of color resent but still experience racial discrimination. Women of color faculty experience discrimination based upon inhibiting racist and sexist stereotypes that have been resulted from being born in and/or working in a country whose history is severely tainted by imperialist ideologies, a past that has created a world of uncertainty for those that have been the victims of such ventures.

The book is separated into five parts: 1) General Campus Climate: explores how academic institutions create an inhospitable climate for women faculty of color faculty and shows that hostility also derives from stereotypical beliefs held by students and other faculty members, 2) Faculty-Student Relationships: examines the social environments of aspiring academics and the challenges that women faculty of color

faculty experience in the classroom, 3) Networks of Allies: examines the supportive (and not-so-supportive) relationships that academic women of color form at work, 4) Social Class in Academia: analyzes class consciousness and bias in higher education, and 5) Tenure and Promotion: grippingly shares candid stories of women faculty of color faculty dealing with their own paths to tenure and beyond. Many of the women who tell their stories in this section were hired, promoted, and given or denied tenure in ways that violated normal campus procedure. There is also a sixth portion that discusses the stories not shared due to fear of institutional retaliation: "A Note on the Silences Shouting from Within This Anthology."

Furthermore, four interrelated themes are explored in each one of these sections "that place the contradictory predicament of women of color faculty in a larger historical and cultural perspective" (3): "Negotiation of Identity," "Link between Agency and Structure," Academic Culture," and "Mechanism for Change." These are all themes and topics that need revisiting in an academic environment that is transitioning into one of being in service to a corporate ideal in its daily operations. *Presumed Incompetent* addresses this transition as a result of financial threats, resulting in a greater threat to the 21st century university, as a space of equality and justice. Instead, the university is now considered to be a place where one can buy an experience that might lend itself to a decent job while being entertained. One of the contributors to this volume, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, author of, "A Prostitute, A Servant, and a Customer-Service Representative: A Latina in Academia," bluntly refers to herself as serving in the role of a "customer service representative" instead of a professor. She states, "I was teaching at a history juncture marked by the relentless corporatization of the university, a process that has turned teaching into a marketplace (or shopping mall of sorts), where students feel like self-entitled customers and faculty and staff are forced to play the roles of either clerks . . . or customer service representatives" (41). Lugo-Lugo's chapter deals with a complex of issues, such as corporatization of the university as a context that brings a unique dilemma to women academics of color who study subjects such as race, class, and gender in the academy. Her pedagogy risks being seen as faulty, insignificant, and disposable (41). For Lugo-Lugo, the reality of being a Latina academic is that she expected to play the role that everyone else expects her to play: the commodified,

sexy, and hot Latina (43). Lugo-Lugo argues that the university is embracing a business model, and as an institution, increasingly closes its doors to potential benefactors of a higher education and a better life. She writes that “. . . it would be just a tad easier to be able to talk to students about race relations, racial inequality, and racism without having to contend with an institution that puts a price tag on me, my class, and my lectures” (49).

Through a myriad of voices such as Lugo-Lugo's chapter, *Presumed Incompetent* shows that other women faculty of color faculty experience *microaggressions* (3), which are subtle or blatant attempts at punishing unexpected behaviors, such as acting like a true intellectual instead of a seductress, in the case of Lugo-Lugo. Interestingly, one kind of microaggression written about in the “Faculty/Student Relationships” section by Sylvia R. Lazos, comes from students. In her chapter titled, “Are Student Teaching Evaluations Holding Back Women and Minorities: The Perils of “Doing” Gender and Race in the Classroom,” Lazos discusses the unconscious biases of students who have stereotypical behavioral expectations from their female professors of color (173). Lazos writes that numerous studies show how the process of students evaluating professors is fraught with unexamined social influences and biases. Furthermore, the evaluation of minority professors can be a source of stress that is beyond their outlined job description and expectations: cultural and gender stereotypes often influence the way that students evaluate their professors and this type of microaggression is one that operates from a presumption that when a minority professor walks in the door, he is or she is presumed not to be well credentialed (176). What's worse is, if she is not attractive, most likely her ratings will more than likely be lower than if she is attractive. Microaggressions, such as the expectation of beauty are not, however, objective indicators of the professor's performance and cause unnecessary stress.

Microaggressions and contradictory experiences are present within the confines of the university as *Presumed Incompetent* effectively communicates. A democratic, leftist university, for example, does not trump skin color or one's last name. *Presumed Incompetent* demonstrates through its first person accounts that faculty of color experience unequal treatment on many different levels. For example,

a female African-American academic is expected to fulfill the role of a mammy in Angela Mae Kupenda's "Facing Down the Spooks" (20). A Latina scholar is afraid of being perceived as too smart and fears backlash or rejection. Women of color are often expected to play the role of the token representative for one's race in Yolanda Flores Niemann's, "The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe" (336). Given these stories, it is obvious that women of color are often disrespected by fellow students, and student evaluations are evidence that some romanticizing and stereotypical attributes are projected upon women of color professors. These types of experiences also lead to differential tenure procedures all within the environmental realities of a hostile campus climate and the list goes on.

Unequal treatment, unequal opportunity, and unequal status equal continued discrimination for women faculty of color faculty, even when they possess the same scholarly credentials as their white male and female peers. Thus, *Presumed Incompetent* effectively validates that the "ivory tower" is a not free thinking university. Instead, it, The Ivory Tower, perpetuates the current social order of inequality, and it does so by selectively discriminating against academic women of color. However, as most of the contributors agree, all hope is not lost; the Humanities still exist even while facing continuous criticism and attacks by business model advocates who do not understand the value of a humanities education. Amidst this current attack, the Humanities are a place where students go to learn more about themselves and gain a creative view of the world around them—and universities need women faculty of color to teach creative views of the world.

This compilation of personal counter stories, *Presumed Incompetent*, holds tremendous potential to transform the academy. The experiences shared are possible lights for women of color who experience similar indignities. For example, women of color might approach their unique circumstances with more grace, instead of remaining in the dark and stumbling through the rigors of tenure, by reading the experiences and suggestions of others before them. They will be free to contribute their unique knowledge and perceptions, unhindered, and help higher education meet the demands of an ever-changing

world. After all, racism is alive and well in the United States, and it is a topic that needs to be examined in a safe place: *Presumed Incompetent* provides us with that space, and it should be reflected upon by those who are committed to the transformative powers of civic rhetoric.

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