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Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia ed. by Gabriella Guffey et al. (review)

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Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Nieman, Carmen G. Gonzales, and Angela P. Harris (Eds.). *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2012. 570 pp. Paper: \$36.95. ISBN 978-0-87421-922-7.

REVIEWED BY NADIA M. RICHARDSON, A GRADUATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AND FOUNDER OF VALENRICH WELLNESS, LLC.

This anthology, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, is comprised of essays that explore the presumption of incompetence that arises when women of color pursue academic careers in culturally inhospitable institutions of higher education. The theme woven throughout the book is the experienced and, at times, internalized presumption that the women represented in these stories do not possess the intellectual competency to belong in the academically rigorous "ivory tower" traditionally equated with White male scholars.

Although the civil rights movement in the United States is currently commemorating its 50th anniversary, affirmative action debates continue to rage, spurred on most recently by the Supreme Court's decision to order an appeals court to re-rule on the most current affirmative action case, *Fisher v. University of Texas*. At issue is the questioned constitutionality and necessity of considering race in higher education admission processes in what some consider a postracial society.

Institutions of higher education are caught in the crux of the debate and face the challenge of increasing campus diversity in environments that covertly resist such efforts by claiming liberal objectivity and academic freedom. Instead, scholarly uniformity may be rewarded with tenure, and social hierarchical power structures are reproduced along the lines of race, gender, and class (Evans, 2007; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Woods, 2006).

Through interviews, academic research, and first-person accounts, *Presumed Incompetent* explores the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual

orientation, and ethnicity in the professional experiences of women in academia. While the stories and research represent a variety of disciplines, a majority of them are legal academic narratives that utilize critical race feminism and intersectionality.

Critical race feminism (CRF) is a theory that emerged in response to the essentialist portrayals of Black women in critical legal studies (CLS) and critical race theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, 1991; Williams, 1991; Wing, 1997). It deconstructs the allegedly neutral concepts of CLS and CRT by focusing attention on the sexual and racial aspects of power relationships and the multi-dimensional experiences of women of color who are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination based on their race, class, and gender.

Combined with intersectionality, a concept that examines the "multiple systems of oppressions" that "simultaneously corroborate and subjugate to conceal deliberate, marginalizing ideological maneuvers that define 'Otherness'" (Few, 2007, p. 454), CRF places women of color at the center of its analysis. *Presumed Incompetent* adeptly brings theory to life by providing powerful examples of overt and covert discrimination that women in academia face due to their intersecting identities.

Presumed Incompetent consists of 30 chapters grouped in five parts. Part 1, "General Campus Climate," focuses on ways in which institutions of higher education can foster hostile climates that contribute to the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes that negatively impact how students and colleagues perceive women of color.

Part 2, "Faculty-Student Relationships," highlights classroom challenges for women of color, especially regarding teaching evaluations and unexamined consumer-driven student expectations of faculty homogeneity. Part 3, "Network of Allies," presents the struggle that women of color face in developing the professional networks and mentorship they need to advance their careers and secure tenure.

Part 4, "Social Class in Academia," is a rare and thought-provoking analysis of class bias in higher education with a particular focus on the performance of class, class bias, and the evolving acquisition and navigation of social capital. Part 5, "Tenure and Promotion," showcases the institutional racism that pervades the often ambiguous path to tenure and the self-doubt and psychological harm that it elicits.

Each story, study, and interview presented in the five individual parts deconstructs the layers of cultural incompetence and inequitable power structures that inform the contributors' presumed incompetence. The women who contributed their stories, research, and time to this important anthology provide a wealth of cultural and professional representations (ethnicity, sexual orientation, class,

institutional type, discipline, etc.) as well as their significant years in academia. They share their honest reflection in essays that, at times, resemble personal diary entries complete with poetry.

While offering little new revelation of the challenges faced by women in academia, *Presumed Incompetent* provides a somber reminder of what little has actually been accomplished to dismantle and rectify culturally hostile academic environments. Each chapter showcases experiences that are neither isolated incidents limited to one particular type of difference nor sob stories of overindulged academics. Instead, each chapter highlights the similarities as well as the uniqueness of each experience as well as the various ways that the contributors experienced discrimination along the intersectional lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

Presumed Incompetent is a compelling illustration of the importance, power, and potential of qualitative research. Through the use of counter-storytelling, a qualitative technique often utilized by critical race feminism that uses written works “to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144), the once-silenced voices of an overwhelming marginalized group of women are unmasked, and the cultural and historical contexts of their marginalization are exposed, unraveled, and combated.

Perhaps the most revealing contribution of the text is its discussion of social class. Rather than focusing solely on the inequalities and struggles of those from a lower socio-economic status, *Presumed Incompetent* explores the performance of class in the lives of women of color from middle- to upper-class environments who, in addition to their presumed incompetence, are also assumed to be from a lower socio-economic status because of their race. As such, their colleagues underestimate the social capital with which they enter academia and stereotype the authenticity of their experience into stylistic behaviors unjustly associated with their race and/or ethnicity.

These chapters distinctively explore privilege through the presented contributors’ experiences with tokenism, the stigmatizing (stigmatization) of affirmative action, consumer-driven student expectation, and a range of stereotypes including, but not limited to, the model minority status of those from Asian descent, the nurturing mammyfication of Black women, the passivity of Native American women, and the over-sexualization of the hot Latina.

While the stories are gripping in their unabashed honesty, they are not immune from their own unintended generalizations. Statements that rang loud with unpacked oversimplified arguments included the notion that “[W]hites cannot read

[B]lack faces very well” (Lazos, 2012, p. 176) and “you’re able to bring your whole self to the table at all times” (Moffitt, Harris, & Forbes Berthoud, 2012, p. 89) at a historically Black college or university versus a predominantly White university.

On the surface, such statements do not contribute to the overall message of the book. However, unpacking them with the same critical lens applied to societal inequalities reproduced and reinforced at institutions of higher education through the text, I believe that they communicate the hurt, angst, and cynicism experienced by the text’s contributors. The mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical fatigue expressed in the personal stories underscore the damage caused by an unceasing battle against discrimination and the internalization of one’s presumed incompetence.

Presumed Incompetent is a text that can be applied in multiple ways and for multiple audiences. For example, women of color who are completing their graduate studies, in the early stages of their academic careers, and/or pursuing tenure, as well as those who have secured tenure but have not yet come to terms with the damage it may have inflicted on their well-being may all find comfort, validation, and encouragement in these stories.

Instructors can also apply this text in teaching critical race theory, qualitative research methods, and critical race feminism as well as courses and seminars that explore intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

The book’s true impact, however, relies heavily on whether those who need to learn these lessons the most actually read the stories and apply the strategies presented. If only women of color read and appreciate this book, it will be the equivalent of preaching to the choir. I do not say this to minimize the transformative power that can be ignited from the rejuvenating spiritual epiphany of learning that one is not alone in one’s struggles. Instead, it is my hope that faculty, department chairs, hiring committees, tenure committees, administrators, and other academic decision-makers will read and reflect on the stories and strategies shared in *Presumed Incompetent*. A sincere consideration of this text can encourage new awareness in those whose misguided and unintentional complicity contribute to the continued reproduction of inequities for women of color. *Presumed Incompetent* is a call for everyone to reevaluate and envision institutional diversity in its various forms.

When affirmative action is administered in academic environments that are not actively committed to and holding themselves responsible for substantive institutional diversity, then perceptions of tokenism, presumed incompetence, questioned qualification, and doubtful intellectual merit will continue to plague women of color. “Failure to talk about race in any sphere . . . perpetuates racial separation” (p. 226).

Presumed Incompetent encourages a continued discussion of race, class, and gender by presenting the cultural and structural challenges experienced by women who navigate intersecting identities in academia and encouraging the implementation of constructive strategies, shared most candidly in Chapter 30, for fostering healthier campus climates for all faculty members.

However, the discussion cannot and should not end here. The authors represented in this text are established and secure in their careers. They have the power to share their stories with little or no fear of professional retaliation. Absent are the voices of those who are early in their careers and who silently and cautiously navigate academia in hopes of making their own intellectual contribution—voices not unlike my own. *Presumed Incompetent* is another step toward eradicating the discriminatory beliefs and practices that devalue the intellectual academic contributions of diverse faculty; but we have many miles to go before we sleep.

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A Survival Guide for New Faculty Members: Outlining the Keys to Success for Promotion and Tenure by Jeffrey Bakken and Cynthia Simpson is a must-read monograph for new faculty members, recent Ph.D. graduates looking for faculty positions, and Ph.D. students interested in the pursuit of professorship. Charles McGuire, Associate Vice President for Academic Administration at the Illinois State University, in his foreword comments: “It’s the book that we all wish we had available when we first entered the job market” (p. vii). Yes, it is indeed.

A Survival Guide for New Faculty Members is comprised of numerous practical tips based on the many years of professional and personal experiences of the authors in academia, which are eloquently presented to guide the newcomers in the field. This volume contributes to the limited scholarship available in the area of tenure and promotion and is undoubtedly a valuable resource for doctoral students and new faculty members.

Bakken and Simpson divide the book into three parts: “The Basic Fundamentals,” “The Nuts and Bolts of Success,” and “The Final Steps.” “The Basic Fundamentals” section covers how and where to search for faculty positions, how positions vary by institution types, what should be included in the application materials, what types of questions to expect during a phone interview, what to ask during a campus visit, and finally, how to respond to a job offer.

This section provides information on practical resources such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Higher Ed Jobs (www.higheredjobs.com), and Academic 360 (www.academic360.com) to search for jobs and give advice on using indexes to narrow down one’s job search.

The authors divide institutions into three institutional types: Research I, teaching, and in-