

Review: *Presumed Incompetence: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*

Hui Wu

Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella et al., ed. *Presumed Incompetence: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2012. Print.

Presumed Incompetence: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia is a must-read for higher education administrators and faculty who, by default, work more and more with colleagues and students of diverse backgrounds. This book is not about all women in academia but about women academics of color who are different and distinct in fundamental ways from men of color and white women. Because of this difference, women of color often battle a “double bind” syndrome—the combination of being a woman and a woman of color” (Wilson 66),¹ a particular syndrome that plagues them but not their white and male counterparts, a syndrome that is quite often simultaneously, and confusingly, identified as “other.” In addition to educating faculty colleagues and administrators in general about the interlocking issues such as race, gender, class, and nationality that women academics of color face on the job, this book also shares specific strategies for critically examining dominant systems in order to empower and inspire women academics of color to overcome challenges and forge ahead for success.

Forty-six academics in law, psychology, social sciences, and the humanities contribute to this collection. Six of them have held or are holding senior academic administrative positions; almost all chapter authors have experiences in higher education administration. Divided into five parts, each section introduces its chapters with a foreword

¹ All quotations are from the book under review.

written by a top or senior administrator who has decades of work experience in academia. The forewords confirm in distinct personal voices that layers of issues of race, gender, class, and nationality confront women academics of color. All of the foreword writers have witnessed what the narratives in this book present (Dovidio 113). They have observed countless women of color who enter academia only to be presumed incompetent by many of their colleagues and students and who ultimately end up leaving academia out of frustration (Allen 17). Women of color are “thawed and injured as individuals and as members of groups” (Cantor 221). With a total of fifty years of work first a faculty member and then as a university president, Samuel Smith points out that “universities have much in common with elite country clubs,” whose “perceived social orders or structure usually descends from the white males with affluent backgrounds from prestigious universities” (285). In the university, “women of all colors are usually considered below men, and their status diminishes more if they are of color, which indicates they may come from lower-income families and neighborhoods” (Smith 285). Deena González echoes Smith in saying that “Tenure and promotion review[s] remain mysteries for many outsiders from first-generation scholars to those with working-class origins” (334). Again, Bettina Aptheker points out “the repeated efforts by contemporary white academics, lawyers, and politicians to manipulate statistics and feign liberal intentions while denouncing affirmative action” and “blaming students of color and women for their presumed ‘failures’” (xiii). While the most noticeable is the confirmation of layers of discrimination that set women of color apart from white women, the more important, yet poignant, are the authors’ insights into the outcomes of affirmative action. For example, confirming Delia Douglas’s observation that “white women have taken up the position of gatekeepers of the racial status quo (i.e. the culture of whiteness) of the academy” (61), Aptheker exclaims in her foreword—“the people who gained the most from affirmative action by any statistical analysis were white women!” (xiii).

Investigating the interlocking racial, sexual, class, and ethnic system that straightjackets women academics of color, all thirty chapters in the book focus on a mix of personal reflections and qualitative research data from surveys and interviews. The type of research approach varies greatly from traditional scholarship that usually excludes personal

voices and stories. To clarify the methodology, the introduction writers, Angela Harris and Carmen González, argue that “Storytelling by individuals, when well done, packs an emotional punch and provides the psychological detail necessary to understand a person with very different life experiences” (3). At the same time, qualitative empirical research creates a frame to interpret the qualitative data (Harris and González 3). As a result, the methodology enables authors to resonate with each other to make their faculty colleagues understand that women academics of color suffer not because they are female but because they are both female and of color. For example, in the multi-chapter Part 1—General Campus Climate—words such as “hostile,” “unhealthy,” “troubling,” “haunting,” “painful,” “torturing,” and “toxic” in a pure white institute (PWI) repeatedly arrest the eye. “Racial battle fatigue,” in Sherrée Wilson’s term (70 emphasis original), runs through the pages as a constant reminder of the discrimination, contempt, and frustration women academic of color encounter on a daily basis. Meanwhile, their white counterparts also provide additional evidence of the disturbing realities. Chapter 2, “Waking Up to Privilege,” by Stephanie Shields shares her reflection on her automatic unearned privilege as a white woman. Shields admits that “being a member of a particular intersectional group—in this case, white and educated—on its own conveyed a door-opening, step-to-the-front-of-the-line status associated with privilege, particularly the white advantage that I had neither earned nor asked for yet benefitted from” (30). It is excruciating to read her first-hand observation of what her Latina and Native American women colleagues were forced to deal with in the late 1980s and early 1990s and her reflection that “I already knew that their scholarship and teaching were constantly under the microscope” (35).

The book ends with an empowering chapter by Yolanda Niemann—“Lessons from the Experiences of Women of Color Working in Academia”—wherein she sums up most notable passages in the book and offers advice to both administrators and women academics of color: what to do and how to do it, what not to do and how to avoid it. If faculty colleagues and administrators do not have time to read the whole book, at a minimum, they should read this chapter to understand how existing academic structures create hostile environments to their women colleagues of color. Women academics of color can follow the map laid out by Niemann to navigate the difficult terrain and to enhance their

resilience and ability and learn the strategies to overcome the challenging realities. As a woman academic of color and an administrator myself, I find these tips helpful and inspiring.

In conclusion, this book presents research achieved through nontraditional methods to address real, subtle, and on-going racial, sexual, class, and ethnic problems in the academy, problems that many white academics are inclined to dismiss as “exaggerations or illustrations of ‘oversensibility’” or as unusual incidents caused by a small number of “bad actors” (Dovidio 113). This work should inspire academics to question, once again, white male supremacy; gendered agendas tailored for and by white women; and the consequences of intertwined racial, sexual, class, ethnic prejudice against women of color.

About the Author

Hui Wu is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of Literature and Languages at the University of Texas at Tyler. Her research interests encompass history of rhetoric, comparative studies of rhetoric, global feminist rhetorics, and archival research in rhetoric and composition. Her article, “Lost and Found in Transnation: Modern Conceptualization of Chinese Rhetoric,” won the 2010 Teresa Enos award for the best article published in *Rhetoric Review* in 2009. Her books include a critical translation, *Once Iron Girls: Essays on Gender by Post-Mao Literary Women* (Lexington Books, 2010) and the Chinese translation of Jan Swearingen’s *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies* (Jiangxi Education Press, China 2004). She and Swearingen are completing another book titled *Guiguzi, China’s First Book on Rhetoric: A Translation and Comparison with Ancient Western Rhetoric*.