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Book Review: Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia

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Book 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, Angela P. Harris (Boulder, Colorado: Utah State University Press, 2012)

Review by Sonia Lawrence

This book was eagerly ordered and awaited, then sat around neglected for a while. Not surprising, perhaps, that when it came down to it I was reluctant to dive into all the damage and dysfunction the academy has visited upon this particular group of outsiders who made it in. When I finally read it, most of what was in the volume was not a surprise. But it was presented in ways which allowed me to think rather than just feel. Well curated by the editors, it remains a vibrantly mixed bag of work, able to serve different purposes at different times. I was almost finished the book when I went out to a Symposium organized around it by the Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law and Justice. Many of the contributors were there, as well as a new group of women brought into the project, and the day amplified and complicated many of the themes.

The contributors are almost all employed as full time academics (one who does not fit this category is the lone Canadian, Delia D. Douglas, a sociology Ph.D. and independent scholar).¹ They come from a variety of disciplines, mainly the social sciences and the legal academy, probably a reflection of the editors, two of whom are law professors (Carmen G. González, Angela P. Harris). Contributors Angela Mae Kupenda, Adrien Katherine Wing, Elvia R. Arriola, Stephanie M. Wildman, Angela Onwuachi-Willig, Sylvia Lazos, Dean Spade, Deidre M. Bowen and Margalynne Armstrong all teach in the legal academy, while the others are in a variety of fields mainly in the social sciences/humanities. They write about a wide range of different things and in an equally broad range of styles. The book is divided into five parts: General Campus Climate, Faculty/Student Relationships, Networks of Allies, Social Class in Academia, and Tenure and Promotion, each with a short introduction.

The editors identify a number of themes which provide more insight than the substantive divisions. These are “the negotiation of identity in the academic world”,² the “link between agency and structure, the individual and the collective”³, “the nature of academic culture” and what is valued in our strange little world, and finally “mechanisms for change”. Within these frameworks are found stories which articulate or illustrate the emotional reality of working in a space which claims fervently to be a meritocracy and yet so clearly marks merit as a raced, gendered and classed prize.

¹ Delia D Douglas, "Black/Out: The White Face of Multiculturalism and the Violence of the Canadian Academic Imperial Project" in Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs et al, eds, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, 1st ed (Boulder, Colorado: Utah State University Press, 2012) at 50.

² Angela P Harris and Carmen G González, "Introduction" in *ibid* at 3-4 and 7.

³ *Ibid* at 14.

The authors are quite careful to talk about what is not in their book. Disability, for instance, is not explicitly named although the authors note that “[m]any women described stress-related physical and psychological symptoms and disorders, including high blood pressure, asthma attacks, autoimmune disorders, significant weight gain, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and cancer.”⁴ Other silences are self protective. Attending a March 2013 Symposium on the collection held at UC Berkeley School of Law, I heard many participants tell stories that they would not write down – a variety of risks to self and others back up these decisions. The nine categories of reasons for silence that the editors offer (11-13) tell us much about the kind of stories left out and the situations of the women who decided to remain silent. Class, too, seems to get short shrift. Part IV, Social Class in Academia, is the shortest Part, but in fact many of the other narrative-style contributions do implicate class hierarchies. I do not want to lay these silences at the feet of the editors – they are clear about the openness of the call and they interrogate the silences in a meaningful way. In fact, the discussion of the silences may be one of the most important parts of the book.

Although there were a number of indigenous women at the Symposium, no stories from this community are included in the book. Given the author’s attention to the reasons people have for remaining silent, I cannot read this as a flaw. But I will suggest a small corrective, which is the work of Patricia Monture-Angus and in particular the essays which make up the first part of *Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks*.⁵

There are two other pieces in particular that I think illustrate the variety of value that this book offers. The first is by Nancy Lazos, and it is about student evaluations.⁶ Lazos, a prolific scholar and dedicated teacher, is now the Justice Myron Leavitt Professor of Law at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas school of law. This article is, I think, a vital resource for those struggling to do “diversity work” in their institutions. Student evaluations need to be seen with a critical eye – not because student opinion is not important, but because of the context in which it is demanded and delivered. Being aware of the variety of meaning contained in student evaluations could make a whole range of faculty conversations, especially around tenure and hiring, much better. When you get this book, circulate this article to the Hiring Committee and the Tenure and Promotions Committee. Or ask a senior white male colleague to circulate it for you.

The second piece is by Angela Onwuachi-Willig, the Charles M. and Marion J. Kierscht Professor of Law at the University of Iowa College of law entitled “The Silence of the Lambs”.⁷ There is a great deal packed into it, but what leapt into focus for me was that despite the significantly different positioning of senior and junior faculty members, especially the untenured, one doesn’t necessarily notice that the shift has happened. I think that I moved into a “not junior” place in my career a long time before I noticed I had made the move, and long before I started thinking about what kind of responsibilities this might entail for me. This piece helped me put those together. No one who writes in this collection is

⁴ *Ibid* at 11.

⁵ Patricia Monture-Angus, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995).

⁶ Sylvia Lazos "Are Student Teaching Evaluations Holding Back Women and Minorities? The Perils of Doing Gender and Race in the Classroom" in Muhs et al, *supra* note 1 at 164.

⁷ Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "Silence of the Lambs" *ibid* at 142.

naïve about expectations of support from those similarly labeled. In fact there are a number of articles which directly or indirectly touch on the subject of finding and developing allies across race and gender lines. What is the experience of the younger women on my faculty? How can I be supportive and understanding without assuming that I know what they are experiencing? At the same time as I was realizing a long list of failures on my part in this light, I was reading the many references in this book to the extra burdens placed on women of colour in the academy. On top of being presumed incompetent, they are often expected to provide motherly comfort, or perhaps sexual excitement, to represent their race, to be the happy face of diversity at the institution, to tolerate the racism of others, to make students of colour and woman feel welcome and supported, to fulfill diversity requirements but not to talk about race, to be perfect in a landscape which feels entirely made of traps, and if they should fail at these things, they not only harm themselves – but they make things more difficult for hosts of women they do not know and may never meet.

For the most part, the other essays use personal experience as a launching point for either analysis or development of a guide to the academy for those following behind. They illustrate that the experience of being a woman of colour in the academy is relatively rare but still full of variation. There were women at the Symposium who were the “only” on their faculty, and the first. How valuable for these women to be able to share the experiences of others, and to imagine the community of women who share hers, who might understand something about her position and challenges? This is a good book for every faculty lounge, even if most of the Faculty will shy away from it.

When I came home from the Berkeley conference, Sara Ahmed’s “On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life”⁸ was waiting in my mailbox. The combination of these two books, both filled with personal stories and insights into institutions, cracked my vision of my own place in the “practice” of diversity wide open. These women of colour have written their stories and done their work in the register of resistance and resilience, and they challenge us to do the same.

⁸ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (London: Duke University Press, 2012).