

Seattle Journal for Social Justice

Volume 12 | Issue 2

Article 2

2013

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Recommended Citation

Collin, Robin Morris (2013) "Book Review of Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol12/iss2/2>

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**Book Review of *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, 2012
University Press of Colorado

By Professor Robin Morris Collin, Norma J. Paulus Professor
of Law*

I. INTRODUCTION

Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia is a collection exploring the professional experiences of faculty women of color and other “unprivileged” scholars—“two-fers”—combining multiple disadvantaged groups. In unflinching detail, these narratives reveal the scope and breadth of the stress these women encounter as academia diversifies, as well as the consequences for their personal and professional lives. At times gut-wrenching to read, and at times joyful and transcendent, these stories offer insight and counsel that are truthful, useful, and affirming to teachers, students, and administrators.

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These stories are also instructive for professionals, business people, politicians, and public servants who can, and will, discern their own stories and strategies in these pages because these accounts cross the borders between higher education and the wider community. This collection is a compelling warning to the leaders of higher education: when the faculty women of color are harassed, defamed, and betrayed by colleagues and students, higher education shrugs at their peril. Betrayal of women faculty of color is also the betrayal of explicitly stated institutional values and goals within higher education in the United States. The connection between women faculty of color and the future identities of students, the future identity of our communities, and the future leadership in the global arena are clearly made in this volume.

The volume is organized around five key areas of academic life: (1) general campus climate; (2) faculty-student relationships; (3) networks of allies; (4) social class; and (5) tenure and promotion. Each section begins with a brief introduction overviewing and giving context to subsequent essays that embrace a broad spectrum of faculty women of color experiences from diverse institutions and individual backgrounds. These accounts range from the personal and anecdotal to the empirical and statistical, from all size, rank, and configuration of institutions of higher education. The common strands are collected and curated by the editors in their comprehensive “Foreword,” “Introduction,” and “Afterword,” which include organizational recommendations, systemic recommendations for academic institutions, and strategic counsel for individuals.

The editors assembled this massive research project to address the disinvestment in diversity and inclusion in a post-racial climate; they sought to confront the culture of silence that shelters abusive relationships; raise the flag of resilience; and dispel the isolation, shame, and self-blame that has afflicted many women faculty of color. The public attack on affirmative action programs, and the rise of private education while public support for higher education wanes may be responsible for a retreat from

the cause of recruiting and retaining diversity.¹ Additionally, a new generation of visible and powerful multi-racial people, like President Barack Obama, raises the question of what race continues to mean in US culture. Further, what we have learned over the decades of research into sexual abuse of women and children of both sexes is that silence is evidence of abuse. The damages to sexual abuse victims, including shame, self-blame, depression, physical stress-related illness, and suicide, are reflected in the stories of women faculty of color. The editors achieve their goal of revealing these often hidden stories and addressing their public policy remedies in this book.

The book concludes with not just a mission statement, but also a comprehensive set of recommendations about how to change a culture. These recommendations identify the internal work that remains to be done, despite a generation or more of commitment to diversity in US higher education. Most significantly, this book calls upon US higher education to acknowledge where it is failing faculty women of color and acknowledge the persistence of counterfactual beliefs of racial and gender inferiority.

The book is 570 pages in length. Despite the messages at times being difficult to hear for whatever reason, the essays are facilitated by thoughtful organization. The unifying theme is implicit throughout: While academia's threshold from hiring to post-tenure may be slippery to some degree for all faculty members recruited and hired, wealthy, white males start on safer and higher ground, and they stay there. Moreover, wealthy or middle-class, a white women's experiences in academia does not give a full or satisfactory account of significant differences between their experiences and those of women of color, women of sexual difference, and low-income women. These chapters painfully peel away the essentialism of some feminist and race theory in accounts that detail how women and

¹ See, e.g. Erwin Chemerinsky, *The Segregation and Resegregation of American Public Education: The Courts' Role*, 81 N.C. L. REV. 1597 (2003).

people of color may become accomplices in the defamation and destruction of women faculty of color. When we attribute inclusiveness and compassion to women as part of their essential attributes, or when those same qualities are attributed to people of color, we are assuming an essential complex that these essays contradict. The message for those seeking easy answers to the challenges of race and gender in these accounts is both unmistakable and tough. We insist that diversity refers to people who look different or admit to a different genealogy, but we do not challenge the hierarchy of power, wealth, and privilege in their established institutions.

II. CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND TACIT CULTURE: WHERE WOMEN OF COLOR ARE CONCERNED THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

The first section of the book is devoted to the general campus climate. This section examines the communications between the stakeholders in academia, including faculty, students, staff, administrators, and external constituencies. These communications, including kinetic and nonverbal communications, assemble, order, reward, and punish members in explicit and tacit ways.

Together, these stakeholders in their academic organization and their communications produce an emergent set of characteristics. These characteristics, or the “academic climate,” often include behaviors and values that contradict explicitly held and expressly stated institutional values. For example, nearly every institution of higher education includes some mission statement about how it values diversity on its web pages. The institutions that do not include this kind of statement are remarkable for their omission. This discontinuity between stated values and the conduct reported in this volume is fertile ground for “climate conflicts.” “Climate conflicts” are unexpected, subtle, stunning, often automatic (read unintentionally) major and minor offenses that happen repeatedly and

unremittingly to women faculty of color. “Climate conflicts” take a physical and psychological toll on women faculty of color. These stresses are different in kind, as well as different from the overall impact from stresses experienced by white and wealthy academics. There is continuing evidence that the physical toll of these stresses results in serious physical illness. Studies documenting the toll of racial stress on mental and physical health are not new, and the evidence here documents that racial stress in academic work is no different despite its outwardly elite status.

The natural response of a stressed individual in an atmosphere where climate and catechism collide is one of vigilance, wariness, and defensiveness. Wariness makes it difficult to talk to others inside the institution about what is happening, especially in authoritarian institutions where the price of indiscretion is retaliation. Stresses that remain secret and unknown to anyone may take the greatest psychological toll because they may go unacknowledged even by the person suffering from them. Nurturing personal relationships, acknowledging psychological and physical pain, and seeking professional support and help are the passionate last words from Editor Yolanda Flores Niemann—a message echoed by many at the symposium held at Boalt Hall celebrating the publication of this volume:

Nurture personal relationships with those who love you and listen when they express concern Be aware that, when psychologically injured at work, you may experience the stages of grief identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1973)—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance Receive support from a counselor or psychologist, especially when trusted friends are not physically accessible in your current location.²

² Yolanda F. Niemann, *Lessons from the Experiences of Women of Color Working in Academia*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 446, 499 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

These are words to live by, literally. The physical consequences of chronic, micro and macro aggressions is well understood in terms of physical health, mental health, and family health. The contributors to this volume are courageous to bare their wounds and admit to their need for outside help at times (“Get Counseling”). When they do acknowledge these costs, it raises the flag of hope to women they do not know. They may never know how life affirming this simple confession of vulnerability and survival was.

Educational organizations, accrediting organizations, and institutions of higher education have acknowledged the value of racial and class diversity and inclusion of non-traditional academics. What we know about hostile climates and stress in higher education is that they exploit vulnerable people and undercut institutional values. The organizations of higher education can, and must, do more to ensure that their faculties reflect on their culture and climate conflicts, taking seriously the challenge to change the conversation about race, gender, cultural competence, and respectful behavior between members of their organizations and within their own institutions.

A. Chapter 30 Presents a Comprehensive List of Recommendations

Recommendations are organized into the five topical areas of the book, and within these areas the recommendations are specifically addressed to administrators and to women of color and their allies. Each recommendation is followed by examples from the book and further explanation. It is impossible to miss the points made by this advice. For example, under “Recommendations for Administrators,” the first recommendation is to model a culture of respect:

Campus climate is created from the top down Teaching does not only happen in front of the classroom. The campus leadership team models the way to treat all members of the community and must be strongly encouraged to behave accordingly. Persons with

the greatest formal power and authority have an ethical obligation and moral responsibility to be particularly sensitive to their treatment of persons with less power.³

III. STUDENT POPULARITY AND LEGITIMATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Teaching is often a vulnerable act. Teachers may expose far more of themselves in the process of teaching than students in a large class or lecture environment. What is different for faculty women of color is the virulence they face, oftentimes unchecked, in unaccountable reviews of their professional ability and character. The weight administrators and colleagues give to these anonymous accounts can be significant and determine whether a teacher receives tenure and promotion.

The “Faculty/Student Relationships” essays explore a critical part of the communications network that lies at the heart of academic existence. These faculty-student interactions become the grist for narratives revealing privilege. As John Dovidio points out in his “Introduction to Faculty/Student Relationships,” issues like negative comments on teaching may not be important for white, male faculty with other credentials, yet they become the end-all for faculty women of color without those same credentials:

[B]lack, Asians, and white women who have impeccable qualifications may be hired or promoted at rates comparable to those of white men, but when their record is anything short of perfect, they are victimized by discrimination. In these cases, decision makers weigh the strongest credentials of white men most heavily while they systematically shift their standards and focus on the weakest aspects of racial minorities. The process often occurs unconsciously, even among people who believe that they are not racist or sexist.⁴

³ Niemann, *supra* note 2, at 453.

⁴ John F. Dovidio, *Introduction to Faculty/Student Relationships*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT* 113, 114 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

It may be possible for majoritarian culture men to teach for many years and never experience anything other than deferential behavior. The essays assembled here reveal what one may not see at all, and if this quantity and quality of assault is invisible, that is because one may enjoy the privilege of not being subject to it. In this way, not having an experience is the measure of privilege;

[A]lthough experienced researchers often believe that we already have a comprehensive understanding of a topic, and administrators often feel that we have seen it all, the particular value of this book for me is that it makes it clear that there has been so much that I have actually failed to see . . . The messages are difficult to hear for anyone who believes in fairness and equality, particularly those of us who hold that academia is responsible not only for intellectual [,] progress but also for moral leadership.⁵

These blind spots not only contribute to the revolving door for women faculty of color, but also confirm that formal education is no guarantee of tolerance, intellectual progress, or a community of conscientious men and women fit to lead a diverse future. This impression undermines the willingness and ability of a diverse public to support education. A culture and climate of imposition and threat are antithetical to learning and growing.

While the resilience of faculty women of color shown in these essays is inspirational, not all responses are so successful. Some coping strategies have paradoxical consequences; for example, internalizing oppressive values may lead to self-hating behaviors in women faculty of color. This paradox illustrates how climate and culture exert unstated pressure on women faculty of color to assimilate, despite the institutions' stated values of commitment to diversity and inclusion.

⁵ Dovidio, *supra* note 4, at 113.

IV. LEGITIMATING VOICES IN THE WORKPLACE: WHY WOMEN OF COLOR FACULTY NEED ALLIES IN THE WORKPLACE, AND WHY FRIENDSHIP IS IMPOSSIBLE IN AUTHORITARIAN CULTURES

“Networks of Allies” addresses the basic thesis that “whites and men start from [a] presumption of competence.”⁶ White women have been the primary beneficiaries of feminism and all efforts at affirmative action, inheriting the challenge of insider status:

While it’s true that most white women of a certain age have been ‘presumed incompetent’ at one time or another, women of color continue to suffer far more This outside-inside dialectic is worth our attention today as we push to make higher education more inclusive, more innovative, and more valuable working from both the outside and the inside.⁷

Acknowledging that the current configuration of power in academia favors wealth, whiteness, and maleness, individuals inside of those inherited or immutable characteristics can and often do see the value of individuals on the “other side.” Potential allies are everywhere; they are as non-monolithic as any other politically defined group. Allies may also intuitively understand the necessity of reconfiguring power on a basis that does not require subordination of others for leadership of a post-colonial, post-modern, and even post-racial world.

Allies are people who can speak for women faculty of color in their absence, especially when they understand their own position and power at critical points. For example, it is important for them to speak first on behalf of woman faculty of color and not wait for the evaluative

⁶ Nancy Cantor, *Introduction to Networks of Allies*, citing Sylvia R. Lazos, *Are Student Teaching Evaluations Holding Back Women and Minorities?: The Perils of “Doing” Gender and Race in the Classroom*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT* 221, 221 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

⁷ Nancy Cantor, *Introduction to Networks of Allies*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT* 221, 222–23 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

conversation to create the need for a defense. Allies can be helpful wherever women faculty of color seek external validation from formal tenure and promotion procedures to informal references for promotion or job changes. In “Silence of the Lambs,” Angela Onwuachi-Willig elegantly explores this dynamic of silenced victims and allies with voice:

I refer primarily to the tenured voices that formed the basis of my first dean’s understanding words to me – the nonsilences of senior colleagues of color that together worked to create a space where my dean . . . could acknowledge my challenges and burdens as a female faculty of color My senior colleagues of color had used their power and status to create a space for those who came after them As a result, they refused to engage in unforgivable silences that would have perpetuated a presumption that the average white male professor’s experiences are the same as those of women of color.⁸

Finding allies, activating them, and knitting them together is complicated. They may be found inside the institution or in other venues and forums. Outside venues of support can be critical in neutralizing slanderous, untrue claims arising from within the “home” institution. These external venues of support may be found in public service and nonprofit organizations, professional organizations, and elsewhere. They take time to cultivate.

Seeking out these allies helps to counteract the wariness and defensiveness that besieged women faculty of color naturally feel as described in the earlier essays. Discernment, one quality of an educated mind, serves us in practice as it does in theory. This power of discernment, combining scientific inquiry and the ethical imperative to investigate facts and reach conclusions for ourselves, is what we teach and what we must also practice. And the practice of friendliness or friendship with people

⁸ Angela Onwuachi-Willig, *Silence of the Lambs*, in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT 142, 150–51 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

who can and will help or mentor can also be lost in the internalization of tacit messages of hierarchy; especially inside authoritarian organizations, friendship is difficult if not impossible inside the walls of those organizations. In authoritarian organizations, cultivation of external friendships and allies and finding outside venues and forums for professional expression and friendship are particularly important for a faculty woman of color's professional and psychological survival.

Friendship and mentorship are not always lifelong or temporally extensive relationships. They may be brief moments of heartfelt advice and understanding. Remember these people and take the time to thank them (and get their business cards). Knowing people who will press the institution on its principles from positions of outside power is an advantage, especially in the environment of authoritarian educational institutions.

Many allies for women faculty of color may be found outside of our institutions, outside of our usual disciplinary walls, and even outside of academia. This highlights the importance of creating, hosting, and attending conferences and meetings where allies may be found and supportive relationships established. The problem with cultivating allies outside of one's discipline or outside of academia may be one of "fractionation," or the division of one's time into distinctly different venues and substantive areas that do not contribute to depth in any single area. Fractionation cultivates political and intellectual capital in venues outside of the institution's direct control. It also contributes to the internal narrative of being marginal and the reality of being marginalized. This is especially true of institutions assembled and communicating in the authoritarian model. For example, while public and professional service is formally stated as one of the few criteria for tenure and promotion, it tends to factor against women faculty of color when their record deviates from their wealthy, white male counterparts.

V. CLASS DIFFERENCES IN US ACADEMIC CULTURES

“Social Class in Academia” unapologetically sets forth the business country club analogy that governs so many academic organizations in the post-Millennial world:

[U]niversities have much in common with elite country clubs. The academic credentials are necessary to be invited to join, but like all country clubs, not all members are perceived as equal.⁹

Fifty years after the March on Washington, more US residents are living in poverty than during the War on Poverty. The gap between rich and poor in the United States is greater than any other industrial nation. The trajectory of wealth is that it will grow, and the same is true for poverty. This gap is shaping higher education in the United States, from reliance on fundraising from wealthy individuals and corporations to the inability of students to pay the costs of higher education without incurring massive student loan debt.

What and whom does this model serve? Any historian will acknowledge that a powerful elite, one focused on maintaining privilege and separateness from lower classes, will survive by the use of oppression and violence for as long as possible. In institutions of higher education that often adopt the goals of human service and human freedom, these instances of violence and oppression have institutional costs that may be discounted when visited upon faculty women of color; however, it will not be confined to them. The climate of tacit tolerance for violence creates repercussions for the full range of campus vulnerabilities, including bullying, rape, and other behaviors. This is true not just of the institutions at the bottom of lists compiled by corporate organizations. Increasingly,

⁹ Samuel H. Smith, *Introduction to Social Class in Academia*, in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT 285, 285 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

these battle stories emerge in news and magazine pages of the national and international press about the most highly ranked institutions.

While higher education has drifted towards authoritarian business models, contrary to historical traditions of faculty-shared self-governance, it has increasingly shaped itself along the lines of a wealthy country club supported by carefully subordinated labor. Boards of trustees are increasingly populated by people with no particular connection to education besides having sufficient funds and expectations to contribute to the endowment. At the faculty level, tenured security is increasingly being replaced by a contract work force. Despite higher education's tendency to believe that it answers to no one, preserving its claim to independence and intellectual leadership, it is painfully apparent that higher education answers to its insatiable need for money from whatever source, including entertainment revenues and sports.

The demographics of the United States and the globe inform us about the characteristics of the new majority: women of color from poor and modest income backgrounds. The new normal is arriving at the doors of academia and not being allowed inside. The world's future not only depends on wealthy individuals and corporate elites that are currently powerful, but also rests upon the skills and abilities of the new majority, one that is female and from low-income backgrounds of color.

"Social Class in Academia" is the shortest and smallest of the volume. More must undoubtedly be said about class exclusion in American higher education, and this is not the best-developed portion of the essays, indicating the need for a sister volume devoted more particularly to this challenge. The challenge of class exclusions and inequity of opportunity in higher education will only continue to worsen as the income gap dissolves the middle class.

VI. RETAINING FACULTY WOMEN OF COLOR AND CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

A. Tenure and Promotion

Diamonds are formed from carbon placed under extraordinary pressure over time. Pearls are formed by organic beings irritated by small things over time. Let us be like the diamonds and pearls. It may be the irritations and time that take the greatest toll. As for the pressure, well, if we didn't know, now we know.¹⁰

Tenure and promotion are the events where qualifications and competence are at their most contested. Hiring and recruitment (an area not called out in this volume separately) raise the same issues without the finality of the tenure decision. Tenure is “forever,” while hiring and recruitment often result in a revolving door.

While the language and doctrine surrounding the tenure and promotion process is about merit, the tacit reaction to this decision is about institutional identity or “branding.” The same disconnect between explicit values and tacit culture first observed in the chapters on climate and faculty student relationships resurface here. Yet, despite a track record of accomplishment assembled over time, within the institution and outside of it, the accounts here report an unexpected quality, surprising even to seasoned members of academia. Here, the conflict between explicitly stated values and virtues and tacit climate and cultural values and virtues manifest in a context that is “both deeply personal and profoundly political.”¹¹

The unanticipated quality of the assaults here, together with the financially and personally devastating outcomes for people who have acquired status without its attendant income or security, makes these the most wrenching of accounts. The cumulative advice from prior chapters

¹⁰ Robin Morris Collin, John P. Morris Lecture, Arizona State University College of Law, April 2007.

¹¹ Cantor, *supra* note 7, at 221.

about communication, accounting for bias in the processes, building a network of allies, and understanding the nature of the paradigm, does not assure success in the ultimate question of tenure and promotion.

The contest for the future identity of the organization engages the full spectrum of academic stakeholder interests including external stakeholders and alumni. Tenure and promotion are processes designed to ensure the replication of the institution by the current incumbents. This is a form of quality control that is inherently political given institutions with histories and cultures of exclusion, oppression, racism, and misogyny. What we *should expect* when outsiders representing that historical culture of subordination ask for validation and job security is not what we *do expect* from academia's lofty stated goals and aspirations to leadership for the future.

The question is whether organizations devoted to higher education can change the heuristic they serve at the level of their most intimate internal processes. Because changing the way we know, what we know, and from whom we learn is at stake in these decisions. For some candidates, it is possible to moderate and assimilate immutable characteristics and political values enough to be accepted or even trusted to replicate hierarchy and subordination as it currently exists. For others, this possibility is either nonexistent or unacceptable. It is not simply the packaging of external characteristics that engenders reaction.

This is the fight for the future of how we will think about complex issues the next generation will face. The next generation must be educated, and the fight for each individual's hearts and minds in that generation is seriously engaged in academic tenure and promotion. The academy, actual and virtual, is one of the last places in our society where long-term thinking occurs. Politics, businesses, and organizations influenced by them respond to very short time frames such as electoral cycles and financial reporting. Make no mistake: the ability to influence how people will think in longer, generational, and historical terms is the powerful position that

education occupiers. This struggle is also seriously engaged in the hiring process, a key part of academic life that is not called out separately in this volume, but should be looked at carefully with these lessons in mind.

Challenging women of color, the “twofer” of this collection, often receive “friendly” advice to leave before tenure, specifically to leave that particular institution for a visit to a different, more welcoming place or sometimes to leave academia altogether. Taking this advice may explain why a high percentage of faculty of color visit other institutions before tenure. It may also explain the observed revolving door for so many women faculty of color.

But what explains why we should stay contrary to advice and probability telling us to leave? For some, it is sheer unwillingness to quit and willingness to battle for the stated values of higher education. For others, it is the promise of intellectual freedom and the opportunity to develop and express one’s talents. Freedom to think about what we choose to value and the privilege to teach it to others is not limited to academia, but it is what makes the work of academia joyful. The joy and the challenge of transcendence are also present in these pages.

VII. CONCLUSION: KEEPING FAITH WITH THE FUTURE WE KNOW IS COMING

These narratives and essays are not explained as accidents, incidents, or outliers. As a summary of experiences across geography, rankings, and generational poles, they present a pattern of exclusion, vilification, and marginalization that higher education ignores at its peril.

What we know for certain about the future is the cultural diversity, heterogeneity, vast differences in wealth, and ecological crises future generations and communities will face as the result of our industrialized economies. Higher education must find ways to engage and lead that future if the stated ideals of intellectual promise and moral leadership are to be associated with higher education. Authentic leadership for a future as

uncertain as that we are leaving must be credible in its claim to empower individuals to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It must be demonstrably faithful to the aspiration to provide intelligent, compassionate leadership. Women faculty of color are indispensable to that credibility and authenticity.