

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Presumed Incompetent: the Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia***  
edited by Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez,  
and Angela P. Harris (Utah State University Press, 2012)

*Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, an anthology of personal narratives by academics of colour, takes its title from the work's central concern: the presumption of incompetence formulated as a direct consequence of inequality and intersections of racist and sexist discrimination in academia. Relentlessly problematising the United States higher education system, its increasing marketisation, recruitment and diversity policies, these deeply personal narratives reveal the experiences of women of colour working in this context, their struggles as well as dedication and persistence. As the editors claim in their Introduction, the volume is intended to be read as 'framework for understanding the contradictory culture of academia' (1). This contradiction at the heart of academic life lies in its emphasis on meritocracy, neutrality and dissemination of knowledge for the betterment of society. However, the large amount of empirical data suggests that inequality, discrimination and inaccessibility to educational resources remain a constant yet frequently denied issue.

The anthology is divided into thematically diverse sections such on-campus climate, relationships between students and faculty, forming networks of allies, issues of social class in academia, tenure and promotion. This diverse approach allows a particular multiplicity of perspectives, made possible through an intersectional approach taking into account the diversity of experiences while at the same time establishing structural connections between each individual narrative. Each of these sections is prefaced by an individual introduction, describing the section to follow and anticipating its most crucial concerns.

Introducing the anthology, Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. Gonzalez engage with racism in academia, obscured by various national myths such as the belief in meritocracy and upward mobility. Engaging with institutional whiteness evidenced by the predominance of white individuals in higher education, Harris and Gonzales contextualise their discussion by reflecting on the increasing corporatisation of universities and its features such as a customer-service model of education, increasing casualisation of staff and forming partnerships with profit-making industries and businesses while cutting down on non-profit generating fields such as the humanities. Furthermore, the editors explain their preference of qualitative empirical data such as surveys and interviews, framing their choice of using personal narratives to expose racism and sexism in academia in the following words: 'Storytelling by individuals, when done well, packs an emotional punch and provides the psychological detail necessary to understand a person with a very different life experiences' (3). Indeed, these experiences are reflected in the sheer variety of stories gathered in this volume. However, this is also a work in which 'absences speak', as the editors include a 'Note on the Silences Shouting from Within This Anthology', which reflects on those who shared their stories but decided not to publish due to vulnerability, fear of discrimination, hostility and retaliation, threatening their reputation as well as embarrassing their colleagues (11).

In my view, one of the most important aspects of this anthology is its intersectional and multivoiced approach and concerns, evidenced by a variety of experiences and perspectives touching upon white privilege, tokenism, classism, racial and sexual bias and prejudice as well as culturally-specific challenges. For instance, Angela May Kupenda's

Book reviews: *Presumed Incompetent: the Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*  
edited by Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs et al. Maja Milatovic.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

article 'Facing Down the Spooks' engages with the lack of solidarity between the predominantly white staff and staff of colour. Kupenda's article details her experiences with white women academics ready to support her on the basis of their shared gender but failing to understand how racism impacts women academics of colour. Kupenda sees the issue of unacknowledged and unmeritocratic white privilege as a crucial obstacle to forming alliances across race and gender and understanding how racism impacts people of colour. Her contribution warns us against enthusiastic assumptions of solidarity based on unacknowledged inequalities and power relations. Continuing the discussion on white privilege is Stephanie A. Shields' 'Waking up to Privilege: Intersectionality and Opportunity' where she reflects on her experiences as a white academic and scrutinises her socialisation in a society where whiteness is defined as the invisible, all-encompassing norm.

Highlighting issues of class, Serena Easton's contribution 'On Being Special' reflects on her Black middle-class privileges as a child, including believing she was 'special' and therefore immune to discrimination. However, Easton details her disillusionment on entering academia, as she faces prejudice, exclusion and continuous assumptions of incompetence. Another class perspective comes from Constance G. Anthony's narrative 'The Port Hueneme of My Mind: The Geography of Working Class Consciousness in One Academic Career', revealing her experiences as a working class individual in a privileged context filled with exclusionary codes of conduct. Crucially, Anthony's experiences point to the practices in academia which single out those coming from less privileged backgrounds, alienating them for mispronouncing challenging words or confusing certain social cues.

Reflecting on tokenism and discrimination, Michelle M. Jacob reveals the challenges of being the only Native American faculty member in her poignant narrative 'Native Women Maintaining Their Culture in the White Academy', highlighting three main issues faced by Native minority staff: an extreme sense of isolation, tokenism and tremendous service burdens (242). Yolanda Flores Niemann also discusses tokenism and lack of representation in 'The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism and Tokenism in Academe', revealing discriminatory hiring practices and her unprecedented teaching and advising workload which she aptly calls 'undermining by workload' (544).

Apart from University staff, colleagues and administrators, a great many of these contributions discuss the academics' relationships with students. For instance, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo's 'A Prostitute, a Servant, and a Customer-Service Representative' contextualises these issues by exploring the impact of corporatisation on academics of colour, detailing how the customer-service model particularly affects faculty of colour. Lugo-Lugo highlights the assumption of competence automatically assigned to white male staff members, contrasting it to negative stereotypical images frequently attached to ethnic faculty members, exacerbating the presumption of incompetence. Sheree Wilson makes a similar observation in 'They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain', exploring the 'Mammy' stereotype attached to certain African American women faculty and administrators, expecting them to undertake various nurturing and caretaker roles and thus hindering their professional development.

Finally, it is important to highlight that each of these personal narratives is infused with healing and reassuring words as well as transformative possibilities and strategies of forming alliances. Nurturing interpersonal and professional relationships and persevering in difficult conditions, this important and courageous collection offers a sense of community, support and hope for the future. Using storytelling as means of exposing discriminatory practices and narrating personal experiences, *Presumed Incompetent* is accessible, inspiring

and engaging reading. With its emphasis on intersectionality and breaking silences and its constructive contributions to feminism, critical race and whiteness studies, equality and diversity, this anthology is a necessary read for both academics and students invested with antiracism, decolonising practices and equality.

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