October, 2012

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

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The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia

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Published by Utah State University Press
An imprint of University Press of Colorado
5589 Arapahoe Avenue, Suite 206C
Boulder, Colorado 80303

The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of

The Association of American University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State College, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State College of Denver, Regis University, University of Colorado, University of Northern Colorado, Utah State University, and Western State College of Colorado.

Manufactured in the United States of America
Cover art: Color Block Face by Bernadette Elszy-Perez
ISBN 978-0-87421-869-5 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87421-922-7 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-87421-870-1 (e-book)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Presumed incompetent : the intersections of race and class for women in academia / edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs ... [et al.].
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-87421-869-5 (hardcover) – ISBN 978-0-87421-870-1 (e-book) – ISBN 978-0-87421-922-7 (pbk.)
1. Women college teachers. 2. Women college teachers—Social conditions. 3. Minority college teachers. 4. Women in higher education. 5. Sex discrimination in higher education. 6. Feminism and higher education. I. Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella
LB2332.3.P74 2012
378.1'2–dc23
2012022578

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Introduction

Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. González

As editors who are also women faculty of color, we produced this volume to provide a framework for understanding the contradictory culture of academia. On the one hand, the university champions meritocracy, encourages free expression and the search for truth, and prizes the creation of neutral and objective knowledge for the betterment of society—values that are supposed to make race and gender identities irrelevant. On the other hand, women of color too frequently find themselves "presumed incompetent" as scholars, teachers, and participants in academic governance. The essays collected in this volume examine the ways that higher education reflects and reproduces—yet also sometimes subverts—the social hierarchies that pervade American society, including race, gender, class, and sexuality.

The United States continues to be a nation profoundly marked by racial, gender and economic inequality. The US has among the highest levels of income inequality in the developed world and the lowest rates of upward mobility (Massey 2008; Herz 2006; Scott and Leonhardt 2005; Keister 2000; Schor 1992). Notwithstanding the accomplishments of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, white women and people of color continue to experience covert and unconscious bias in the job market that depresses earnings and restricts social mobility (Tsang and Dietz 2001; Castilla 2008; Lempert 2010). Recent studies confirm pervasive bias against people of color in employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets (Massey 2008; Pager and Shepherd 2008).

Despite this evidence of persistent inequality, the belief in meritocracy and the narrative of upward mobility through hard work and self-sacrifice continue to serve as defining national myths (Delgado 2007; Hochschild 1996). Higher education, in particular, is widely regarded as the ticket to social advancement. Higher education exerts a powerful pull on the American imagination. Armed with studies showing that college graduates have far higher incomes than those who only hold a high school diploma or less, policy makers frequently exhort young people to earn a college degree (Gates Foundation 2010). Education and nondegree training programs are similarly urged upon older workers as a solution to unemployment and underemployment. And education is not only an individual advancement strategy. An educated, skilled workforce, we are told, is essential to sustain corporate investment in US research and development and prevent capital flight in a fully globalized economy. Thus, higher education is deemed essential in the United States for economic advancement and success, both individual and national (Lewin 2010b).

However, a large body of social science research indicates that higher education is not immune from the inequities that plague the rest of American society. Most of this research focuses on the experiences and outcomes of college and university students and indicates that Latino/a, African American, and Native American students have lower rates of college enrollment and retention than white students. The National Center for Education Statistics, for example, reports that in 2001–2, Asians/Pacific Islanders had the highest six-year graduation rate, followed by whites, Hispanics, blacks, and American Indians/Alaska Natives. Approximately 67 percent of Asians/Pacific Islanders, compared with 60 percent of whites, 48 percent of Hispanics, 42 percent of blacks, and 40 percent of American Indians/Alaska Natives graduated with a bachelor's degree or its equivalent within six years (National Center for Education Statistics 2010). Underrepresented students of color also report higher levels of stress and anxiety, caused partly by straitened economic circumstances and partly by the alienating environment of predominantly white institutions (Schwitzer et al. 1999). For many students from a working-class or impoverished background, whether they are students of color or not, college and graduate school is a mystifying—even hostile—place, full of opaque cultural codes and academic challenges for which they are poorly prepared (Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal 2001). Finally, for students of color, racism in the form of daily "microaggressions" is another constant concern (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). As psychologist Claude Steele's research indicates, for instance, even the fear that one will be judged according to extant stereotypes can depress academic performance (Steele 1997).

Although full-time, tenure-track faculty at US colleges and universities have been less well studied, at first glance they would seem to have little to complain about. These academic workers have reached the top of the privilege and status hierarchy. Although the ivory tower itself is under assault from the same economic and social pressures that have made so many American jobs increasingly precarious—an issue to which we return later—by all external measures, full-time faculty enjoy levels of autonomy, prestige, and economic reward that are unusual indeed.

This book demonstrates, however, that the women of color who have managed to enter the rarefied halls of academe as full-time faculty find themselves in a peculiar situation. Despite their undeniable privilege, women of color faculty members are entrenched in byzantine patterns of race, gender, and class hierarchy that confound popular narratives about meritocracy. Far from being above the fray, faculty at institutions of higher education are immersed in the daunting inequities and painful struggles taking place throughout an increasingly multicultural America.

For many women of color on college and university campuses, the problems begin with numerical representation. While the nation's student population is becoming increasingly diverse, the overwhelming majority of full-time faculty positions continue to be filled by white men and women. From 1997 to 2007, for example, the percentage of students of color enrolled in US colleges and universities climbed from 25 to 30 percent (Ryu 2010). However, the percentage of full-time faculty positions held by people of color increased only slightly—from 13 percent in 1997 to 17 percent in 2007 (Ryu 2010). Women of color, in particular, continue to be underrepresented. In 2007, women of color held only 7.5 percent of full-time faculty positions. Moreover, the percentage of women of color declined steadily with rising academic rank. Women of color comprised 10.4 percent of instructors and lecturers, 9.9 percent of assistant professors, 6.6 percent of associate professors, and only

3.4 percent of full professors (Ryu 2010). In addition to being concentrated in the lower academic ranks, women of color are also overrepresented in less prestigious academic institutions, such as community colleges (Jayakumar et al. 2009; National Center for Education Statistics 2009).

These statistics, however, tell only part of the story. Although quantitative data and statistical measurements are crucial in understanding the experiences of women of color in academia, we have made the choice in this volume to focus instead on personal stories and qualitative empirical data, such as surveys and interviews. In our view, qualitative research is particularly important in the investigation of social hierarchies. As feminist scholars and those in the critical race theory tradition have established, personal stories may bridge the epistemological gap that frequently appears between the lives of people with a particular privilege and those who lack that privilege (Delgado 1989; Montoya 1994). Storytelling by individuals, when done well, packs an emotional punch and provides the psychological detail necessary to understand a person with very different life experiences (Delgado 1989). Qualitative empirical research, in similar fashion, creates a frame in which to interpret the quantitative data. The narratives collected in this volume reveal that not only the demographics but the culture of academia is distinctly white, heterosexual, and middle- and upper-middle-class. Those who differ from this norm find themselves, to a greater or lesser degree, "presumed incompetent" by students, colleagues, and administrators.

The essays collected in this volume explore the presumption of incompetence through a series of interrelated themes that place the contradictory predicament of women of color faculty in a larger historical and cultural perspective. One of these themes is the negotiation of identity in the academic world—the privileges and challenges that arise from the intersections of race, gender, class, and other claimed and assigned identities. These essays illustrate what critical race theorists have called "working identity" (Carbado and Gulati 2000b; Houh 2006; Onwuachi-Willig 2007; Yoshino 2006). Social identities are not static but emerge in the context of interaction. And in the field of everyday interaction, identity performances may clash with stereotypes and expectations held by others (Carbado and Gulati 2000b).

Thus, students want their black women professors to be more "motherly." White faculty may feel comfortable learning salsa with their Latina colleague or treating her like the maid, nanny, or secretary who ministers to their personal needs. Yet faculty and students of all ethnicities and genders may feel threatened when their colored female colleague acts like a serious intellectual rather than a mascot, cheerleader, or seductress (Pleck 1990). When an academic woman of color's behavior thwarts expectations, the result may be what Peggy Davis calls *microaggressions* (P. Davis 1989): subtle or blatant attempts at punishing the unexpected behavior. These pages are filled with stories of microaggressions and responses to them, including attempts by the person disciplined to accommodate, resist, or perform a kind of jiu-jitsu with others' demands. In the process, the faculty member in question may find herself embracing a new identity, clinging tenaciously to an old one, or some combination of both (Carbado and Gulati 2000b). Or the result may be a subtle and complicated palimpsest of identity as new identifications are written over old ones.

These identity performances take place against a backdrop of institutional privilege and subordination. The obvious dimensions of structural injustice include race, gender, class, and sexuality (and we could add disability, not represented in this

volume). The contributors to this book find themselves disciplined by colleagues, students, or administrators whenever their assigned and/or claimed identities do not match cultural stereotypes. As the cognitive psychology literature explains, unconscious bias plays a part in the way teachers and students are perceived by others (Chang and Davis 2010). Given a climate of shared cultural stereotypes and images, it is not surprising that although each of these stories is unique, the authors also describe strikingly similar barriers to their success.

However, just as every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way (as Tolstoy wrote), each workplace structured by caste has unique features. In the academic workplace, judgments of worth tend to be extremely subjective. Reputation is the coin of the realm, and reputations are built not only by objective accomplishments but through images and sometimes outright fantasies—individual or collective—that cling to the nature of the work and the person being evaluated. Academic judgments, then, are especially susceptible to unconscious bias, although the precise forms this bias takes varies from one institution to another.

This point brings us to a second theme that connects these essays: the link between agency and structure, the individual and the collective. As feminist consciousness-raising groups recognized long ago, the personal is political. Predominantly white and male employment and educational institutions systematically disfavor women of color, not solely through individual bias but as part of larger systems of education, employment, media, and other civil society institutions that perpetuate and extend the privileges created by group subordination. It is important, then, to read even the most seemingly personal stories in this collection as symptomatic of a larger, structural problem, rather than solely the issues of any one woman or department, college, or campus.

A third theme raised in many of the essays in this volume is the nature of academic culture itself. Academia, as a legion of satirical novels has pointed out, has its own culture in which certain faculty qualities and attitudes—brilliance, rigor, seriousness, rationality, objectivity—are greatly prized. The origin of academia's reverence for these qualities can be traced back to the birth of the scientific method. As scholars of the university have noted, the campus has had a long love affair with science or, perhaps more accurately, with the idea of science. Within the pecking order of the university, the most valued pursuits are those that most easily claim rigor, objectivity, and, these days, technocratic mastery. Thus, there has been a long struggle between the sciences and the humanities, and within the sciences, between the "hard" and "soft" ones. The qualities that are valued in scholarly endeavor are also esteemed in professional life. Research universities are more prestigious than teaching ones; research is valued over teaching at nearly all universities, and teaching is valued more than community service (Wisniewski, Ducharme, and Agne 1989). Among researchers and scholars, the romance of the brilliant, lonely genius in pursuit of Truth—even if the heavens should fall—still lingers around promotion reviews.

These revered characteristics, however, are not only associated with the hard sciences. They are also traditionally linked with masculinity and are understood as the opposite of femininity. For instance, rationality is prized at the expense of recognizing—or being able to deal with—emotion (Harris and Shultz 1993). On every campus, tasks associated with femininity—such as teaching—are valued less than those associated with masculinity, and the most prestigious disciplines are those with the fewest women. This means not only that people with female bodies or feminine

self-presentations are likely to be excluded from certain disciplines or understood as inferior. It also means that the disciplines themselves—forms of knowledge and the methods of producing them—are understood and pursued in gendered terms (McCloskey 1998; Keller 1983; Resnik 1989–90). Methods of knowledge production that do not fit the model of the brilliant genius who works alone and possesses learning inaccessible to the masses, such as participatory action research, are marginalized or actively denigrated. And methods of knowledge production that challenge the idea of value-free academic inquiry are bitterly attacked. For instance, in the 1980s in the discipline of law, a storytelling movement pursued by critical race theorists drew harsh (one might say hysterical) criticism because of its departure from the norms of objectivity and neutrality (Farber and Sherry 1993).

Racial hierarchy also pervades the history of academic culture, although its influence is harder to see. Scholars in the hard sciences often protest that their work is value neutral and politics-free and, therefore, that questions of social hierarchy and caste are irrelevant. The history of science, however, shows this is not the case. One need not take up the extreme claim that there is no such thing as objective truth to see that cultural, social, and political interests shape what people investigate and, therefore, what they find (Blackburn 2005). For example, from their inception, Western scholarly disciplines as distinct as geology, botany, and tropical medicine flourished, to a great degree, in service of Europe's colonial enterprise. These disciplines enabled Europeans to exploit the mineral riches of the colonies, profitably cultivate tropical cash crops in far-flung colonial plantations, and protect the colonizers from the ravages of tropical disease (McNeill 2010; McClellan 2010; Brockway 2002; Drayton 2000). Meanwhile, the so-called natives were pronounced uncivilized and stripped of their natural resources in the name of scientific conservation or sustainable resource extraction (Drayton 2000; Harding 1998). This, of course, does not make tropical medicine and botany false. It does mean, however, that political interest shapes scientific knowledge in subtle and occasionally blatant ways.

Again, the issue is not only the use of scientific knowledge for political ends. Nor is it only the exclusion of people of color from the ranks of those engaged in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. What is insidiously troubling about Western intellectual culture is its espousal of "value-free science" to mask the ways that the idea of pure and interest-free truth has been and continues to be used to perpetuate unjust social hierarchies. Perhaps the most obvious example is the scientific literature on race. Stephen Jay Gould, in his book *The Mismeasure of Man,* skillfully shows how leading scientists in the late nineteenth century produced scholarship that was woefully deficient, even by its own standards, yet remained highly regarded because it confirmed the prejudices Anglo-Europeans held about white supremacy and black inferiority (Gould 1981).

As we move further into the twenty-first century, these debates about whether and under what conditions knowledge can be value free may be overshadowed by changes in the institution of the university itself. Many scholars argue that American colleges and universities today, influenced by neoliberal ideology and struggling with financial burdens, have embraced corporatization (Nussbaum 2010; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Washburn 2006; C. Nelson 2010; Nelson and Watt 2004; Giroux 2009; Saunders 2010; Johnson, Kavanagh, and Mattson 2003; Bok 2003). Features of this corporatization include closer and more explicit partnerships, especially in the hard sciences, with private industry; the adoption of business models for university

governance (including the move to abolish tenure), instead of traditional shared governance; and a focus on short-term financial returns, which privileges revenue-generating ventures in business, science, and engineering, over disciplines like the humanities and the arts that do not generally generate profit.

The corporatization of the university has also facilitated a marked shift in the academic labor market away from full-time, tenure-track positions and toward contingent labor, including greater reliance on adjunct and part-time faculty and graduate students for teaching. Data collected by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) from the period including the 2008 recession reveal a telling pattern in full-time appointments: the total number of faculty members grew, but most of the new appointments were in non-tenure-track positions. Just in the two years between 2007 and 2009, the growth in full-time, non-tenure-track and part-time faculty positions outstripped the increase in tenure-track jobs (American Association of University Professors 2010–11). According to federal data analyzed by the AAUP, graduate student employees and faculty members serving in contingent appointments made up more than 75 percent of the total instructional staff in 2009. These trends suggest that the market for full-time, tenure-track academic work may become a winner-take-all market, with a handful of academic superstars at the top and an enormous underclass for whom academia is a classic "bad job," featuring low pay, few or no benefits, and low job security or input into shaping the rules that govern one's working life. The data also suggest that women of color are likely to be disproportionately represented at the bottom, exacerbating the presumption of incompetence.

The advancing corporatization of the academy also presages a number of cultural changes that may adversely affect women faculty of color. Colleges reportedly are coming to treat their students more and more like customers, and arguably students have adopted that attitude for themselves, coming to higher education to buy the commodity of credentials, rather than to learn (of course, it is not clear there ever was a golden age when most students did come to learn!) (Giroux 2009; Saunders 2010). It is possible that this shift will also exacerbate the presumption of incompetence by encouraging the disciplining (through poor evaluations or microaggressions) of faculty members whose identities, authority, insights, pedagogical approaches, and/or failure to conform to stereotyped expectations challenge entrenched racial, gender, class, or other hierarchies. If academic women become service workers who must please, rather than educate, their students, their career advancement will likely be determined to a greater extent than before by their ratings on "customer service" evaluations.

A 2009 study conducted by researchers at the universities of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, British Columbia, Michigan, and Washington and at the US Military Academy at West Point highlights the pitfalls of this service worker model. The researchers found that volunteers who viewed videos featuring a black male, a white female, or a white male playing the role of a bookstore employee assisting a customer consistently rated the performance of the white male as superior even though the actors in the video read the same script, performed the same tasks, and were filmed in the same location. This preference for white males was exhibited by white men and women viewers as well as viewers of color of both sexes. Surveys of patient satisfaction with the performance of doctors and customer satisfaction with country clubs belonging to a large hospitality company revealed the same bias (Hekman et al. 2010). The results of this study bode ill for female academics of color.

A fourth theme in these essays is mechanisms for change. The restrictiveness of American academic culture has its origins in the history of American education. The nation's most prestigious universities were not established to educate women, people of color, or the working class. On the contrary, they were designed to serve the interests of wealthy white men (Karabel 2006; Saunders 2010). Not until the decades following the Second World War did social movements, federal legislation, judicial decisions, and presidential decrees pry open the doors of the nation's universities to large numbers of women, people of color, and members of the working class (Brubacher and Rudy 1997). While many of the formal barriers have been lifted, academic institutions remain, at their core, profoundly inhospitable to the experiences and points of view of those formerly excluded. The Third World Feminist movement of the 1970s on college campuses around the country succeeded in planting women's studies and ethnic studies departments where there had been none (Hu-DeHart 1993; Sandoval 2000). Yet, in the end, the values that animated the founding of these departments were at least partly eclipsed by the larger culture of the university.

Regrettably, the culture of academia overall remains not only remarkably blind to its own flaws, but deeply invested in a thoroughgoing denial. Most faculty of color on predominantly white campuses, if they have worked for more than a year or so, are familiar with the committee appointed to investigate diversity concerns. Such committees tend to spring up like mushrooms after a rain in the wake of racist incidents and create files of paper that are then stored until the next scandal. The culture of academia, ultimately, is impervious to change because its power structure is designed to reproduce itself. Here we return to our first theme: the links among race, gender, sexuality, and class. When the people in power receive a mandate to search out excellence, the first place they look is to people like themselves, and too often that is also where the search ends. Social science literature, for instance, abounds with studies demonstrating that "employers assign higher subjective ratings to male or white employees than they do to women or minorities with comparable work records" (Merritt and Reskin 1997, 229 n. 98).

In addition to underscoring the need for meaningful structural change, these essays highlight the need for individual women of color to recognize and honor the connections among body, mind, culture, and spirit—connections that are denied by the rationalist and masculine-dominated culture of the academy—to survive and thrive in a hostile academic environment. The women who tell their stories in this collection individually and collectively experience physiological and psychic effects from being presumed incompetent. Mounting public health evidence suggests that chronic stress—like the pressure of being continually misperceived or belittled or having to fight off microaggressions—can result in higher levels of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and coronary heart disease (Lewis 2006; Lepore 2006; Peters 2006). At a subtler level, the antiracist psychiatrist Frantz Fanon wrote decades ago about the psychic strain white supremacy places on people of color (Fanon 1967). More recently, Patricia Williams has described the effects of constant racist belittling as "spirit-murder" (P. Williams 1991).

Within academic culture with its masculine bent, there is no easy way to articulate or deal with the emotional, the psychic, or the spiritual. Many of the authors in this collection, however, have developed resources for naming their wounds and healing them, including friendship, alliances, and poetry. Similarly, some of the

authors in this collection have found ways of combating the relentless individualism of academic culture to reclaim community and solidarity in their professional and personal lives.

The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of the essays in this book. It also discusses the "silences" within this collection—the stories that women of color shared with us about their experiences in academia but, for various reasons, decided not to publish at this time.

Part I: General Campus Climate

The articles in Part I lay the book's foundation by examining—from a variety of perspectives—the ways that academic institutions create an inhospitable climate for women faculty of color. The authors analyze the dissonance between the intersecting identities of women of color (including gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class) and academia's white, male, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual norms. Through personal narratives, interviews, and traditional academic research, these authors describe and explain how cultural stereotypes distort the ways women faculty of color are perceived, evaluated, and treated by students, colleagues, and administrators. The problem often begins during hiring when unconscious bias triggers greater scrutiny of the presumptively incompetent applicants of color while the flaws of white male applicants are minimized or disregarded. Women of color must perform their social identities carefully and selectively to avoid being criticized, marginalized, dismissed, or rejected by colleagues and students. This performance may be particularly treacherous for women teaching or writing in disciplines (such as ethnic studies and women's studies) that challenge dominant ideas about equal opportunity. The essays lament that white faculty and administrators, despite personal and institutional commitments to social justice, often fail to recognize or address the demoralizing and potentially career-threatening microaggressions that routinely confront women faculty of color. This denial is particularly troubling to the extent that the increasing commercialization of higher education encourages students to see themselves as customers and treat their professors as service workers who must cater to their needs and preferences. As the authors explain, hiring additional faculty of color is necessary but does not solve the problem. Rather, what is required is transforming academic culture so that it welcomes and embraces those who are currently regarded as "other" and increases the opportunity for alternative points of view to challenge dominant ideologies and deep-rooted social hierarchies.

Part II: Faculty-Student Relationships

Part II examines faculty-student relationships, specifically the social environment of aspiring academics and the challenges that women faculty of color experience in the classroom. These authors analyze the obstacles that female students of color must overcome to enter the professorial ranks, including lack of mentoring or encouragement, the need to counter negative stereotypes, and the presumption that they were admitted to competitive academic programs or hired as faculty only because of their race and gender. In addition, women from working-class or impoverished backgrounds often struggle with the disorientation associated with stepping into middle- and upper-class working environments and the nagging sense that they have abandoned their communities of origin or "sold out." The authors also explore the experiences of junior faculty as they find their voices in the classroom,

grapple with student demands and expectations (including the internalization of racial, class, and gender stereotypes by their students of color), and experiment with novel pedagogical strategies designed to transform conventional approaches to the study of race and gender. Finally, the essays examine gender and racial bias in teaching evaluations and the procedures that might ameliorate this bias.

Part III: Networks of Allies

The articles in Part III examine the supportive (and not-so-supportive) relationships that academic women of color form at work. The research indicates that building networks is crucial to professional success in academia. These essays suggest that allies are also essential for individual well-being and the work of making the campus climate more hospitable for women faculty of color. At the same time, building networks on campus can be challenging for academics. The authors in this part identify two broad challenges to building networks. The first is institutional—the structure and culture of academia. As graduate students, women of color may be hesitant to establish strong relationships with junior faculty, who may share their interests but also may lack the power to mentor them effectively or may not receive tenure. When women of color enter the ranks of junior faculty, their challenge is to overcome the competitive nature of academia. Establishing relationships of openness and trust is crucial, these authors suggest, even if it means violating norms of secrecy around issues like salary and perks. Racial solidarity can help establish this openness and trust, but the authors also note that even in a racially homogenous group, hierarchies of status connected with the rank of the school or role within the institution (tenured versus untenured, for example) may appear. Joint appointments raise another kind of institutional challenge to, and opportunity for, networking. Participation in two departments can facilitate network building, but it can also place intolerable demands on a faculty member's time and energy.

The second broad challenge to building networks for academic women of color is overcoming social privilege. Several of the essays, for instance, address the issue of organizing as women. Organizing and supporting one another as women faculty members requires white women to identify and work through their racial privilege. Another, more subtle issue related to privilege is being the first or the only person of one's community in academia. This position brings with it the heavy burden of needing to serve a specific community without becoming overwhelmed by the demands for one's time and attention.

Part IV: Social Class in Academia

The essays in Part IV, "Social Class in Academia," analyze class consciousness and bias in higher education. Women from the lower or working class face enormous obstacles in the academy, due not only to material deprivation but also to the alienation of working-class academics from their origins and native communities. These academics face enormous pressures to pass as middle- or upper-class, and they must carefully evaluate the potential repercussions of "coming out" as working class—much like the risks of coming out as gay in the larger society.

The essays analyze the ways that race, class, and gender reinforce the marginalized status of women faculty of color. For example, these authors examine the condescension that characterizes the way white faculty and other diasporic immigrant academics treat American-born or American-raised Latinas because of their

families' actual or presumed lower-class origins. Another manifestation of class and racial bias is the preferential treatment some white faculty and administrators give middle- and upper-class Asian American and elite Indian, African, and Latin American immigrant faculty at the expense of "presumptively incompetent" US–raised Latinas and African Americans thought to come from the working class. Finally, as anti-immigrant hysteria sweeps the nation, Latinas are vulnerable to being perceived as "illegal aliens" and linguistic traitors and may face not only marginalization in academia but verbal and physical harassment by students. These essays present a sobering account of the intersections of race, class, and gender for academics from the working class.

Part V: Tenure and Promotion

The articles in the fifth part, "Tenure and Promotion," are among the most gripping in the book. Here, in a series of often harrowing personal narratives, women faculty of color tell candid stories about their own paths to tenure and beyond. Although each woman's story is different—a common saying in academia is that "all tenure is local"—some disturbing connections are evident. These women faculty of color experience academia as a foreign space and wonder whether they really belong there, despite their qualifications. Self-doubt and shame are constant threats. These essays also suggest that women faculty of color too often face belittling, sometimes openly racist, comments about their qualifications, their activities, and their research, especially when that research involves race and/or gender. According to these authors, women faculty of color are overburdened with externally—and internally—imposed demands that they do everything better than their colleagues, and they are also singled out to fulfill special demands, such as being the "face of diversity" for their departments or campuses or mentoring all students of color.

These essays also reveal the workings of aversive racism in academic institutions. Many of the women who tell their stories in this section were hired, promoted, and given or denied tenure in ways that violated normal campus procedure. Hostile white colleagues, in some of these accounts, went to great lengths to sabotage the women they felt did not belong in their institution. Also destructive were those colleagues who professed support for the professor under fire but encouraged her to accede to unreasonable demands to appease the attackers or leave the institution "for her own good." In an environment where great lip service is given to diversity and federal affirmative-action policies apply, overt racism is discouraged. Therefore, battles over racial and gender hierarchy are fought through individual women's bodies and minds.

The essays in this section, however, are not only shocking and sad. They are also filled with humor, wisdom, and inspiration as the authors draw insights from their own experiences and give advice to those still walking the path through hiring to tenure. These essays are also filled with the hope and faith that solidarity among women faculty of color and their allies will ease the way for the next generation of academics.

A Note on the Silences Shouting from Within This Anthology

One of the most telling experiences that we, the editors, had concerns the essays that are not in this collection. Although the essays included are rich, varied, and

multilayered, many women who responded to our call for papers expressed enthusiasm for *Presumed Incompetent* coupled with reservations about contributing. Some of these potential contributors finally decided not to have their experiences included for several reasons.

First, some would-be contributors felt too wounded spiritually and psychologically to write about their experiences. Several women asserted that it would take years to fully process the covert and overt acts of hostility that they encountered on a regular basis from students, colleagues, and administrators. Many 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.

Second, a significant number of women decided not to contribute to the anthology for fear of retaliation. They believed that they would be penalized for airing their home institution's dirty laundry in public, and they were not prepared to become pariahs. One woman felt that writing about her experiences would not only burn bridges at her current institution but also undermine her future career prospects. She described the vilification and rejection that her home institution had lavished on a highly qualified applicant who had published an article detailing the bias she had experienced as a woman of color at another university. Rather than being moved by the applicant's gut-wrenching tale, her prospective colleagues dismissed the narrative as a fabrication, and declined to hire her.

Third, many women believed the problems they encountered at their home institutions were part of a pattern or practice experienced by many others. In their view, it was impossible to write about their individual experiences without disclosing the experiences of others. Unwilling to publicly embarrass colleagues already burdened by institutional inequities, these women informed us that they could not participate, even anonymously.

Fourth, several women reported that trusted mentors had warned them that publishing an essay based on personal experience would be regarded as "un-intellectual" and would subject them to personal and professional ridicule. Several potential contributors hold prominent positions in university administration and public service in addition to their accomplishments as teachers and scholars. They informed us that describing their personal experiences in academia would harm them professionally and impede their efforts to create opportunities for students and colleagues. Sadly, for these would-be contributors the price of individual success was, apparently, silence about the ways in which academic attitudes and institutional practices reproduce hierarchies of race, gender, and class.

Fifth, a number of women expressed apprehension about writing in an area outside their professional specialization. These potential contributors explained that they were trained to do analytical work in their respective disciplines but lacked the requisite theoretical background to examine fully the complex ways that race, gender, sexual orientation, and class had shaped their professional lives. Other women—under constant pressure to prove themselves in their academic disciplines and overwhelmed by service obligations as the representative of color on multiple university committees—simply decided they could not afford to devote the necessary time and effort to this project.

Sixth, many women privately told us their stories in great detail but declined to put them in print to avoid exacerbating already tense and fractured professional

relationships at their home institutions. For instance, several of these women reported having been recruited by prominent liberals who seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of increasing the diversity of experiences and perspectives at their universities and who offered mentorship and support. However, after the women's arrival these faculty members treated their protégées in a condescending manner—boasting about how much they had done to help the women succeed, taking credit for their accomplishments, and/or publicly expressing worries about whether they could satisfy the university's promotion and tenure requirements. In addition, a few women reported that they were penalized when they expressed opinions that diverged from those of their patrons. Stunned at being cast in the role of charity recipients by colleagues they had regarded as supporters, these women declined to contribute until they could figure out how to do it in a manner that would prompt self-reflection, rather than defensiveness, from their misguided "benefactors."

Seventh, a few women feared that making their stories public would undermine fragile coalitions among faculty of color in their department by exposing the complicity of certain colleagues in perpetuating the presumption of incompetence. For example, stories like this one emerged, which we couch in general terms to protect confidentiality:

> A troubling pattern that plagues many educational institutions is the tendency of faculty and administrators to adopt a faculty member of color as the official pet or mascot. The pet may be a key administrator's personal favorite, who serves as the official spokesperson for all faculty of color. She may be the "exceptional" woman of color whose accomplishments (real or imagined) or compliant attitude put other faculty of color in a negative light. In public, the pet makes a dramatic display of her selfless efforts to support colleagues of color. In private, the pet is harshly critical of the teaching and scholarship of these same colleagues, thereby reinforcing the race- and gender-based presumption of incompetence.

As this narrative suggests, academic institutions may pit faculty of color against one another by bestowing lavish rewards on one faculty member to avoid accusations of racism when they denigrate another. This behavior is consistent with broader societal patterns. As Richard Delgado observes, when racialized groups coexist in a particular location, whites often maintain racial hierarchies by giving one group preferential treatment at the expense of those less favored (Delgado 1999). Regrettably, some members of the favored group, including those who describe themselves as feminists and critical race scholars, may enhance their own status by collaborating in characterizing other faculty of color as inferior. Feeling unable to describe these dynamics without exposing other women of color, many potential contributors opted for silence.

Eighth and relatedly, several women declined to participate because their stories raise uncomfortable questions about what will happen as faculty of color achieve critical mass in higher education. Will they reproduce the dysfunctional racial and gender hierarchies of predominantly white institutions, or establish a new paradigm? In a handful of institutions where faculty of color have achieved critical mass, women faculty of color reported that the internalization of long-standing societal norms has simply reconfigured the racial and gender hierarchy, rather than eliminating it. In other words, the dominant racial group subordinates other racialized

groups—often in alliance with white faculty, who continue to enjoy high status. Women of color remain at the bottom of such hierarchies and may even be worse off than in majority-white institutions because they feel unable or unwilling to denounce oppressors who also happen to be people of color. One woman described this situation as "the Anita Hill paradox at the institutional level." Institutional transformation therefore requires that all faculty—white and of color—acknowledge and demolish conscious and unconscious biases, rather than replicate divisive survival strategies of the past.

Finally, several women felt that their experiences in academia, though personally challenging, had been relatively benign in comparison to those of friends and colleagues in other departments and at other institutions. In some instances, particular women were treated well precisely because their home institution was seeking to overcome its (well deserved) reputation as a hostile environment for women faculty of color. It is important to keep in mind that the essays collected in this anthology reflect a range of experiences and institutional settings, and do not presume to represent the experiences of all women of color in all institutions at all times.

These silences and omissions magnify the importance of the essays in this volume as timely and valuable contributions to our knowledge about the current state of higher education. As a group, these essays add texture and nuance to the big pictures conveyed by empirical research, and provide the intimate details of lived and felt experience that only personal narrative can offer. Moreover, these essays go beyond simply providing a critique. Read together, they yield a multitude of lessons for administrators and faculty, both white and of color. Thus, in the conclusion to this volume, Yolanda Flores Niemann condenses and summarizes these lessons and offers concrete recommendations for moving forward.

A final editorial observation may be necessary regarding the impact of affirmative action on the presumption of incompetence. A popular argument against affirmative action is that it contributes to the stigmatization of those who are its beneficiaries—and even those perceived to be beneficiaries. Certainly the successes of women faculty of color are often met with envious grumbling about affirmative action, and some social science research confirms that white men and others use this rationalization to justify their discomfort about female success (Heilman, Block, and Lucas 1992; Heilman 1996; Krieger 1998). It is conceivable, therefore, that the essays in *Presumed Incompetent* could support the conclusion that affirmative action is damaging those it attempts to help.

However, we do not believe the converse is true—that eliminating affirmative action will erase the presumption of incompetence. Evidence of condescension and belittlement long predates affirmative-action policies in academia. For instance, in the autobiographical book "Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years," two African American schoolteachers born in 1893 and 1891 relate their experiences of being challenged because of their race despite their qualifications as professionals (Delany and Delany 1997). Nor has the termination of affirmative-action programs in recent years at several universities eliminated the presumption that students of color are less qualified and capable. Indeed, one recent study found that students in states that had abolished affirmative action reported more stigma and hostility than students going to school in states with such programs (Bowen 2010). The stigmatization effect appears to be a complex phenomenon not directly dependent on the presence or absence of affirmative-action programs (Krieger 1998; Bowen 2010).

More importantly, the potentially stigmatizing effects of affirmative action must be weighed against the alternatives. Krieger, surveying the research, concludes that the abolition of affirmative action would significantly reduce the presence of women and people of color by eliminating an important mechanism that compensates for discriminatory disadvantage. Abolishing affirmative action also sends a message to the larger society that racism and sexism have been overcome and that there is no need to examine one's attitudes and behavior for unconscious bias (Merritt 2010). We therefore believe that the benefits of affirmative action far outweigh its drawbacks.

The essays in *Presumed Incompetent* point, finally, toward the Third World Feminist recognition that the business of knowledge production, like the production of tea, spices, and bananas, has an imperialist history that it has never shaken. Inventing the postcolonial university is the task of the twenty-first century. We can only hope that this task of decolonizing American academia is completed before the tenure track itself disappears. Otherwise, scholars in the next century may confront another ironic example of women finally rising in a profession just as it loses its prestige and social value.