Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia

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Recommended Citation

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Yolanda Flores Neimann, Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs, and Carmen Gonzalez (2020)
Utah University Press
Reviewed by Dannemart Pierre, M.S.

In "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel" (1961), James Baldwin presents an allegory on racism and the Black experience. Baldwin explains that if there is a murdered body in a room, and everyone in the room is aware of the murder, and aware of the body, and aware of each other's awareness of the body, but no one is willing to talk about it, it will not be long before they cannot discuss anything at all. Susie Nam, a pseudonym used in order to protect her career, alludes to Baldwin's allegory in her essay, "Making Visible the Dead Bodies in the Room," to underscore what happens when institutions create environments where women of color must use pseudonyms to speak about their experiences. Baldwin's work is instructive for understanding the need to discuss the experiences of women of color in academia.

Nam's essay is included in *Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia*, the second volume in a collection of essays edited by Yolanda Flores Neimann (professor of psychology at the University of North Texas), Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs (Theiline Pigott McCone chair in the humanities and professor of modern languages and women studies), and Carmen Gonzalez (professor of law at Seattle University School of Law). *Presumed Incompetent II*

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centers the voices of women of color from various ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, levels of career accomplishments, sexual orientation, and ability. In highlighting the perspectives of women of color in the academy, the book challenges the academy to address the proverbial dead bodies in the room.

Presumed Incompetent II is organized into five sections: Tenure and promotion, academic leadership, social class, bullying and microaggressions, and activism and resistance. The 32 narratives, however, may be categorized into two themes emerge: the perilous road women of color must travel on their journey to success and the high costs women of color pay to succeed.

Six decades after affirmative action, people of color remain underrepresented in higher education faculty and leadership. *Presumed Incompetent II* illustrates how the road to success is particularly difficult for women of color. According to the narratives, as of 2013, only 17.8% of tenure-track faculty are people of color as compared to 79% White (Neimann, 2020). Universities lure new faculty with the promise of tenure-track positions, but women of color are overloaded with low-level or unpopular courses. In "They See Us, But They Don't Really See Us", Monforti and Michelson (2020), discuss how implicit biases against women often lead to lower course evaluations. When women of color are more likely to be assigned unpopular courses, and they are more harshly evaluated while teaching those courses, this creates an additional obstacle in the tenure process.

The essayists also report problematic and embarrassing tenure or promotion processes for women of color. Cynthia Lee, Penelope Espinoza, Grace Park, and Jennifer Gomez each recount a litany of prejudicial encounters during their tenure process. In "Surviving a Difficult Tenure Process," Lee (2020) shares the experience of submitting an article for promotion which had been accepted for publication in the *UCLA Law Review*. However, her review board described the article as "deeply flawed" (p. 51), and her work on race was heavily criticized and then dismissed.

Similarly, contributors such as Neimann (2020), who served on the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, bemoan how often they are tokenized on committees for their ethnic identity but not their perspectives. These appointments give little recognition, produce minimal change, and result in no time for scholarship. Women

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of color must navigate a landscape endemic of workplace bullying, marginalization, silencing, shaming, stalking, psychological trauma, and physical threat on their road to success.

A second theme woven through the narratives is the physiological and psychological toll of racialized experiences on women of color in academia. Like Nam (2020), who addresses the chronic stress of racial trauma that leads to "death by academia" (p. 174), Wing (2020) discusses the "spirit injuries" that persist long after women of color leave an institution (p. 224). In "Picked to Pieces," Hoff (2020) explains the loss of identity for women of color forego racial and cultural heritage in order to fit into institutional cultures that normalize, sanction, reward, and facilitate whiteness. Women of color find that they must choose either to spend their career attempting to achieve whiteness, thus losing their identity, or sacrifice their career by resisting it.

Several contributors sacrifice their safety and face retaliation when they speak against institutional injustices. Brooks (2020), Tudor (2020), and Patton (2020) discuss the violence of academia which strikes fear in its victims. Patton (2020), an award-winning journalist, urges women of color to stop living on the defensive and recast themselves from victim to empowered.

Presumed Incompetent II presents a wonderful collection of female voices of color whose narratives are too often ignored within academia. The text provides a platform to highlight the perspectives of women of color in the academy and challenges the academy to address the wounded and dead bodies in the room. Although powerful, the volume is not without critique.

First, the experiences are primarily those of faculty, even though some of the contributors transitioned to senior administrative roles. Discussions about higher education are often siloed between academics, student life, and development. The stories of staff personnel are usually excluded from critical conversations; this text perpetuates this erasure. Where are the voices of women of color in student affairs, human resources, admissions and recruitment, or athletics? Student affairs professionals, for example, understand the holistic student experience. Athletics personnel know the student athlete's perspective. If the university does not know how to serve these staff, how can they hope to serve the students? The exclusion of staff creates a limited view of academic life for all women of color and perpetuates a class division that has been a characteristic of higher education.

Secondly, having dragged the dead bodies out for viewing, the editors left readers with a grim reality of life in academia. Women of color considering higher education may become disheartened by the narratives and seek alternative fields. Although, women of color are fighting back through speaking, writing, conducting research, and creating support networks, "Change that is dependent on individuals can be fleeting and illusory" (Bridgeman, 2020, p. 21). To be transformative and lasting, universities must institutionalize these changes.

To be a woman of color in academia is to be presumed incompetent. Women of color report the need to monitor their tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and dress in order to avoid negative stereotypes about their racial/ethnic/gender identity. Stereotypes that often jeopardize their careers. Women of color experience debilitating physiological and psychological health concerns; they suffer professionally and personally from discriminatory practices. *Presumed Incompetent II* forces the conversation that many in leadership are unwilling to have about women of color in academia. The essays challenge readers to evaluate their personal narratives to effect change. By acknowledging these experiences, women can speak out about their experiences and demand accountability. This may be the greatest value of the text, leading to lasting change for women across the academy.

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