

Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium

Volume 8

Article 10

12-1-2014

Review – *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, edited by Yolanda Flores, Angela Harris, Gabriela Gutierrez y Muhs and Carmen Gonzales

Roy Lee
St. Leo University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lee, Roy (2014) "Review – *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, edited by Yolanda Flores, Angela Harris, Gabriela Gutierrez y Muhs and Carmen Gonzales," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*: Vol. 8, Article 10.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts/vol8/iss1/10>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia. Yolanda Flores, Angela Harris, Gabriela Gutierrez y Muhs and Carmen Gonzales, editors. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2012. 512. Paperback 0874219221. \$38.95

Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia examines the effects of race and gender on female faculty members in institutions of higher education. It is a compilation of personal stories, a majority of which are from women of color sharing their pain, struggles, disappointments, and challenges within the environment of academia which is clouded with racism and classism. This would include fellow faculty/staff members and students with whom they work and commune on a daily basis. These women of color have achieved the highest degree, yet experience racism and inequalities that are alive and well in the 21st century.

The book is divided into five major sections that address critical issues that affect academics of color: General Campus Climate, Faculty/Student Relationships, Networks of Allies, Social Class in Academia, and Tenure and Promotion. The fact that many of those invited declined to participate because of fears of retaliation or breaking academia's code of silence brings home the valuable contribution this work makes to the much needed discussion on the pressures and perils of being both female and persons of color in academia today. The editors note that "Our goal as editors was to empower women of color and allies by providing tools and strategies to overcome the challenges described in this volume." [3]

There are three major areas which I would like to address that became themes for me throughout the book: the climate for African-American women within the educational field; faculty/student relationships; and tenure and promotions.

For women of color, a basic perception of incompetence is presumed on college and university campuses because of the color of their skin. It is noted that the conscious and subconscious understandings of racism are at work in the minds of many white people who are seen as the privileged class within our society. Because of this bias, the white, male-dominated hierarchy within academia has often created a hostile and

The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium VIII (2014): 103-106.

intimidating environment for people of color. Behaviors can be condescending in language, as well as attitude. African-American male educators [have] gained some access to this "private club" since the Civil Rights Movement and Affirmative Action, but this gave way to an attitude of resentment from the original members which currently makes life even more difficult for the African-American female working in such institutions.

Women of color who do not have strong and enduring backbones will not be able to survive the test of time within these corridors of academia. Their encounters will create stressors that affect the mind, body and soul. The authors note that some of the women who have experienced negative behavior gave way to despair, and for some that despair resulted even in taking their own lives. A solid support system for Black and other women of color in this kind of oppressive atmosphere is of critical importance. The work's last chapter provides examples and recommendations.

Contributors attest to the fact that Caucasian students, too often, have viewed these women as incompetent based on their skin color and their own lack of experience with people of color. This perception gives many students the opportunity to infuse their own personal bias and stereotypes into the classroom, challenging their professors because they feel and think they do not have the knowledge to teach on the university level. These stereotypes are unintentionally reinforced at times because of possible outward differences: in terms of wardrobe, braided hairstyles, or maybe even the professors' choice of expression. If this kind of student/faculty experience exists, it can possibly give the students more power over a woman of color through student evaluations, thus reducing even further her feelings of self-worth and her colleagues' and others negative perspective of them. If there is no support from fellow faculty members, this tool of evaluation from the students is another opportunity for the administrators to dismiss a female professor of color.

This same notion of tokenism and stereotypes for the women of color in academia makes its way through the thick layers of tenure and promotion. Being female and African-American can seem like two strikes against them when dealing with the white, male-dominated institutions in which they work.

In addition to putting more stake in student evaluations than normal for the purpose of not granting tenure or promotions, for many administrators and faculty members in predominant universities, the text asserts that it is common practice to marginalize them and find ways to keep them isolated or give these women of color overbearing and inflexible hours to maintain outside the classroom – such as additional workloads to teach in the summer and having long office hours or other burdensome requirements that white academics don't have to face. These factors can lead to even more exclusion and isolation.

In spite of the many obstacles placed in the paths of women of color in academia, the work reveals that solutions are available. Mentoring is essential for survival in the institutional system as is an understanding of self that includes the "double consciousness" professed by Du Bois--being capable of working out of both worlds, white and black, while embracing both the African-American and female aspects of the experience; knowing what is going on around you; sharpening political skills; giving back to the community through service; forging strong connections with biological and extended family around and outside of them; encouraging all faculty members to participate in and encourage the teaching of controversial and emotionally charged topics within their own courses; being involved in programs that take care of their mental and physical health; and setting up a social network in order to create a structure of trust, communication, and support so that others do not have to live in isolation or desolation are viable examples. It is noted that when anyone lives under these kinds of conditions of overt racism, their psychological well-being affects their job performance, thus making it extremely difficult to achieve the ultimate of one's potential.

Most of the women who participated in this book continue to thrive with great dignity under these extremely daunting circumstances. It is only when you go through the pressures of life that one is able to resurrect with a stronger ability to articulate that struggle and express an insight into a life that gives it authenticity. The personal stories in this book reveal that all people of color have a personal story of struggle and

redemption to share with the world. In sharing their story, the pain and burden of oppression is made a bit lighter.

I believe that most African-Americans, male or female, as well as other persons of color in the United States can relate to *Presumed Incompetent* because the experiences of racism and inequality set forth in its pages are part of the fabric woven for all people of color in this country. Beginning to solve the problems that women of color encounter as educators in academic institutions is to first become aware of what is happening. *Presumed Incompetent* does just that. It opens the door for dialogue so that the burden can be lightened, thus leading hopefully to obstacles being removed. This, in turn, allows African-American and other women of color in universities all over America to be respected, promoted, and most importantly empowered to do their fundamental job: Educate.

This work is a valuable and critical addition to the growing literature on the roles that prejudice and discrimination continue to play in academia in the United States. It is vital reading for anyone in academia or planning to enter, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender.

Fr. Roy Lee
St. Leo's University
Atlanta, Georgia