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Fight the Tower: A Call to Action for Women of Color in Academia

Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde*

INTRODUCTION

Everything in my life, like leaving a war torn country as a refugee and entering a strange new land, organizing for social justice as a young adult, and graduating with a doctorate in Ethnic Studies, *should have* prepared me for the obstacles a woman of color would face in academia. It did not. Although I was trained as an academic, I was not trained in navigating the treacherous political terrain of the university system. Without guidance to fully understand a corrupt system, I could not have anticipated the series of events that transpired and the unimaginable toll it would take on me during tenure review, tenure denial, and the appeals process.

In the end, I found that the cost of winning my tenure fight was too high because I lost two lives in the process, my own and that of my unborn child. Under the stresses of a two-year tenure battle, days after turning in my successful tenure appeal, my body crashed and I miscarried. I had been five months pregnant when I lost my child. I was rushed to the hospital where I hemorrhaged nearly all my blood supply, requiring 14 units of transfusion and went into cardiac arrest. The team of doctors and nurses worked tirelessly to resuscitate me. Although protocol only called for 30 minutes of resuscitation, the lead doctor, an innovative, passionate, and brilliant South Asian woman, announced she would break protocol by continuing to

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perform CPR and asked who would join her. The whole team yelled in unison, “Yes.”

They aggressively tried to revive me, telling each other that I was a mother of very young children, then one and three. The team worked on resuscitating me for 30 minutes, then another hour before finally finding a faint pulse. I was clinically dead for a total of 90 minutes before that point – I had nearly no oxygen to my brain during that period. Still, I was not out of the woods. With most of my organs not working, I fell into a coma. I was kept alive only by machines. My prognosis was grim, with a chance of survival marginal at best. Family and friends traveled from everywhere to be by what they thought was my deathbed. Doctors predicted that even if I did survive, I would not be whole, and it would take at least a year of inpatient care for me to learn to partially talk and walk again. Despite the dire predictions, my husband Brian, who never left my side, remained vigilant and hopeful that I would recover.

In the days following my near death, I would come close to dying again and again. On day one my kidneys failed and I was put on dialysis. The doctor predicted I would be on dialysis for the rest of my life, but in the second miracle of my recovery, I regained the use of my kidneys on day two. I was still in grave condition however, as the embolism that had almost killed me also threatened my body with numerous blood clots. The doctors had little hope for my survival and recovery. They repeatedly made dire predictions and tried to prepare my partner for the possibility of me living the remainder of my life in a convalescent home. On day three, I underwent emergency surgery to decrease the likelihood of dying from blood clots. On day four, I remained unresponsive, but my chances of survival improved greatly, with doctors predicting I would return to 60 percent capacity at best.

Miraculously I survived. On day five, I woke up from the coma and my true road to recovery began. Although rehabilitation should have taken months or years, I was able to talk and walk after one week. Hospital

physicians and staff dubbed me the “hospital miracle,” a “modern medical wonder.” They regularly visited me with teary eyes while I was in recovery. They said they had never seen a case like mine and that I was “one in a million.” They confessed they and their families prayed for me. My own family and friends also looked at me like I was a ghost. Having seen me completely unconscious with tubes everywhere, they could not stop crying and hugging me, shocked that I was even remotely responsive. All this attention was overwhelming because I was not aware of their experiences in the “living world” as I was busy *dying*.

In fact, when I was in a coma, I knew I was dead. I knew every day that if I did not return to the living soon, it would be more difficult to even try. Although I knew I was already in the other world, I willed myself to keep fighting. My thoughts had nothing to do with tenure or anything related to work. My only thought was for my children. I imagined them as adults sitting together, viewing old photo images of themselves as toddlers beside their adoring mother. I could not allow myself to die and leave my children without a mother to protect and guide them through their lives. I had one wish and that was to hold my children again, to simply enjoy being in their presence. So, I fought against all odds to be back with the living, to be with them. Now, every moment I spend with my children is like a dream come true.

But, how could I, who considered myself a person of strength and conviction, be so close to premature death? Academia for women of color is toxic, laden with such a myriad of discriminatory practices and barriers for advancement that it is nothing short of a miracle if one overcomes it with one’s sanity, health, and general sense of being still intact. The years of micro- and macro-aggressive attacks leading up to the tenure and appeals process proved too much for my mind and body to bear. I am not alone. Other women of color in academia have similarly harrowing tales of

torment and torture by administrators, faculty, and students leading to serious ailments and even death.¹ Often the torture is in the form of bullying and mobbing that goes on for years causing harm to the body and mind, reducing what were once strong, willful scholars, into physically weakened ones – as was my case.²

¹ Since I first spoke publicly about my medical scare and near death experience, I have had numerous graduate students and faculty disclose to me how they suffered psychological, physical, and emotional distress due to the discrimination and harassment they faced in academia. Research has found that people of color are acutely prone to experience health issues due to racism in a variety of circumstances and in diverse institutions. However, because academia remains an institution that is seen as civil, little research has been conducted to link failing health to experiences of racism and sexism. For readings on stress-induced illnesses that women of color experience due to racism, sexism, and gender disparities see: Cynthia Colen, *Addressing Racial Disparities in Health using Life Course Perspectives*, 8 DU BOIS REV. 79–94 (2011); Kellee White, *The Sustaining Relevance of W.E.B. Du Bois to Health Disparities Research*, 8 DU BOIS REV. 285–293 (2011); Harrell et al, *Multiple Pathways Linking Racism to Health Outcomes*, 8 DU BOIS REV. 143–157 (2011); M. Pilar Matud, *Gender Differences in Stress and Coping Styles*, 37 PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, 1401-15 (2004); Maria L. Ontiveros, *Three Perspectives on Workplace Harassment of Women of Color*, 23 GOLDEN GATE U. L. REV. 817-828 (2010); Halaevalu F. Ofahengau Vakalahi and Sandra Hardin Starks, *Health, Well-Being and Women of Color Academics*, 1 INT’L J. HUMAN. & SOC. SCI. 185-190 (2011); Tobias et al, *The Role of Stress in Neurodegenerative Diseases and Mental Disorders*, 23 NEUROENDOCRINOLOGY LETTERS, 199-208 (2002); Gee, Gilbert & Chandra L. Ford, *Structural Racism and Health Inequities*, 8 DU BOIS REV. 115–132 (2011). *ee* Daniel G. Solorzano, *Critical Race Theory, Race and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experience of Chicana and Chicano Scholars*, 11 INT’L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. EDUC. 121-136 (1998); Tracy Patton, *Reflections of a Black Woman Professor: Racism and Sexism in Academia*, 15 HOW. J. COMM. 185-200 (2004).

² João Ricardo Faria et. al., defines workplace bullying as “the infliction of various forms of abuse (e.g., verbal, emotional, psychological) against a colleague or subordinate by one or more other members of a workplace. For more on this topic see João Ricardo Faria, Franklin G. Mixon Jr., and Sean P. Salter, *An Economic Model of Workplace Mobbing in Academe*, ECONOMICS OF EDUCATION REVIEW 31 (2012) (<http://academics.utep.edu/Portals/1890/wp1-2012%20Mobbing.pdf>). Mobbing, according to Darla J. Twale and Barabara M. De Luca has elements of bullying including aggressive acts to harm the “target,” but also more covert manipulations that involves allies and networks that constitute the “mob.” DARLA J. TWALE AND BARABARA M. DE LUCA, FACULTY INCIVILITY: THE RISE OF THE ACADEMIC BULLY CULTURE AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT 720–26 (2011).

My transformation from a confident scholar to a naive embattled one and then finally to a strategic fighter clearly was not an easy or short journey. I had to rethink my beliefs and accept some harsh truths about academia and my role in the institution. But once I acknowledged the reality of my situation, I moved quickly to take action. My initial sense of isolation then turned into a movement of solidarity with other women of color that was ready to battle for our rights.

We must fight because we are at a crucial crossroad. With massive budgetary cuts at universities nationwide and trends towards corporatization, underrepresented groups again find themselves increasingly targets of bullying, harassment, and dismissal. Sadly, the vast majority continues to endure the violent onslaught feeling isolated and alone, unable and sometimes unwilling to seek assistance and fight. Parallel to this dismal reality, however, is the growing movement of scholars speaking up against the injustices in the academe. Led in part by the women behind the seminal anthology, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, is where women of color from diverse fields of study share their deeply personal stories and provide empirical data that exposes systemic wrongdoings.³

Recognizing the relevancy of *Presumed Incompetent* to my own situation, I reached out to one of the book's editors. She graciously provided advice in frequent conversations about my tenure appeal during the weeks that led up to my hospitalization; so, it must have been worrisome for her when I seemingly disappeared. I called her as soon as I could pick up the phone and talk. I told her my tale through involuntary tears of pain and disbelief about my near death and the loss of my child. I will never forget her response. She said, "I feared this, I feared the worst

³ PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González & Angela P. Harris, eds., 2012).

and it happened.” Her tone was calm; she had heard it before too many times. We are quite literally dying in the academe, and the urgency to speak up and fight is now.⁴

Motivated by the singular thought that I needed to do my part to help other women of color in the academe avoid the suffering I endured, I participated in the University of California, Berkeley School of Law symposium hosted by the Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice on March 8, 2013, barely a month after my hospital release and while still very weak. The event showcased more than 40 invited speakers to continue the conversations that began in *Presumed Incompetent*. As part of closing plenary, I discussed “solutions” to assist women of color in the academe. I mentioned amongst other things, the need for a “concerted and smart revolution in the Global Age.” After the plenum, a woman left a folded-up note for me then disappeared. When I opened it, it read, “Let’s work on a network to stop the abuse in academia. Yes to revolution!” It also listed her name and email contact. This article is an extension of my presentation on that day with the spirit of that note.

This article is broken up into three parts. Part I discusses my personal journey through academia, exposing me to the many discriminatory practices within the tower, targeting issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, and motherhood. I naively struggled through invisible barriers looking more inward than outward, essentially blaming myself instead of recognizing the early signs of systemic wrongdoings. Part II discusses my two-year protracted tenure fight and my transformation from an embattled scholar to a strategic warrior. When faced against mounting attacks, I found ways to defend my work and personhood, changing not only my own future, but also that of those around me. Part III is a call to action. Here I

⁴ See Carmen G. González and Angela P. Harris’ piece, “Presumed Incompetent: Continuing the Conversation,” in the Introduction of this volume.

propose practical strategies for women of color to stand up against the grave injustices we face. I argue that if we arm ourselves with these strategies, we can build a unified solidarity movement and political action to fight the tower.

I. DISCRIMINATION IN THE TOWER

In many ways my struggles as a woman of color in academia mirror the hundreds and thousands that preceded me. In particular, the institutional and individual barriers that I encountered included prejudices against me on the basis of gender, ethnicity, culture, race, class, disability, and motherhood. My journey, however, also has its unique components, which was particularly painful because I am a Vietnamese American, mixed race woman that struggled within an Asian American Studies program, a space occupied exclusively by Asian Americans and therefore easily presumed as safe from harboring harmful biases.⁵ Unfortunately, because some people of color in the academe have adopted the mindset of the dominant culture, even within ethnic studies departments, women of color are not safe.⁶

⁵ A very well known and respected Professor Emeritus in my field, who went through a historic three-year battle for tenure at a Research 1 public university in the late 1980s, has since spoken to over a hundred distressed scholars of color that sought his advice. When I spoke to him about my case, he pointed out that I was the first person he had consulted that came from an Ethnic Studies program, making my situation very unique. I speculate the unique nature may be in part because people of color are rarely compelled to discuss intra-racial and inter-ethnic differences even though it is more prevalent than most want to acknowledge.

⁶ Certain members of my department aggressively worked against my tenure, breaking procedure to do so. Motivations for such actions are unclear, but for a discussion of co-opted minorities, see Daryl J. Maeda, *Down with Hayakawa!* "Assimilation vs. Third World Solidarity at San Francisco State College," in Daryl J. Maeda, *CHAINS OF BABYLON: THE RISE OF ASIAN AMERICA* 40-72 (2009). Also see Frantz Fanon's analysis of how colonialists are able to hand pick and train those from the local populations, called "native elites," to incorporate the colonial mindset including the suppression of their own people. FRANTZ FANON, *THE WRETCHED EARTH* (1965).

A. *Entering a Hostile Tower*

Our universities are in crisis; but, in truth, they have been in decline for some time. High-level university administrators are increasingly coming not from the faculty pool but from the private industry without a background in education.⁷ These individuals act more like executives running a corporation for profit instead of working on a system of shared governance with faculty directly involved in important decision-making processes for the future of the university as a whole. “Such corporatization transforms students into customers, teachers into workers, administrators into CEOs and campuses into market populations.”⁸ It also means long traditions in the academe, such as tenure, come under threat. In place of tenure track positions is a dispensable labor force made up of temporary workers known as adjunct professors and lecturers that are paid a fraction of what full

⁷ In BENJAMIN GINSBERG, *THE FALL OF THE FACULTY: THE RISE OF THE ALL-ADMINISTRATIVE UNIVERSITY AND WHY IT MATTERS* (2011), Ginsberg chronicles the expansion of what he calls “administrative blight” of the past 30 years starting from the 1980s. Working with a managerial rather than academic sensibility, administrators have served to marginalize the faculty in carrying out tasks related to personnel and curriculum that once belonged to faculty. See JAMES RIDGEWAY, *THE CLOSED CORPORATION: AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES IN CRISIS* (1968); Jill Blackmore, *Globalisation and the Restructuring of Higher Education for New Knowledge Economies: New Dangers or Old Habits Troubling Gender Equity Work in Universities?* 56 *HIGHER EDUCATION QUARTERLY* 419-41 (2002). See Pay P. Green et. al. *Administrative Bloat at American Universities: The Real Reason for High Costs in Higher Education* POLICY REPORT GOLDWATER INSTITUTE No. 239 (2010).

⁸ Jason Del Gandio discusses the close relationship between universities and private industry with a large number of college presidents sitting on corporate boards. Jason Del Gandio, *Neoliberalism and the Academic-Industrial Complex* TRUTHOUT (Aug. 12, 2010), (<http://www.truth-out.org/archive/item/91200:neoliberalism-and-the-academic-industrial-complex>). Noam Chomsky elaborates on how universities have adopted the neoliberal model for hiring adjunct professors is akin to how the controversial retail conglomerate, Walmart, creates an army of temporary workers that are made vulnerable due to very low pay and no ability to bargain. Noam Chomsky, *How America's Great University System Is Getting Destroyed*, CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY AND WORK PLACE, <http://www.alternet.org/corporate-accountability-and-workplace/chomsky-how-americas-great-university-system-getting?page=0%2C0> (Feb. 28, 2014).

faculty are paid, receive no benefits, and have no power in decisions made about departmental functions.⁹ Moreover, such faculty often have to travel to numerous universities for contractual work to eke out a living, leading some to label these workers as our modern day traveling salesperson or indentured servant.

The corporatization of universities is especially impactful to the college careers of PhDs of color. In the new two-tiered workforce of the academe, people of color are disproportionately overlooked for tenured-track positions, and if hired, are frequent targets for dismissal. As a result, academics of color are overly represented in the low-paying adjunct pool.¹⁰ The utilization of discriminatory practices to achieve corporate-like goals runs counter to intellectual missions and risks hurting our society.¹¹ But, the troubled economy and movement towards corporatization alone cannot explain the institutional injustices women of color face.

⁹ For a discussion of the neoliberal assault on the university through utilizing adjunct faculty to undermine faculty governance, see Tarak Barkawi, *The neoliberal assault on academia*, ALJAZEERA (Apr. 25, 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/20134238284530760.html>. See Eileen FitzGerald, *Western Connecticut State University blending adjuncts, faculty*, CTPOST (Sept. 15, 2013), <http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Western-Connecticut-State-University-blending-4817086.php>.

¹⁰ See Edith Wen-Chu Chen & Shirley Hune, *Asian American Pacific Islander Women from Ph.D. to Campus President: Gains and Leaks in the Pipeline*, in *WOMEN OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHANGING DIRECTIONS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES* (Gaetane Jean-marie & Brenda Lloyd-Jones eds., 2011).

¹¹ The University of California, where I received my undergraduate and graduate degrees, states in its Mission Statement: “The distinctive mission of the University is to serve society as a center of higher learning, providing long-term societal benefits through transmitting advanced knowledge, discovering new knowledge, and functioning as an active working repository of organized knowledge. That obligation, more specifically, includes undergraduate education, graduate and professional education, research, and other kinds of public service, which are shaped and bounded by the central pervasive mission of discovering and advancing knowledge. See *University of California Academic Plan, 1974-1978* <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/aboutuc/missionstatement.html>. (last visited Sept. 10, 2013).

We are not welcome in the academe. Using the cracked pipeline as a metaphor to describe the academic career trajectory of Asian American women scholars, Edith Wen-Chu Chen and Shirley Hune showed that even though Asian American women in 2007 earned 3.2 percent of the masters degrees and 3.1 percent of the doctoral degrees, they held only 1.8 percent of tenured positions at colleges and universities and only 1.3 percent of full professorships (Chen and Hune 2011).¹² In general, Asian American women trailed behind their Asian American male counterparts in academic appointments, in all tenure-track positions. They are overrepresented in lecturers and instructor positions. As discussed previously, these are traditionally lower paying positions occupied by a politically vulnerable segment of the academe. In Chen and Hune shows that the “revolving door” acutely applies to Asian American women where the academic pipeline is severely cracked. Because of this, many that naively enter the academe ultimately either leave their institution for another or leave academia

¹² In a 2014 study on biased treatment in higher education, it was revealed that discrimination based on gender and race can start during the undergraduate years when prospective graduate students seek potential mentors. In an audit study in academia of over 6,500 professors at top U.S. universities drawn from 89 disciplines and 259 institutions, an identical fictitious inquiry email was sent from made up students with the difference being gender and ethnic specific sounding names representing the Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, Indian, and Chinese groups. The study found that emails with the Caucasian male sounding name received the most and quickest responses whereas the emails from minorities and females had lower rates of responses. The Chinese female sounding name emails were ignored at the highest rates in all disciplines, with the exception of Fine arts. Network. Katherine L. Milkman, Modupe Akinola and Dolly Chugh. SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH. April 23, 2014. *What Happens Before? A Field Experiment Exploring How Pay and Representation Differentially Shape Bias on the Pathway into Organizations* (working paper). (http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2063742). This research essentially shows the crack in the academic pipeline for Asian American women starts very early and that they are exempted from *the model minority myth*, which wrongly ascribes academic superiority, success and access to Asian Americans. For additional readings on obstacles Asian and Asian American female scholars face in North American academic institutions, see “STRANGERS” OF THE ACADEMY: ASIAN WOMEN SCHOLARS IN HIGHER EDUCATION. Guofang Li and Gulbahar H. Beckett Eds. (2006).

altogether after years of experiencing discrimination and barriers set up against their advancements. Others are forced out through denial of tenure, or are pushed out through sustained harassment post-tenure.¹³

Historical inequalities, marred by legacies of racism, sexism, and classism, continue to shape and define the context of the university today, whether in economic boom or bust. It appears contradictory that universities, supposedly spaces of intellectual discoveries and critical investigations, in truth harbor the same societal misgivings that breathe life into discrimination, exclusion, and violence. What makes it more insidious is that those in the establishment have successfully co-opted support from the oppressed groups, so they now serve as henchmen to enforce discriminatory practices while perpetuating extremely hostile work environments.¹⁴

This unwelcoming and even harmful work environment has been described as “academic bully culture.” According to Darla J. Twale and Barbara M. De Luca, this culture entails the formation of corrupt, aggressive, and malicious faculty into alliances called “mobs.” The mob members engage in secret dealings with each other and utilize intimidation tactics against their “target.” Faculty “targets” are often in the dark about this mode of operation until it is too late. The incivility goes unchecked and, more often than not, is condoned by administrators (Twale and De Luca

¹³ For more examples of women of color being pushed out of their university in some form, see Elvia R. Arriola’s *No Hay Mal Que Por Bien No Venga*: *A Journey to Healing as a Latina Lesbian Law Professor*; Yolanda Flores Niemann’s *The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in the Academe*; and Serena Easton, *On Being Special*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

¹⁴ Benjamin Ginsberg chronicles in *The Fall of the Faculty* (2011) how top administrators curried favors with leading ethnic “activists” on campus to consolidate their own administrative power base. Often this involves favoring one racial-ethnic group over another in the manner of divide-and-conquer (97-130).

2008). Thus, the context was set for my experiences, which began the moment I set foot into the academe.

I entered the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1980s as an undergraduate with mixed emotions and a strong case of *imposter syndrome*.¹⁵ Though grateful to be accepted into a leading academic institution, I felt I did not belong there, did not earn my place there, and sooner or later, I would be “found out.” The ideas behind the struggle for equal rights, the recognition of historical discrimination, and the continued bias within institutions that prompted policy makers to introduce affirmative action, had already faded by the time I became a college student.¹⁶ In their place was a discourse that mirrored my insecurities, imbued with the assumption that people of color were inferior intellectually but allowed to roam the halls of the ivory tower *only* through forced government edicts.

In spite of or because of the existing stereotypes about people of color in universities, I found refuge and salvation in the Ethnic Studies Department. Inspired by my professors there, I observed how they applied their cutting edge theories to practice through direct action in their local and international communities in order to fight for social justice and equality. I aspired to be an activist-scholar like them, so I focused on both theory and activism in my undergraduate and graduate studies.

¹⁵ Imposter Syndrome is the acute belief one’s accomplishments came from having to work harder than others, having skewed other’s impressions, and being lucky rather than through one’s true ability and earned credit. I contend that much of this psychological condition experienced by women of color stems from having to endure long-term and ongoing forms of discrimination. See Clance et al., *The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention* PSYCHOTHERAPY: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE (1978); William C. McDowell, Nancy G. Boyd & Wm. Matthew Bowler, *Overreward and the Impostor Phenomenon* 19 JOURNAL OF MANAGERIAL ISSUES 95-110 (2007); See also Sabine M. Chrisman, W.A. Pieper, Pauline R. Clance, C.L. Holland & Cheryl Glickauf-Hughes, *Validation of the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale*. 65 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT 456-67 (1995).

¹⁶ For definitions of affirmative action and a very brief overview of the fight for and against affirmative action, see Faye J. Cosby, *Understanding Affirmative Action*, 15 BASIC AND APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 13-41 (1994).

B. The Confident Scholar

When I applied for my tenure-track position at a top-ranked Research 1 public university, I was already more accomplished than most in my rank. I had written chapters published in what are now considered classic anthologies on mixed race issues. I also published work in the leading journal in my field on the topic of Vietnamese Diaspora.¹⁷ Along with several internationally recognized fellowships and an array of social justice and community projects in my curriculum vitae, these accomplishments, I learned, earned me the right to successfully negotiate an off-scale salary and a higher rank than what was generally offered. On a fast track for success, I anticipated I would be done with my monograph within a few years and receive early tenure.¹⁸ In essence, I had positioned myself very well as I confidently entered my dream job as an Assistant Professor in the Asian American Studies Department at a research university in California, with students coming from diverse socioeconomic and racial-ethnic backgrounds.

The reality was much more dismal as I would quickly learn. So caught up in the fantasy of the perfect professorial lifestyle, I all but ignored or at least

¹⁷ See “*Making Vietnamese Music Transnational: Sounds of Home, Resistance and Change*, in *AMERASIA JOURNAL (VIETNAMESE AMERICAN ISSUE)* (Linda Vo & Russell Leong eds., 2003), *Reprinted in EAST MAIN: ASIAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE*. (Shilpa Dave, LeiLani Nishime & Oren eds., 2006); *Doing the Mixed Race Dance: A Multiracial Vietnamese American Class Typology*, in *THE SUM OF OUR PARTS: MIXED HERITAGE ASIAN AMERICANS* (Teresa Kay Williams & Cindy Nakashima eds., 2001).

¹⁷ *From Dust to Gold: The Vietnamese Amerasian Experience*, in *RACIALLY MIXED PEOPLE IN AMERICA* (Maria P.P. Root, PhD ed., 1992).

¹⁸ When I negotiated my entering rank anticipating I would come up for early tenure, the head of the department at the time, who would eventually be self-demoted to lecture rank due to lack of research and publication, had to convince me to keep to a standard timeline for promotion. Section 220 of the University of California’s Academic Personnel Manual defines the criteria of appointment to the rank of Associate Professor under three broad categories of teaching, service, and research. In my case, my record was targeted for being of “subpar” quality despite overwhelming evidence that pointed to a rigorous and superior quality of scholarship in my field.

attempted to downplay the early warning signs of my demise. For instance, within the first weeks of my career as an assistant professor, one of my colleagues encouraged me to “choose a tribe.”¹⁹ Though initially surprised by this unsolicited piece of advice, in retrospect, I have come to understand he meant well in warning me that academia was laden with politics, and the sooner I learned how to play the game by building political alliances, the better the outcome of tenure would be for me.²⁰ But, at the time I first heard his warnings, I felt above what I saw as “office politics.” I believed that if I just focused on my scholarship, my work would speak for itself and I would earn tenure without issue. In short, I did not heed my colleague’s recommendation and inadvertently allowed myself to be set up for failure.

C. Target of Bullying

To say I did not anticipate the horrors of a tenure battle would paint me extremely naive, yet, I must have been to some degree. I was trained by the premier doctorate ethnic studies program in the nation; hence, I knew very well the many forms of oppression within and outside the academic institution, both theoretically and on a very personal level.²¹ I was aware of

¹⁹ My colleague was referencing the popular television show, “Survivor,” where contestants often had to create alliances, essentially forming a tribe in order to have optimal protection from elimination. Subsequent conversations with this particular colleague post-tenure battle, he assured me that our initial conversation were for my survival in the department as he knew his marginal status and did not want the same fate for me.

²⁰ Another interpretation would be that this colleague was testing to me to see if I was the kind of faculty member that would partake in departmental politics that may require me to act against individuals while promoting other ones in order to curry favors down the line. I proved I was not then nor will ever be this kind of faculty member.

²¹ One of the first things I learned in my PhD program was that since ethnic studies rose from community grassroots movements led by young scholars and activists, ethnic studies would always be under threat. Graduate students understood as we entered the graduate program that if administrators threatened to dismantle ethnic studies, we would have to fight to maintain it or have to run to a disciplinary department for salvation. In 1999, as a graduate student, ethnic studies was in jeopardy when UC experienced massive budget cuts. It was the second incarnation of the Third World Liberation Front

battles ahead and was, in essence, already trained. The general belief though is that we were fighting the white supremacist patriarchal system *out there* - that no matter how messy inter-departmental fighting got, they would not easily jeopardize ethnic studies or even those within ethnic studies.²² So, during my graduate years, I successfully avoided problems by not attaching myself to any (ethnic) group and instead worked with others outside my department in order to safeguard my nascent academic career. In comparison, my tenure-track position with an Asian American studies department seemed ideal. There was only one group to deal with, Asian Americans, and I assumed that, even with odd personalities, my department members would be wholly supportive of each other.

Hence, I was blindsided when a self-identified feminist scholar within my own Asian American Studies Department was the first person to torment me. As bell hooks notes, “[u]nfortunately, we now see many academic women lay claim to feminism across age, race, [and] ethnicity who do not disengage from patriarchal thought or habits of being” (hooks and McKinnon 1996). This individual and I actually came from a similar academic background, and in many ways our work took on similar trajectories. I was very proud of her accomplishments and was in fact delighted to hear we would enter the department at the same time. These

(TwLF) that fought against all odds to keep the department alive. TwLF was created in 1968 by San Francisco State and UC Berkeley students. Their principles included relevant education and self-determination. They successfully protested for ethnic studies at SFSU in 1968 and at UC Berkeley in 1969 and 1999.

²² Here, I am not suggesting the retention of women of color scholars based solely on their gender and race but rather the understanding within communities of color that the vast majority of institutions in the US society have embedded in their structures invisible and visible obstacles against minority groups, keeping them from fair and just advancements. See Brenda Lloyd-Jones, *Implications of Race and Gender in Higher Education Administration: An African American Woman's Perspective*, 11 *ADVANCES IN DEVELOPING HUMAN RESOURCES* 606-18 (2009); Tracey Owens Patton, *Reflections of a Black Woman Professor: Racism and Sexism in Academia*, 15 *HOWARD JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATIONS* 185-200 (2004).

good feelings, however, were not mutual, and as soon as I was abroad for extended research, she moved to poison the department against me. Her outlandish and unfounded comments regarding my scholarship reached my ears as soon as I returned from overseas. Remarks included that my scholarship was discredited by international scholars, but when pressed to name these scholars, she remained silent. Some colleagues recognized her attacks were of a personal nature and let her know that they did not feel comfortable listening to her comments. Trusting this, I moved forward to conduct my work and tried as best I could to ignore her.

Ignoring her only agitated her further, and she escalated her campaign to demean me. She orchestrated a one-sided rivalry that convinced some in the department that the bully and I actually had some kind of feud that needed mediation. After an explainable missed meeting with her, instead of speaking with me personally about it, she vocalized loudly to staff that I was being a diva that intentionally tried to disrespect her. Here again my silence only served to fuel her accusations. I never once defended myself. I was afraid to. I felt bullied and did not know how to handle it. She had created a hostile work environment, but rarely attacked me directly. I only knew this colleague extremely disliked me when other faculty or staff privately disclosed this well-known fact to me. It got to the point where a colleague felt compelled to ask and comment, “What did you do to that woman? She hates you.”²³

What she cleverly managed to do was plant the seeds of doubt in my department, and over time, I recognized that I was increasingly isolated. I lost all confidence and even became silent at faculty meetings for fear of

²³ According to Namie and Namie, the top ten bullying tactics include: blame for “errors,” unreasonable job demands, criticism of ability, inconsistent compliance with rules, threatens job loss, insults and put-downs, discounted/denial of accomplishments, exclusion (“icing out”), yelling, screaming, and stealing credit. Of this list, I experienced at least eight. Namie, Gary and Ruth Namie. 2000. *THE BULLY AT WORK*. Sourcebook Inc. Naperville, Illinois.

being unfairly judged. More seriously though was, as I became aware of some of her tactics to weaken my resolve, I started to doubt my place in an institution that not only harbored bullies but also often rewarded them for their abusive behavior. Bullies get away with their unfounded criticisms of their targets because peers wrongly presume overt pompous behavior to demean others equals intellectual competency. I feared the bully's aggressive nature would eventually turn the few remaining departmental allies against me. Additionally, because of her close relationship with a powerful administrator, I sensed tenure would become more elusive than originally anticipated.

But, in a stroke of great luck, this individual left the department. It was as if a black cloud had lifted. I thought I was the only one with real gripes against her, but I came to find her presence had very mixed reviews. Those that benefitted from her professional assistance found her to be a great colleague whereas others saw her as a divisive figure that acted out of line and unprofessionally. For me, she was a bully, and when she left I felt alive like I had not the entire time she was there. Added to the good news was promise of new leadership. It really felt like my academic career was about to take an upswing turn again. Unfortunately, my optimism was short-lived. I had more battles to fight.

D. Ongoing Harassment and Mobbing

Things started off well with the new department head. We met right after he took his position, when he reviewed my records and almost immediately apologized on behalf of the department for "dropping the ball" on me. He saw how I was without mentorship and quickly set out to put me in good standing for my tenure review. He asked for my manuscript and announced he would send it to the scholar who is considered one of the foremost members of Asian American studies. Her reputation as a preeminent scholar was only surpassed by her reputation for being a ruthless colleague. I nearly leapt out of my seat for joy, barely able to contain my glee. Clearly the

department head did not expect me to be happy about having my work reviewed by a brilliant but merciless critic. He obviously did not know my scholarship or me as a person. If he did, he would have known that I am very confident about my research and was thrilled at the prospect of having such a well-known scholar review my work. The prominent academic gave my manuscript a glowing review. She mentioned it was “cutting edge” and that I would receive “numerous book contracts.” Because of that sound endorsement, for the next few years the department head worked closely with me to make sure I was on track. Little did I know he would abruptly turn on me as quickly as he stepped up to help me.

E. Disability

Initially I appreciated the close attention paid to my progress and adapted to the new department head’s structured style of management. This was drastically different from the hands-off style of the previous leadership who hardly saw fit to manage my progress. It was during that initial period of trust that I informed the department head of my recent Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis. Because of my Vietnamese, immigrant cultural background, I had previously been afraid to disclose any medical condition to the department head, seeing it as more of a personal rather than professional matter. In my culture, people do not talk about disabilities; they see them as flaws to be kept secret. Over time, however, I had to admit to myself that I had a condition that was hampering my ability to excel as a faculty member. I needed accommodations, so I pushed past my shame and asked for help.

When I informed the department head about the diagnosis, he warned me that if I asked the administration for any services, I risked being labeled for the disability and potentially discriminated against on campus and by any

future employer.²⁴ Despite the potential shame and stigmatization it could bring, I weighed my options and decided that I clearly needed assistance, so I formally requested it. Although it may not have been his intention, the department head reinforced the stigmatization of my disability by discouraging me from getting help and not helping me. He discouraged a formal notice of my condition, and had I taken his advice, I would not have been able to utilize a tenure clock extension and would have been unfairly handicapped in my progress towards tenure as a result.²⁵ For some with physically invisible disabilities, the fear of exposure or weighing the necessity of disclosure remains a continuing personal struggle.

In my situation at that time, I was unable to get adequate support from the campus disability services and had to connect with the local disability rights office off campus to learn about my legal rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. They helped me to inquire about services on campus that I qualified for. It was a discouraging process: I encountered numerous obstacles from the department advising me not to report my disability to the campus disability representative, claiming the department would not have money to help me so I should not even bother asking. I felt shamed into not burdening my department with my special needs, even

²⁴ The department head may have been concerned with the potential backlash that I might have faced due to perceived bias against those with disability, or he may also have been thinking of the costly management of my documented disability. There are also scholars who discuss the “Wholly Inefficient Accommodations” approach to disability accommodations where they recommend that a disability accommodation with a poor cost-benefits analysis should not be considered, even if there is a social mandate for it. This cost-benefits analysis approach partially explains the reasons as to why I felt unsupported when I requested certain accommodations for my disability. For further reading on the politics and economics of disability accommodations, see Michael Ashley Stein, *The Law and Economics of Disability Accommodations*, WILLIAM & MARY LAW SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIP REPOSITORY, available at http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/fac_pubs/709.

²⁵ Though I did not at the time receive any direct assistance for my ADHD, my tenure clock was extended. This was welcome reprieve considering the struggles I experienced when I first entered the department.

though I knew of colleagues that received accommodations for their disabilities. I had initially assumed their conditions must have been so much more serious than mine because I was not fully supported for my ADHD. I found out otherwise.²⁶

In the absence of an advocate, I had no choice but to be one for myself and become an expert on my disability. Eventually I was able to do things like answer detailed requests quantifying tasks and to detail the specifics of my condition in order to ask for accommodations. This type of meticulous documentation requiring a bevy of professional as well as personal documentation is tedious for most people, but especially difficult for an ADHD person to manage. It should not have been so difficult for me to get assistance and accommodations for my disability. As a Vietnamese American I was predisposed to feel shame about my disability. The obstacles I faced and the negative responses I received from the people who were supposed to help me only compounded my shame.

F. Parenthood

About a year after reporting my disability, I had my first child. I was allowed an extension on my tenure clock in accordance with the Work Life program.²⁷ However, when I announced I was expecting my second child, I was informed that because I had received a disability-related extension, I would not receive an extension for my second child. After my request, I felt the departmental support for me waned. It should be noted that the two Assistant Professors that came up for tenure before I did both utilized the

²⁶ The list of accommodations colleagues in my department received for a variety of physical and other needs are too numerous and sensitive to list here. I also want to refrain from making comparisons of disabilities and risk determining certain needs over others for accommodation. It is not about a zero-sum-game for disability accommodations, but, rather, I believe that there was bias and preferential treatment in my department in allotting these accommodations.

²⁷ Work Life programs are employer-sponsored and present in most academic institutions to assist employees balance their work and non-work demands.

stopping of the tenure clock when they had children. A male colleague in my department had been granted a two-year extension following the birth of his two children. Hence, although my situation was not unique, I believe I was uniquely targeted.

During the last quarter before maternity leave, I discovered there was a case being secretly built against me, targeting minor criticisms of my teaching, which was later admitted to by those involved. Despite having consistent positive student evaluations and a teaching award, focus turned to one aspect of the teaching evaluations, in this case “lack of organization,” in my tenure review. This line of attack not only appeared as a biased, concerted effort to target my teaching record for scrutiny, but also appeared as a disregard for a characteristic directly linked to my ADHD condition.²⁸ Furthermore, the department head pressed on a minor dispute I previously had with a disgruntled Teaching Assistant that was later resolved through an informal conversation. Even so, the department head vocalized a much bleaker impression: all Teaching Assistants were against me. But his impression proved to be unsubstantiated, as most Teaching Assistants returned to my employment the following year.

This quarter, not only was I in the third trimester of my pregnancy, but I was also dealing with a student who had a record of mental illness and violence against others. When I accurately observed this student having a manic episode during a lecture, I reported the incident, as well as earlier concerns I had about this individual to the department head. Campus Student Judicial Affairs and the police got involved, and seeing it as a

²⁸ For discussion of student biases in evaluating women of color faculty teachings, see 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: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 164-185 (Gabiella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

serious matter, they began calling me daily to give me updates on the situation. They removed the student from my class and informed me that he was a potential danger to himself and others, and did not even have permission to be on campus, much less take my course. Because this student was dangerous, I feared for my safety and that of my unborn child for the rest of the quarter. I worried at every lecture that the student would return to hurt my students or me. It was during this very stressful quarter that the department head told me not to inform my colleagues about the dangerous student while this very eventful quarter was used to “build a case against my teaching.” Unnamed graduate student Teaching Assistants were brought up as witnesses to troubles with my teaching, setting up a shrouded network or “mob” of opponents against my job performance.

Since 2003, my university has had a faculty Work Life program and a system-wide policy on Family Accommodations for Childbearing and Childrearing that allows for women to have reasonable time off when having children, essentially to assist them in balancing their work and family demands. However, biases against women who choose to have a family remains because the unspoken reality is that though some institutions may offer Work Life accommodations, such as delaying of the tenure clock when faculty have a child, women refrain from accepting this accommodation for fear that doing so may make them seem less competitive than their male counterparts. Consequently, women that have children and utilize the Work Life program are often viewed as not prioritizing their career or as getting special privileges because of their choice to be mothers.²⁹ This lack of support for scholars with family leaves

²⁹ Nicole Nguyen, *Twin careers, as professor and mom: Start a family or go for tenure? Work-life policies let you do both*, U.C. DAVIS NEWS AND INFORMATION (Apr. 16, 2010), http://dateline.ucdavis.edu/dl_detail.lasso?id=12593.

very few options for women of color who wish to have children.³⁰ We are forced to choose between not having children for fear that having a family will jeopardize our careers or having children and subjecting ourselves to prejudicial treatment.³¹

G. Intra-Racial/ Inter-Ethnic Tension

In addition to encountering bullying and unfair treatment based on my disability and motherhood, I also experienced prejudice as a result of inter-ethnic tensions and class biases. As the only Vietnamese American, mixed race woman in my department, I was perceived as one of the “late comers,” a refugee with little resources and networks to help and protect me against multigenerational East Asian Americans, let alone the white establishment. Because of a long-standing history of tension between various Asian

³⁰ For further reading on mothers in the academy, see MAMA PhD. Contributors of the anthology shared their experiences in the often times callous, unsupportive, inhumane, unaccommodating, and hostile academic institution, where the responsibilities and physical demands of motherhood compounded with pressures of excelling in academia are misunderstood, dismissed, or met with aggression by students, colleagues, and administrators. MAMA PhD: WOMEN WRITE ABOUT MOTHERHOOD AND ACADEMIC LIFE. (Elena Evans and Caroline Grant eds., 2008). Also, Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales forwarded a fascinating concept of how valuable skills developed during the mothering process can translate to effective community building, social activism, mentoring, pedagogy, and research. This type of innovative thinking by academic working mothers is but one example of the benefits of supporting mothers instead of shunning them. *Beyond the Tiger Mom: Counternarratives of Asian American Mothering*. (paper presented at the Annual Asian American Studies Conference. Seattle, Washington April 2013).

³¹ On the issue of motherhood, when I reached out to a colleague, another woman of color, about my tenure issues, she told me I bore the burden of my children for having chosen to start a family before receiving tenure, while other women would rather have tenure first even though by then it may limit their options to having children at all. It is disheartening when women in the academe feel they have to choose between their careers or starting a family, but not both. Either way, they are potentially left dissatisfied and may not support women who attempt to balance both.

groups, including mixed race, which I conjecture was internalized by some of my colleagues, I was viewed as inferior to East Asian Americans and this view was compounded by patriarchal attitudes. This view was confirmed when colleagues told me on several occasions that some in the department were “patriarchal” and “paternalistic” and that I should tread lightly around them, allowing them to “save face.” I was expected to accept this behavior because it was culturally explicable by their Confucian background. My non-East Asian cultural background was irrelevant in their eyes. I was made to feel very aware of my positionality as a mixed race, Vietnamese American subject within this department, an academic organization largely dominated by East Asian American leadership.³²

Far from being innocuous, the strife took on the form of mobbing where a group organizes and gangs up on an individual target. In my case, the “mob,” as I would later learn, included faculty in my department and was more or less created along ethnic lines. Private conversations within a selected group were held and speculation on a denial of tenure grew, spreading to even those outside of the mob. This cloaked endeavor to lobby against my tenure did not sit well with a few faculty members, and they in turn became my biggest advocates. But, when their support of me was made more apparent to the other faculty of the department, my advocates soon became the targets of mobbing themselves. One came under serious investigation and was even put on administrative leave abruptly; charges were subsequently dropped due to lack of evidence. Another ultimately left

³² I am aware that there are many factors that attribute to inter- and intra-ethnic bias. I have published research that explicitly exposed the tensions that are based on but not limited to: gender, class, age, and immigrant status and history. *See* KIEU-LINH CAROLINE VALVERDE, *TRANSNATIONALIZING VIET NAM: COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND POLITICS IN THE DIASPORA* (2012). Though not discussed in great detail in this paper, I recognize the diversity within individual ethnic groups and that obviously not all individuals harbor ethnic biases. Even my case is much more nuanced than what I was able to relay in this piece with its page limits.

our department for another university in part due to mistreatment during my tenure ordeal.

This type of nuanced intra-racial and inter-ethnic tension that leads to harassment is rarely discussed or even recognized within ethnic groups, so it is even more difficult to explain and prove to the white establishment in the larger university community. I simply had to factor this in my understanding of my treatment within my department, but I rarely spoke about it with other Asian American colleagues and certainly not with non-Asian Americans on campus. In fact, for the most part, outsiders assumed that my tenure battle was with the university administrators and that I had full support from my department. Inter-ethnic strife among people of color should be openly discussed, as well as intra-racial and even inter-ethnic bias because it certainly happens more often than some are willing to admit.

H. Class Bias

Intrinsically linked to intra-racial/inter-ethnic bias is the issue of class bias. Asian Americans (sub)consciously know that there exists a hierarchy of power based on ethnic make-up. For over a dozen years now, in my Introduction to Contemporary Asian American Studies course, one of the exercises I conduct is to have students tell me what this Asian American power hierarchy based on ethnic background would look like. Without fail, students have been easily able to list off groups perceived to have more resources and seen as most assimilated to the US mainstream to those that are judged with less resources, and therefore generally treated worst or ignored altogether by other Asian Ethnic groups or the white establishment. East Asians are always perceived as on top, and when broken down further, it is Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans in that descending order. South Asian and Filipinos come after, and Southeast Asians occupy the lowest rung. Indochinese, because of their relatively recent immigration history and sizable population are most prominent in the lowest category, with Vietnamese, Cambodian, and then Hmong/Mien occupy the lowest

socioeconomic positions. This general understanding is substantiated with reports on educational attainment, poverty rates, and per capita income. Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong groups consistently have the lowest numbers compared to the other Asian American groups (Tim 2011).³³

This common knowledge of ethnic based class hierarchy has yet to really attract sustained empirical research. Nevertheless, it is in place for Asian Americans and guides the way many Asian Americans (sub)consciously think and act towards each other. As scholars, we should know better than to accommodate these dangerous inherent biases. My contention is that some scholars nevertheless internalize these classist notions, and worst yet, use these notions as parameters to judge and subsequently oppress. I found this to be the case with my own battle for tenure when presumptions made by the administrators and faculty were that I could in no way create a sophisticated tenure and appeal campaign that would find support to highlight my accomplishments and demand my place in the academe.

Another observation is that scholars, especially new refugees and immigrants that actually do come from working class backgrounds, the misperception upon dismissing them is that they would quietly walk away from their jobs without grievance. After all, the standard notion is that they were lucky to get as far they did in an institution that was not really created for their entrance or advancement. Or if one comes from privilege, being denied tenure is considered of no major consequence. Possibly a tenure denial just means “you can get a job elsewhere.” However, another way to view this from the perspective of the denied is that they have nothing to

³³ Tim (only first name given), *Asians In America: The Under-Represented Asian Americans*, 8ASIANS (Oct. 31, 2011), <http://www.8asians.com/2011/10/31/asians-in-america-the-under-represented-south-asian-americans>. For more reading on Asian American ethnic group disparity, see *A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the Northeast, 2013*, ASIAN AMERICAN CENTER FOR ADVANCING JUSTICE, http://www.advancingjustice.org/sites/default/files/NEDemo_Final%28Singles%29lowres.pdf (last visited Jan. 18, 2014).

lose. They have invested everything into their careers, and are the sole breadwinners and source of pride for their family and extended families. Walking away is not an option or a logical conclusion for this group.³⁴

I was most likely a subject of class bias and discrimination on my campus. I come from a very mixed socioeconomic background. My early international exposure and childhood class background allowed me the privilege of aspiring for careers that most refugee/immigrants from a war torn, developing country like Viet Nam may not have. While having experienced living in working class, ethnically diverse communities, I recognized class bias as highly problematic, and when I entered the academy, I swore to create better spaces for diverse socioeconomic representation and committed myself to mentoring resource poor students. I believe it was not until certain administrators and faculty understood my more privileged socioeconomic history and international reach that I was treated slightly different and accorded more respect and an open ear. Class biases, like race biases, are prevalent, but since most of the discriminatory practices appear as microaggressions, they are more difficult to prove and be taken seriously.³⁵

³⁴ I should note that classism is exacerbated when scholars choose to research on ethnic communities. Universities, over the years, have successfully created a bias against “community” research, which is not seen as rigorous. Even faculty that produces community engaged scholarship that include provocative theoretic frameworks and have global reach, are nevertheless dismissed as not theoretical or broad enough, respectively. Additionally, accessible writing language to reach diverse audiences beyond academia is further dismissed as “journalistic” and not purely academic. These biases combined to relegate scholars of color to a sub-sector of the academy and make them more vulnerable to attacks against their scholarship.

³⁵ As an immigrant from Viet Nam, my very affluent grandparents raised me in what was formerly the capital of South Viet Nam, Sai Gon. When news of the Fall of Sai Gon was nearing in 1975, my mother, a Eurasian with French citizenship, was able to bring me to the United States where she already lived. For most of my childhood, I was shuffled off from one continent to another living as an expatriate. When we permanently resettled back in the US in my teens, we lived in extremely impoverished and ethnically segregated and isolated communities throughout the Bay Area, California.

Too often women scholars of color face discrimination that includes but is not limited to the intersections race, gender, class, ethnicity, disability, and motherhood. It is often the case that scholars of color intrinsically know bias exists but are unaware of the extent and even more shocked by the academic culture that breeds and sustains a hostile environment for women of color. It may be years of enduring discrimination and marginalization before individuals are faced with having to battle for their careers, livelihood, and dignity in the academe. Facing such a war took place for me after years of enduring many levels of personal and institutional attacks.

II. THE PROTRACTED TENURE FIGHT: MY TRANSFORMATION FROM AN EMBATTLED SCHOLAR TO A STRATEGIC ONE

I did not think obtaining tenure would be a simple or easy process. I knew there would be challenges, but I was confident that I produced good scholarship and met the criteria of my department and the university to earn tenure. When individuals threatened to sabotage my career through discriminatory and unjust practices, I stood my ground and transformed from an embattled scholar to a strategic one.

A. Premeditated Denial

Even before I came up for tenure review, those with administrative powers strongly advised me against moving forward with my tenure application because they said I would most likely be rejected. I was confused when I received this warning because it still did not occur to me that I may not get a fair tenure review. I chose to ignore the advice and turned in my tenure dossier. When I received a split vote in my department, it shocked me to the core, leaving me quite literally speechless on the matter. I felt utterly ashamed, humiliated by the outcome of the votes and

confused as to why I was unable to garner the full support of my department when others with similar and sub-standard records were promoted.³⁶

After the votes, I was advised that I should not appeal the decision. Instead, some suggested I work towards publications and told me that would be my best chance to receive a letter of recommendation for my next place of employment. Still disheartened by the situation and put off by these cavalier remarks about my career, I nevertheless let it be known that I would fight for my tenure at all levels.³⁷ At this point I was threatened that if I pursued a more aggressive position for my tenure application, influential administrators with direct line to decision makers would find ways to minimize my record, such as focus on minute details of my teaching evaluations instead of acknowledging my overall good record in this area. I did not know what to make of such bold assertions.³⁸

Feeling helpless in the matter and unable to get a fair tenure review, I approached a staff person in my academic unit that worked on processing faculty promotions. I relayed the series of events and asked for her recommendation. This person advised me to bypass my direct supervisors in order to gain a fair hearing. Feeling targeted by members within my department and to some degree, the administration, I also reached out to on-campus and off-campus advisors to learn about my rights. I found out that

³⁶ The main criterion for tenure promotion at my university in my field is a book published or in-press with a reputable publisher. By the time I received tenure, I already had a published book with multiple positive reviews, nationally and internationally. A colleague in my department that went up for tenure a year before I did, to this date, four years after receiving tenure, still does not have a published book. This speaks to the blatant bias treatment in my department.

³⁷ The idea of fighting for my career seemed natural to me. I had worked most of my life to be in the academe and was not about to walk away from it easily. I find it odd to this day that some felt their attempts to discourage me would in any way persuade me to abandon my career without a fight.

³⁸ Even though I am disclosing very private information regarding my tenure and appeal procedure, in order to protect myself, I am choosing to remain prudent in not providing various details.

in their haste to be rid of me, certain voting faculty violated important guidelines and a second departmental vote was called for in my case. I thought surely things would take a dramatic turn for the better, especially since my record had more updated information. But, the faculty votes were only slightly better than the first time. I realized people's minds were already made up before the vote, and my good record was not going to be a deciding factor in their supporting me.

B. Creating Support

I reached out to my colleagues hoping they could shed light on the situation. Those that supported my tenure included two newly hired tenured, female professors and a senior male professor who had been marginalized in the department for years. They offered emotional support and provided compelling evidence that my opponents had set me up to fail, including being approached for a straw vote and being told I would not get tenure, even before the official vote. One of my supporters had coincidentally survived a historic battle for tenure at her last institution before joining my department. At this prestigious Research I public university, she, along with two other underrepresented minorities, were denied tenure in her department the same year. Campus-wide, over half a dozen ethnic minorities were also denied tenure, spurring massive student support for these individuals. She told me that she had heard of many unfair tenure cases and that mine was among the worst she came across. She assured me my record was deserving of tenure and that there were so many glaring procedural irregularities in my review that I might be granted tenure on those issues alone.³⁹ It was clear at this point I could no longer trust certain

³⁹ One such procedural irregularity included the addition of a negative teaching evaluation report conducted by a faculty member at the request of the dean and head of the department – after the second vote for my tenure ended and without knowledge of the other voting faculty members.

individuals or the tenure process. I immediately reached out to other key people I knew to get administrative and legal advice. Some of my students learned that I experienced difficulties with my bid for tenure. All were very supportive of my case and extended their assistance.

After all my efforts for a fair review failed, I received notice of my tenure denial. In my university, it is customary that once news of my tenure denial reached the dean, she is to relay it to the department head and the department head then relays it to the candidate. I learned of my denial not from my department head, but through a colleague from my department. Every faculty member learned of my denial before I did and was even warned that I could potentially seek legal action and requested all communications take place by phone or in person instead of by e-mail. This essentially put my non-supporters on heightened alert, further alienating me. At this point, the steps taken by individuals to push me out of the academe no longer surprised me. I chose to stand my ground. I told myself I deserved to be at my university, and no one was going to convince me otherwise.

C. Standing My Ground

Aware of the procedural inconsistencies with my tenure case and some faculty member's attitudes towards me, at the first faculty meeting following my tenure denial, I announced to the faculty that I would appeal my tenure denial. In response, one faculty member verbally attacked me openly and claimed I was wrong to have bypassed certain power holders. This same individual threatened that my appeal case would come back to the department and foes in administration for another recommendation. When I corrected his claims by noting my appeal should not go back to the department, his tone indicated that despite all my effort to gain tenure, they would ultimately make the final decisions. The verbal attacks were obvious to read, but even the silence of the mob was telling. Unfortunately, more vocal advocates were absent from this meeting, furthering my feelings of isolation.

The harassment continued when I was told I need not be present at the bi-monthly faculty meetings as they might have made me feel “uncomfortable.” With my growing confidence, I refused to stay away, stating that I was still a full-time faculty member employed with the university and had all rights accorded with the position, including the right to attend faculty meetings and vote on departmental issues. The repeated claim was that faculty members would discuss sensitive matters regarding my tenure case and I should not be present. The faculty regularly used the excuse of “confidentiality” for, what Professor Andrea Smith would describe as, the protection “of those in power against the needs of those more vulnerable in the academy” (Smith 2008). I explained that the tenure decision was no longer in the hands of the department. Still, it did not stop some for making it clear I was no longer welcome at faculty meetings. It also did not stop me from attending every meeting with my head held up high. My actions were designed to send a message: I earned my seat at the table and was not planning to give it up. I was not going anywhere.

D. Growing Support

Tensions were already high within the department because it was clear I was not quietly leaving the university and was still demanding a fair review of my tenure dossier. However, things got more heated when students began asking staff and faculty in the Asian American Studies Department about my tenure case and openly showed support for me. By first demanding answers from my department, students were inadvertently smoking out faculty from their hiding places and making them accountable for their decisions. More overt divisions arose when certain faculty downplayed the student movement, while others applauded it.⁴⁰ At one meeting that

⁴⁰ One colleague was so threatened by the student movement, and the fact that some had singled her out as a non-supporter of my tenure, that she accosted me outside of our office building and verbally demanded I speak with her regarding the student movement

included Asian American studies' faculty and a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, cross disciplinary cluster of several dozen students in support of my tenure, individuals began to educate unsupportive faculty about the dangers of divide-and-conquer and eloquently spoke about my credentials and need for me to remain on campus. From this meeting, students continued with a support campaign that they dubbed saveVnow. Along with alumni students, they built a website (saveVnow.com), opened social media pages, started an online petition, met with faculty and administrators, garnered endorsements from scholars across the nation, and threatened to protest on campus.⁴¹

My case was getting public exposure, which was initially something I feared, but anticipating its value, I took a risk and allowed it to happen. In fact, when I chose to fight, my colleague, who had been through a successful and very public tenure appeal, let me know some of the benefits and pitfalls of having a public tenure fight. Though I was aware of the cons that included public scrutiny of my record and that I may be black-listed as a trouble-maker on campus and for employment at other institutions, I only saw the positive aspects. The most important of which was that I was able to connect with others fighting for tenure and was no longer alone. My sense of isolation evaporated when I received moral support from colleagues and community members nationally and internationally. Many even sent letters of support to the university that I believe made a difference in the appeals process. Ironically, I was being asked to speak about my tenure issue only slightly less than I was being asked to speak about my newly published book. So, I was on tenure speaking tours alongside my

for my tenure. In a tone that can only best be described as aggressive, she ordered me to "control" a student activist leader supporting my tenure. I calmly refused, informing her that I was focused on my tenure appeal and that the student movement was autonomous from me. She threatened me and warned me that my action would affect my appeal and I better act immediately. My workplace had become quite hostile at this point.

⁴¹ I was told students set up pages on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and a channel on Youtube to support my tenure. They also began a petition on change.org that reached well over a thousand signatures before declaring victory when I finally received tenure.

book speaking engagements. Of course the other irony was that while I was getting great press for my book including positive book reviews in leading journals in my field speaking to the impact of my work, I simultaneously had to convince colleagues in my department of my value as a scholar.

I grew increasingly methodical as my tenure fight moved along. I no longer naively trusted individuals or the process. I took care to investigate the root of systemic problems and the motives of people's actions. I studied the power structures on campus and was not afraid to meet with very high-ranking administrators to speak my mind. I strategized day and night on the best ways to position my case and worked tirelessly on my appeal. I was transforming into a very strategic fighter. The only thing I neglected was to take care of was my health. I barely slept and was in constant combat mode, always ready to deflect the next series of attacks.

E. One Death, Ten Lives

I turned in my appeal and was about to turn in my student grades for the quarter when I was hospitalized and fell into a coma. Still unconscious in the hospital, and unbeknownst to my university of my whereabouts, I was contacted first by my department office manager, then by my department head, then by high-ranking administrators regarding the late grades. The tone of the office manager was one of professionalism and concern, as was that of the administrators. It was unlike me to simply disappear, and the notes expressed genuine concern as well as extending assistance. The department head's note was void of tact, because even though he knew I was very ill, he still demanded I turn in student grades "NOW" and that my behavior was "unacceptable." He conducted communications as if I could act on his demands but intentionally chose not to. It conveniently did not occur to him that not responding to an email could mean I was in an emergency situation.

Subsequently, in the first faculty meeting after I was released from the hospital and on full medical leave, colleagues reported that the department

head singled out my actions regarding late grades as unprecedented and worthy of reprimand.⁴² This was in light of me turning in all my grades my first day out of the hospital while still barely able to walk and talk and with an unusable right arm that had swelled to double its size due to severe blood clots. In general, I had always endeavored to fulfill my professional duties according to the highest standard. I found it incomprehensible why some would assume otherwise and dismiss my health issues to mischaracterize my work ethic to my colleagues. I never received so much as a note inquiring about my health from the head of the department who knew of my situation, even after hearing I had almost died!

Due to my hospitalization, I was on 100 percent medical leave the first quarter out. When I returned to work quarter on 50 percent medical leave the following quarter, I contacted the department representative to work with Disability Management Services. The representative asked that I work with the disability manager who several years back did nothing but require a ridiculous amount of documentation regarding my ADHD and discouraged me from asking for resources and services from my department due to supposed lack of funds. The department representative insisted I work with this individual even after several pleas explaining my concerns. It took reaching out to various administrators before they overruled the department representative and offered the logical and simple solution to use another Disability Management Services caseworker. This is but one example of the steps I had to take to get very basic services while recovering from a severe medical situation.

I consider myself lucky to have literally survived my near death experience. A good friend and poet, Professor Ping Wang,⁴³ commented

⁴² Faculty in our department had been tardy with grades on numerous occasions in the past, and department heads simply asked them to turn in their grades as soon as they could.

⁴³ Professor of English, Macalester College.

that in Chinese folklore, if one dies and manages to return to life, one gains ten lives. I like that saying because it implies one comes back from the dead more powerful. I was not to have survived let alone recover at the speed I did. Many take much longer to heal from such trauma, but more often than not, the institution asks the employee to return to work. For those who are unable or unwilling to return to work for fear of re-injuring or causing more harm to themselves, they may very well lose their jobs. What this may mean is, even after the institution subjects an employee to unspeakable harm to achieve tenure, tenure is still not secure. If, for example, that employee is unable to fulfill his or her work duties because of work related health issues or is asked prematurely to return before having fully recovered, the institution ironically may use that unfortunate circumstance as an opportunity to dismiss the employee.⁴⁴

On the morning of Cesar Chavez Day, the vice provost called my home to personally inform me that due to my “very compelling appeal package,” I was promoted to associate professor. I am now a tenured professor at my institution. Subsequently, the chancellor sent me a personal note wishing me “continuing success.” This is not the usual protocol for announcement of tenure overturns, and I can only speculate my case received much notoriety. My survival was a miracle, and it was also a mini-miracle when I ultimately won my appeal. I felt as rare as a unicorn because so many fought valiantly before me, but so few of us are able to overturn a tenure denial. I remain grateful to all those who paved the way for my successful

⁴⁴ For further discussion of disability and (threat of) detenuing see Jennifer Lisa Vest, *What Doesn't Kill You: Existential Luck, Postracial Racism, and The Subtle and Not So Subtle Ways the Academy Keeps Women of Color Out*, 12 SEATTLE J. FOR SOC. JUST. 471-518 (2014); and Ramona Fernandez, *De-tenured: A Latina Endures More than Four Decades in the Educational Industrial Complex*, 12 SEATTLE J. FOR SOC. JUST. 421-70 (2014).

campaign, and it is in that spirit that we should fight forward. But, how do we fight the tower?

III. FIGHT THE TOWER: THE CALL TO ACTION

I decided that the story of my tenure battle—win, lose, or draw—was going to be told. I determined this when I chose to fight for my place in the academe. If I had just been fighting for myself, I do not know if I would have had the courage or wherewithal to continue, especially during the periods of heavy attacks against my scholarship and personhood. I chose to fight for my family, my students, my colleagues, and my communities. I recognized that the vast number who contemplated standing up against individuals and the system felt we were fighting in isolation and against all odds.⁴⁵ The truth is we are not alone; we can win. But, we still have yet to come together as a collective to demand our rights. What follows is an ever-evolving list of suggestions on how to start thinking about individual action and strategies towards positive, collective change.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ My personal motivating factor during the early months of my fight for tenure was my colleague in Gender Studies at my university who lost her bid for tenure the year before I did, Professor Luz Mena. She had a stellar dossier and full support of her department when she came up for tenure, but she was not given endorsement by the dean. Without this support, Professor Mena lost tenure and subsequently chose to not continue fighting in order to maintain her own sanity and health. I thought of her often during my battle because she represented for me all that is good in academia – a rigorous scholar, devoted professor, committed social activist, and beautiful dancer and talented dance instructor. Yet, she was pushed out of the Tower. So my fight was in part for her and all the women scholars like her.

⁴⁶ This portion is partly inspired by Yolanda Flores Niemann's chapter in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA, Lessons from the Experiences of Women of Color Working in Academia*. Here, Yolanda Flores Niemann, using the voices of the contributors of *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT*, identifies important lessons that, if understood and taken seriously by those in the academy, may be a source for positive change.

A. Self-care

This very important and often overlooked suggestion to take care of one's health should be on top of everyone's list. One needs to fortify in order to be ready for battle. This means having a network of people one trusts and can speak to on a regular basis about the issues one faces in the institution. If one needs to seek a therapist, psychiatrist, or both, please do so. Aside from being a great support, these professionals take meticulous notes of the visits and are essentially helping you document the abuse in the academe. In place of or in addition to the professionals, you should have individuals that you can speak openly about the issues you face in academia. Remember stress has been proven to affect physical health as well.

Do not forget to eat healthy, exercise, and sleep. Stories of women gaining weight and developing diabetes or losing weight and becoming ill are common during the tenure application period. Some develop severe medical issues that become chronic or linger for years. To stave off possible ailments, remember to work out or have some form of physical activity. Essentially, work on being as well-balanced as possible. No matter how tempting a project or seemingly pressing a request, learn to say "no" in order to safeguard your time and to avoid working long hours, seven days a week. Give yourself ample time to truly rest physically, mentally, and emotionally. Most importantly, get plenty of sleep.⁴⁷ I write this because I know firsthand the stresses of a tenure battle and how easy it is to forget self-care. Ignoring these warnings may result in severe health issues and even death. We cannot afford to lose any more women in the academe due to systemic abuse and self-neglect as a result.

⁴⁷ For further readings on the value of work-life balance caring for one's health, see Eric Anthony Grollman, *Acknowledging the "One-Body Problem"*, CONDITIONALLY ACCEPTED BLOG. (Dec. 23, 2013), <http://conditionallyaccepted.com/2013/12/23/one-body-problem/> and Philip Nel, *In Search of Lost Time*, INSIDE HIGHER ED. (Mar. 3, 2014) <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/03/03/essay-why-faculty-members-work-so-much#.UxTVDMaBbcU.facebook>.

B. Recognize You Are Not Alone

During my fight for tenure, I felt my situation was rare and that I belonged to a very small minority of scholars who chose to battle. I had been beaten down and silenced by over ten years of micro- and macro-aggressions, compounded with suffering through aggressive bullying and mobbing that culminated in a procedurally questionable tenure process before deciding to fight. At that point, I had fully internationalized ideas of inferiority. It took months of personal deprogramming for me to break out of my perceived isolation and learn that I was not alone but rather a part of a growing movement of women bravely speaking up about the injustice they faced in academia.

Leading the charge for awareness were the voices of women scholars contained in *Presumed Incompetent*. I learned of *Presumed Incompetent* during the final crucial weeks of my tenure appeal application. Unfortunately, *Presumed Incompetent* has just been released and it was between Christmas and New Years, so ordering the anthology would have taken time and my appeal was due in just days. I contacted one of the co-editors of *Presumed Incompetent* explaining my situation and how I felt the text would be a useful source to cite in my appeal. She suggested that I contact one of her co-editors, who also happened to be a new faculty at my university and lived near by me in the Bay Area. She immediately agreed to hand me a copy. So, on New Year's Eve, I got my *Presumed Incompetent* copy hot off the press with the editors' best wishes.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Before PRESUMED INCOMPETENT, writings on women of color struggling within academia were sparse and scattered. See Edith Wen-Chu Chen & Shirley Hune, "Asian American Pacific Islander Women from Ph.D. to Campus President: Gains and Leaks in the Pipeline," in WOMEN OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHANGING DIRECTIONS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES (Gaetane Jean-marie and Brenda Lloyd-Jones eds., 2011). "STRANGERS" OF THE ACADEMY: ASIAN WOMEN SCHOLARS IN HIGHER EDUCATION (Guofang Li & Gulbahar H. Beckett eds., 2006).

With the responsiveness of these two scholars, I already felt in good company. But, truly, it was when I devoured the pages of the *Presumed Incompetent*, that I understood the importance of this instant classic. Possibly the most impactful contribution of this 555-page volume was how after reading about the diverse experiences of these women in the academe, I was forever transformed, knowing my struggles in the academe were shared by so many. Each story validated my own experiences and allowed me to feel a sense of solidarity with its authors. Hence, I cannot underscore enough the importance of recognizing you are neither incompetent nor alone.

C. Tell Your Story

One of the most powerful tools of the oppressor is to silence the *other*; hence, our strongest weapon against the violent assaults in academia is our voice. As Audre Lorde discussed in the context of her own mortality, “I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.”⁴⁹ We must tell our stories. Reading the stories of the brave women in *Presumed Incompetent* and hearing the many yet unwritten stories of other scholars emboldened me to find my voice and gave me the courage to speak of my story more loudly and boldly. Though I knew the task at hand, it still took me awhile to build the courage to do so. In the meantime, I found strength and courage in the actions of poet and scholar, Ping Wang, who had the audacity to fight her university almost single handedly.

When threatened with a lawsuit after fighting for her rights at her institution, Ping Wang blasted her story all over the Internet and named the

⁴⁹ Audre Lorde, Paper delivered at Modern Language Association’s Lesbian and Literature Panel: The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action (Dec. 1977), in *SISTER OUTSIDER: ESSAYS AND SPEECHES*, 41 (2012).

culprits directly involved in her mistreatment. She collected stories of the systematic discriminatory practices and personal abuses against other marginalized scholars and publicized how they were routinely harassed and ultimately pushed out of her university. Ping and I connected just weeks after the loss of my child and my near-death experience. I had vowed to myself that I would talk about the issues, including the potential harm it inflicts on women of color; however, I was still not ready to write about it. Ping encouraged me regularly to write down my story. It is the teacher, humanist, and warrior in her to support. With each silence she said, “don’t worry, your story will come. In the meantime, I will lend you my voice, my words.” I thank Ping Wang for lending her voice during this period of recovery.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ In honor of what I endured during my tenure fight, Dr. Ping Wang even wrote a poem for me titled, “The Perfect Peacemaker.” It was so affirming and uplifting to have a world-class poet create words reflecting my struggles and triumphs in the academe. See Wang Ping’s “The Perfect Peacemaker” below:

The Perfect Peacemaker
for Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde and all the peacemakers

I know pain—whips in air, then flesh
I know scars—keloids mapping the skin
I know hunger—scrambling food for the old and young
I know cold—breaking ice with frost bitten hands
I know work--7/24 till I drop from exhaustion
I know silence—steely wall from eye to eye
I know slander—snake in tall grass
I know sneer—daggers into the liver and spleen
I know rumor—vermin from tongue to tongue
I know fear—worm holes in the brain
I know torture—top down, bottom up, inside out
I know Shock and Awe—its engulfing mushroom cloud
I know deaths—journeys to hell and back
I know rich—in the sea of greed and power
I know light—in the tunnel of despair
I know love— fuel from the earth core

I know phoenix...rising from the radioactive dust

It took me some time to find my own voice and to be willing to put it in print. In fact, while I was a major advocate of others telling their stories and working on an edited anthology about Asian American women scholars and academia, I myself was not entirely comfortable telling my personal story—with its horrific moments and triumphant ones too. It was not until I spoke to my good friend and colleague, scholar, poet and activist, Jennifer Lisa Vest, about her experiences involving campus police profiling and brutality that ultimately caused her to leave her position as an associate professor, that I realized I could not expect anyone to share their deeply painful moments without being willing to expose myself too.⁵¹ Thus, I pushed myself to write this piece. Jennifer Vest and I holed ourselves up for three weeks writing our papers. We had to work through so much pain and heartache in the process. If we did not have each other to help us soldier on, I doubt either of us could have finished our pieces in a timely manner – or possibly at all. Sometimes it takes that much to tell one’s story, but it is imperative to do so.

I implore the reader that benefits from reading the stories of struggle, pain, and personal and professional triumph of women of color scholars, to move into action and begin writing his or her own story. It can start small, like jotting down thoughts or even doodles on a scratch piece of paper, move then to a journal, and when you gain more confidence, write on your laptops. Then share your testimony on blogs or social media sites. You may even decide to publish your work in a journal or anthology. However you wish to get your story out, it is of utmost importance and urgency that you

Wang Ping, *The Perfect Peacemaker*, Monkey Lounge (Mar. 21, 2013, 6:14 PM), <http://loungeonkey.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-perfect-peacemaker-by-ping-wang.html>.

⁵¹ See Jennifer Lisa Vest, *What Doesn't Kill You: Existential Luck, Postracial Racism, and The Subtle and Not So Subtle Ways the Academy Keeps Women of Color Out*, 12 SEATTLE J. FOR SOC. JUST. 471-518 (2013).

do. If not for your own healing, do it for all of the others; do it to highlight the atrocities that still take place in academia against women of color.⁵²

D. Making Alliances

As an organizer and published scholar since my late teens, I have developed some finely tuned skills in networking. However, I was only focused on working for the cause of others. It never occurred to me that I needed to build a network of allies for myself to thrive in academia. When I was denied tenure, my immediate reaction was shock and disbelief. I thought I had no support system and could not possibly make it through alone. I was wrong. In fact, I already had my network in place or was only one degree of separation from making key connections. Most likely this is your situation as well.

1. Students

I am the only Vietnamese Professor in the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities at a university with 42 percent Asian Americans, with Vietnamese Americans representing the second largest population in this group. Subsequently, it was the students with allies from across ethnic coalitions that mobilized and fought for my tenure. I believe their “saveVnow” campaign factored greatly into me receiving my promotion. Students and alumni led a sophisticated online campaign to fight for my

⁵² The push to write our stories comes from a long tradition of critical feminist scholars that look to challenge dominant knowledge paradigms by injecting narratives of men, women and children from all corners of that world and walks of life that reflects objective understanding and universal experiences. The rich collection of *testimonios*, story-telling and narratives serves as important research and pedagogical material to forward lived realities that have historically been masked or relegated to the margins. See TRINH THI MINH HA, *WOMAN, NATIVE, OTHER: WRITING POSTCOLONIALITY AND FEMINISM* (2009); Sherene Razack, *Storytelling for Social Change 5 GENDER AND EDUCATION* 55-70; Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, *Narrative Practice and The Coherence of Personal Stories* 39 *THE SOCIOLOGICAL QUARTERLY* 163-87 (1998).

tenure. It included over 1,200 signatures in support of my tenure.⁵³ They wrote emails and made personal phone calls to scholars around the nation to advocate for the cause. Students, on the ground at my university, regularly wrote to administrators and met with them in order to make the explicit statement that they supported my tenure. At a high point in the campaign, organizers were able to gather half of the student senate to sit in a meeting with the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs in order to express their solid support of my case. Students made effective use of protest threats in order to demonstrate how determined they were to see this through. I would often receive flurries of frantic phone calls from university administrators and staff asking me what the students were planning to do and requesting that I “call off” their campaign—they failed to note that this was an organic movement and I did not “direct” it. I encouraged interested parties to directly negotiate with the students.

Students were absolutely vital to the overall success of the campaign. Throughout the darkest moments of my tenure campaign, students and alumni were the ones who kept reminding me of what was at stake in the struggle. We built a support group and kept each other fighting throughout the campaign. Students insisted that I should never give up the fight and I supported the students when they encountered obstacles in their organizing. Many of my colleagues attribute the successful overturn of my tenure decision to the student organizers who led the campaign. Whatever the true reason was, at the very minimum, the students changed the terms of the political environment at the university, and they supported me throughout the harshest attacks sent my way.

I received this kind of unwavering support because of my close connection with my students. My relationship with the students that I

⁵³ Student activists closed down the online petition on the popular social activism site, www.change.org, when I won tenure. Otherwise, the number may have continued to climb.

mentored has always been exceptional. Like so many women of color professors, I found myself inundated with students that sought safety in my courses and came to me personally seeking mentorship. Many came from resource poor backgrounds and were first generation college students. They did not have role models that would have helped them think about graduate and professional schools. When I realized that I may not get tenure, some of my first thoughts were, “I’ve let my students down. Who would be there to mentor them? Who would be there to serve as a role model, showing them that a person of color from modest means could aspire to be scholar and more? Who would create a path that not only they can follow but can count on for direct support as they advanced professionally?” As much as I thought about them, it turns out they thought about me—concerned with my future and career. Hence, in my moment of need, when I reached out to my students, past and present, they were more than able and willing to assist.⁵⁴

2. Scholars

My academic colleagues were no less critical in the success of the campaign. They included colleagues just down the hall from me to those living abroad. There were not many happy moments during my tenure battle, but connecting with a diverse cross section of scholars was definitely a collective highlight. Because of these interactions, many more scholars

⁵⁴ For discussions on the philosophy, ethics, and necessity of utilizing concepts of (other) mothering to mentor women of color in the academe, *see also* Candace Bernard, Wanda Thomas Bernard, Chioma Ekpo, Josephine Enang, Bertyln Joseph & Njok Wane, *She Who Learns Teaches: Othermothering in the Academy A Dialogue Among African Canadian and African Caribbean Students and Faculty* 2 JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH ON MOTHERING: MOTHERING IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA 66-84 (2000); Arlene Edwards, *Mothering the Mind Women of Colour Creating Supportive Communities to Increase the Academic Success Rates of Minority Students* 5 JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH ON MOTHERING: MOTHERING IN THE ACADEMY (2003), and Adrienne Katherine Wing’s *Lessons from a Portrait: Keep Calm and Carry On* in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 356-71 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

are now intimate with my scholarship and I theirs, creating wonderful scholarly and other collaborations.

My most ardent supporters made personal phone calls and wrote letters to decision-makers in my case. What made this particularly effective was that academic experts were weighing in on my case, making the argument that I would have received tenure at more prestigious institutions. One colleague went so far as to suggest that there was “foul play” involved in the process and asserted that my record was a “no-brainer” for tenure. Another colleague urgently warned administrators that a massive lawsuit was a high possibility and the easiest way to avoid this would be to grant me tenure. One can only imagine the kinds of pressure that administrators were feeling when top scholars in the field were weighing in on the decision.

Possibly because I was never all that welcome in the academe, I was often shy to reach out to other scholars. Even though I interacted with many and collaborated with a few, I still held onto some “imposter” beliefs that perhaps I was not actually a legitimate part of this exclusive club of intellectuals. My tenure battle forced me to reach out to scholars that I normally would not have, even ones I desperately wanted to because our intellectual projects could have benefited from closer interactions.

One of the most crucial of these scholars was a well-known and respected Professor Emeritus. He not only greatly influenced my own scholarship since an undergraduate, he also happened to have fought for tenure himself in an epic three-year battle. His campaign included support not only from major politicians, but also from dedicated student activists, scholars, and community leaders. He even had the legal representation of famed Civil Rights lawyer, Dale Minami.⁵⁵ This professor was instrumental in helping

⁵⁵ Dale Minami headed the legal team that overturned the wrongful conviction of Korematsu. *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214, 65 S. Ct. 193, 89 L. Ed. 194 (1944), was a Supreme Court case that affirmed the conviction of a Japanese American citizen who violated an exclusion order that barred all persons of Japanese ancestry from designated military areas during WWII.

me contextualize my situation and maneuver through the muddy waters of academic administrative bureaucracy. I cannot thank him enough for his generosity and assistance. But all these wonderful connections would not have been possible if I remained coy and had never reached out. Reach out!⁵⁶

3. Administrators

Administrators can aid or hinder a tenure battle. One reason I chose a career in academia versus, say, one in the private industry or even government, was that I wanted to avoid politics. I assumed that administrators were individuals that dealt with the mundane bureaucracy and the day-to-day operations of the university; through the work of administrators, I believed that I would be free to utilize my academic freedom in order to push the boundaries of my field of inquiry. I realized too late, however, that the system concentrated virtually all of the power of the administration into the hands of a select few, ultimately undermining the power of faculty governance. This situation became clear to me when the dean of my academic division specifically targeted me during my tenure review; in fact, I felt almost powerless to fight back and often found myself almost believing the dean's mischaracterizations of my scholarly record.

Despite my perception that her disproportionate power was sure to spell my downfall, I learned that I had allies in the administration as well. The Tower, after all, is made up of individuals and many of these individuals may want to assist you. These allies made the decision to defend me and to advocate for my cause to senior administrators at my institution. Supporters at the administrative level can provide valuable information about the

⁵⁶ For more discussion on the value of networking and making alliances, see Manya Whitaker, *Cultivating Allies as a Woman of Color in Academia*, CONDITIONALLY ACCEPTED BLOG. (Dec 5, 2013), <http://conditionallyaccepted.com/2013/12/05/cultivating-allies/>.

secretive and arcane bureaucratic processes in the administration, so do not overlook these potential allies at your institution.

Consider also meeting with administrators. This can sound alien to many of us that view these individuals as possibly too important and would not be receptive to any overture made from faculty, especial junior ones. Please get over this fear and trepidation to make that appointment to speak with high-positioned administrators. They theoretically are mandated to listen to faculty concerns. Even so, do learn about the reputation and politics of the administrators ahead of time and have a thoughtful plan of what to say and goals you want to meet at these meetings.

Also consider if you have, for instance, a good relationship with your dean, provost, chancellor or president, to gift them a copy of *Presumed Incompetent* and use it a springboard for discussion. Even if you have contentious relationships with administrators, more reason to bring the publication and others like it to their attention so they can be aware of the important current conversations around race, gender, and class in the academy. We can build alliances across multiple divides, and administrators genuinely concerned with creating a healthy university environment, inclusive of diverse populations, would serve well to be receptive.

4. Community

Because I value the work I do within my various communities, I managed to have very strong links to these groups that exist outside academia. They were not only instrumental in garnering support, but also helped contextualize my work for decision makers in my institution. You may be surprised how invested they are in your success and are more than willing and able to assist you; so please do not hesitate to reach out to them.

For me this included my many connections to government officials nationally and internationally. I assumed because of my publications on transnational links, it would be more than evident with campus colleagues of my international scholastic connections. Frankly, unless you tell

administrators, they will not bother to really scrutinize your dossier to find out, even if they are on a committee to do so. I had to send memos and speak to interested administrative parties about these connections before they understood and in turn supported my tenure.

In reality, we often work with these individuals and groups without ever thinking they can be our allies in battles within the Tower. They include friends who can directly assist or know others who can, such as lawyers, union organizers, activists, politicians, journalists, reporters, bloggers, and a myriad of other professionals. These groups have power and influence and can assist you.

E. Learn your Rights

Like most professors entering the academe, I did not fathom a drawn out battle for tenure. I assure you, this is more likely than not to happen, and it is best to know your rights now; for example, worker's rights and disability rights. You should also start by familiarizing yourself with the governing document of your university. Professors rarely bother to learn the codes that govern the institutions and essentially one's rights. This changed dramatically when I fought for tenure. In my public university system, the main document that governs the process and procedures of one's personnel file is the Academic Personnel Manual (APM). Almost overnight I had to study my Academic Personnel Manual like a legal document. For someone with ADHD, this sort of work is torturous. In general, most academicians are not trained like lawyers and should not have to be. So, if you find yourself struggling with reading these types of texts, get help. Find that friend that enjoys looking at governing documents or hire a law student that will have the skills to assist you.

In the course of my tenure battle, I quickly learned that the best way to maneuver the system is to speak their language through the APM. Without first understanding the APM, I was defenseless in my appeal to the administration. The individuals reviewing my file were not experts in my

field and could not possibly understand the intrinsic value of my scholarship; thus, it was up to me to challenge their claims through the criteria of merit described by the APM.

It was also the APM that revealed to me that my tenure file was hastily and carelessly handled by my department. Throughout the tenure review process, documents were questionably inserted into my personnel files and my full faculty rights were not disclosed to me. In an honest and fair system, it would be appropriate that the department head and senior administrators disclose the relevant policies and procedures about my file to me. Unfortunately, this was not what happened in my case, and I was forced to learn the APM in order to be my own advocate.

Also, always keep in mind you can and should have legal representation if you feel your rights have been violated. As an immigrant from Viet Nam, I was raised to believe that using the legal system was for other people. In Asian culture, we generally adhere to hierarchies that stress civility and working through issues without much drama or fanfare. The legal system represents just the opposite and was to be avoided. Whatever cultural or personal baggage you carry about the legal system, know that you will at times need representation, and it is highly advisable to get it. This could start with knowing your rights so if you are unionized, your union can file a grievance on your behalf. Often faculty and staff are allotted union representation as part of your union dues. Sometimes you may have to hire a lawyer in addition to union representation.

But, lawyers are costly and most professors will not be able to afford one. Consider negotiating with an attorney to work on your case on contingency, where they will be paid a percentage of the settlement after the case is won. At the very least you should pay for or get free consultation to learn what your options are. Please research for the best legal representation before committing. Good legal assistance usually comes highly recommended. They tend to have a very good record of wins and have a name that the

university respects and/or fears so it will take you seriously when you retain representation.⁵⁷

A serious scholar might consider it ludicrous and unnecessary to defend the merits of his or her obviously excellent scholarship in an academic institution. I worked as a serious scholar that kept my nose out of administrative and political affairs, and at the very least, expected a fair review of my work. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and I learned over time that I needed to protect my faculty rights or risk losing it at every turn.

F. Mobilize for change - Fight the Tower Movement

When you have stories after stories that depict the maltreatment of women of color in the academe, it is no longer an isolated issue. When we rarely hear of the successes of the women that fight and prevail, we know there are concerted efforts to silence those rare successes. When we have to piece together the stories of those that did not make it through the battles, we recognize that there is an epidemic. We must ask ourselves what more can we do?

This is a time to mobilize for change. We do this through bringing awareness to the issue. This can be done at symposiums, at conferences, through social media, in our classes, in our living rooms, or even over the phone. It happens every time we share our stories, information, and resources. We are raising awareness for ourselves and for others. It is important to highlight the abuses. What more can the system, and those that operate in its complicity and uncritical manner, do to you that they have not already done? It is time to act.

What *Presumed Incompetent* presents beyond reproach through its numerous compelling narratives and timely research is that there exists a clear pattern of abuse against women of color in the academe. We know the

⁵⁷ Consider getting a lawyer earlier rather than later. Often times the university has a statute of limitation so it is imperative you file your claim before the clock runs out.

academia is unwelcoming and hostile; however, collectively, we have been able to learn about the institution and essentially how to fight for our rights. Using *Presumed Incompetent* as a resource and point of departure, there are already those taking the mantle to demanding dramatic changes within the academe.

Change is best achieved *collectively*. With the existence of *Presumed Incompetent* and the community of women of color academics that the book has helped foster, we have been able to learn about the underpinnings of the academic enterprise and how to fight for our rights within it. It was from the belief that this struggle is essential, in order to create a spark towards a movement, for change that several women came together to craft a manifesto. The *Fight the Tower – Women of Color in Academia Manifesto* begins with the following:

As women of color in academia, we are often presumed incompetent, not because of our teaching, scholarship, or service, but because of the biased presumptions associated with our gender, sex, sexual orientation, color, race, national origin, ethnic group identification, citizenship status, accent, age, disability, religion, marital status, motherhood, and personhood.

We are perceived as easy targets for discrimination and dismissal based on these assumptions, and because our numbers are still kept disproportionately low in academic institutions, many wrongly surmise we are not capable of collective action. We stand today to say we are united in our struggles to fight off the institutional violent attacks against our personhood, work, and well-being, and vow to connect with others to assist and unite in raising our voices and demanding equal rights and justice.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See the full version of the *Fight the Tower - Women of Color in Academia Manifesto* in this volume. The manifesto was written by women of color academics and was the inspiration for the title of my article. The Manifesto offers a fierce message and is worth a deep reading. *About: Our Manifesto*, FIGHT THE TOWER, <http://fighttower.com/about.html> (last visited May, 21, 2014).

I was inspired by the Fight the Tower movement, and by my own efforts to reach out to women of color who are battling bias to demand and fight for fair and just treatment. *Presumed Incompetent* helped plant the seeds of activism – of a movement to hold academic institutions accountable for the continued discriminatory practices targeting women of color.

A network of concerned women of color scholars and our allies developed the Fight the Tower website, fighttower.com, to support women of color in their struggles in academia to share testimonials, offer practical resources, and serve as a clearinghouse of information. In solidarity, we support each other to survive, fight, and thrive in the academy. Fight the Tower is a call to action that I have taken up and ask that others do the same.

IV. CONCLUSION – FIGHT THE TOWER

It is time to stand our ground and hold the abusers accountable for their actions. Our voices grow every day, and our stories fill a sea of discontent. Institutions may have their own set of codes of governing it and supposed standards for promotion; however, we know that “meritocracy in academia is a myth that is promoted by the dominant group to perpetuate a status quo that protects their own inadequacies.”⁵⁹ No matter how productive we are, if we are targets for dismissal, individuals within the system will find a way to justify our removal. The reality is the universal suffering of women of color within the institutions that they serve. We now have so many allies in the legal system that we should propose investigations into patterns of discrimination and demand systemic change. It represents a crucial way for us to stand together for truth and justice in order to effectively help women of color in academia. We are talking about saving lives and preserving our personhood.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

When I began my journey, I thought I was ill-equipped to fight for tenure. This was an incorrect assessment. In fact, everything I experienced in my life up to that point aided me in the fight of my life for my life and my livelihood. I already had all the tools required to tackle a seemingly impossible task. In this way, I am confident that those out there facing similar obstacles also have it in them to meet the challenges that lay before them.

Very few of us could anticipate the institutional barriers set by the establishment to keep us out of academia. We should recognize that second guessing our actions or replaying scenarios in our heads believing we could have done something differently to avoid being targeted is counter productive. The system would have found other ways and used other means to oppress us. Academia should be the place for intellectual pursuit, not a battlefield; but, *war* is a highly appropriate metaphor for what we engage in when we fight for our rights.

My emotional and intellectual growth benefitted from the gradual understanding of my plight and the telling my story as it evolves. So the stories are meant to reach women at where they are in the fight and where we all still can move forward together. Sharing personal and potentially damaging and embarrassing details of my life is not pleasant, but for me, it was necessary. It is only when personal truth was revealed that I was able to make sense of it and reach out to others.

Through battles against injustice in our institutions, I am in solidarity with those that came before me, those still in the trenches, and the many more that will struggle in the future. We are the individuals that innately believe that if women of color in the academe want fair and just treatment, we must demand our rights and be willing to fight for it. This is our battle cry – Fight the Tower!