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## **De-tenured: A Latina Endures more than Four Decades in the Educational Industrial Complex<sup>1</sup>**

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Ramona Fernandez<sup>\*</sup>

“Our ancestors’ journals are one long cry of pain.” – Joanna Russ<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

It is possible that North American academia has made little to no progress in racial and gender equality in the very halls that should lead us to a better world. The stories in *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*<sup>3</sup> frighten anyone with the least sense of justice, but they frighten me because they reach into the inevitability of the lives of women of color in academia in ways we are taught to ignore. *Presumed Incompetent* has forced me to reevaluate my four decades of college teaching. Who wants to write stories like these? They are a collective record of humiliation. Worse yet, once the stories of

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<sup>1</sup> This title is a play on the conference at University of Michigan meant to protest the denial of tenure to Andrea Smith, a fellow History of Consciousness graduate. Held on March 15, 2008, “Campus Lockdown: Women of Color Negotiating the Academic Industrial Complex” was one of the first events which brought attention to the issues concerning women of color in academia.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Russ, *When It Changed*, in *AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS* 229, 241 (Harland Ellison, ed., 1972).

<sup>3</sup> See generally *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).

women of color in academia are told from this point of view, the “race card” debate begins. And once our personal stories are visible, others can rewrite them so as to create an alternate truth, a truth that rewrites doubt and accusation into the narrative. I could be truly incompetent. I could be a horrible teacher. I could be lazy, a malingerer, a gamester. Living through this story has been the most humiliating experience of my life, but writing this story onto these pages concretizes it, makes my life an artifact in a long story of injustice. Better to be an agent, not an artifact. Writing creates agency.

Unlike some in academia, I never aspired to be a star, and perhaps, that was my first mistake: women of color must be stars or victims; there seems to be no middle ground. Good is not good enough; stellar is too much because it is threatening, but better to be stellar. The department chair who recruited and hired me for my present position once asked me in frustration, “Don’t you *want* to be a star?” In retrospect, he had perceived my potential and was frustrated by my modesty and reticence. I replied that stars were always targets. It seemed far less stressful to be second. For those of us who have lived on the border all our lives, for those of us who were never meant to be admitted inside the august walls of academia, for those of us not six feet tall, pipe smoking, tweed jacket wearing, males of the white persuasion, our entrance tickets are coded: —”fine heavily.”<sup>4</sup> When I think of the racial abuses President Obama has had to endure under the cover of political opposition, why should any woman of color in academia expect to be viewed as anything but “suspect”? When I think of the humiliating spectacles of Harvard professor Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr. arrested on the front porch of his Cambridge home and then trapped into having a beer with the arresting officer, President Obama, and Vice President Biden on

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<sup>4</sup> Michael A. Messner, *The Privilege of Teaching About Privilege*, 54 *SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES* 3-14 (2011).

the White House lawn as a meaningless gesture of reconciliation, of the scolding that Cornel West had to endure in Larry Summer's office at Harvard years earlier,<sup>5</sup> I wonder what any of us, doubled over with pain in less storied halls and with less than impeccable credentials, can expect?

I have been ensconced in academia since I turned 17. Now approaching retirement, I have witnessed American education through more than four decades of study and teaching. Born into a working poor family of mixed ethnic background, my pale olive skin and phenotypically white Latina appearance created recurring identity confusion. My ambiguous physical appearance, coupled with a highly marked Latino name and a mother whose Eastern European ancestry was passed on to me through the intense training mothers provide to daughters, led to the deep confusion "mixed" children often report about their identity formation. My "racialized self" was not clearly coded to anyone around me, or myself, or during my post-World War II childhood. Identifying *when and why* I am a target is difficult under these circumstances. Long ago, I ceased to perceive most of what *Presumed Incompetent* calls microaggressions.<sup>6</sup> Over time, I accepted the microaggressions I could not ignore as reflective of my personal failings. I was wrong to do this. All of us come to believe some of the negativity directed at us. All of us transform some portion of the most irrational and

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<sup>5</sup> Amanda Terkel, *Larry Summers Clashed with African-American Scholars at Harvard*, HUFFINGTON POST, Aug. 6, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/06/larry-summers-harvard\\_n\\_3707808.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/06/larry-summers-harvard_n_3707808.html).

<sup>6</sup> See Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. Gonzalez, *Introduction*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 2* (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012) [hereinafter Intro]; see also Derald Wing Sue, Christian M. Capodilupo, et al., *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice*, 62 AM. PSYCHOL. 271 (2007); Martha Montero-Sieburth, *Beyond Affirmative Action: An Inquiry into the Experiences of Latinas in Academia*, 11 NEW ENG. J. OF PUB. POL'Y 65 (2012).

vicious attacks we experience into the conclusion that the fault is in ourselves.

Reading *Presumed Incompetent* was an exercise in sorting out what I had assumed were negative quirks of my own from aggressions aimed at my racialized and gendered self. It frightened me to realize that my chances for a smooth and happy career in academia had been virtually nil given my position as a leftist woman of color from an undereducated, working poor family whose dysfunction<sup>7</sup> was itself a major factor in my psychological and social development. I had used my intelligence as a bulwark against the damage my childhood caused. As a result, I found myself the instructor of record for college freshman writing courses when I was just 22 years old. Given that only one other member of my family had completed high school, I was stunned to find myself intellectually prepared but socially and emotionally vulnerable in ways my colleagues could not imagine.<sup>8</sup> It took at least a decade to sort out this initial confusion. From the very first classes I taught, I found that some students adored both my teaching and my personal style, while others could not abide me or the course structure and content.

As the decades flew by, my teaching style developed, I experienced the normal ups and downs of life, my intellect expanded, my psychology matured; however, no matter what I did, I still contended with students, faculty, and staff who assumed that I should not be standing where I am in fact standing: in front of a classroom, speaking to a large group, sitting in a faculty meeting, or even walking the halls of the institution.

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<sup>7</sup> The polite academic word that can be used to paper over all manner of horrors too distracting for an academic essay.

<sup>8</sup> Constance G. Anthony, *Port Hueneme of My Mind: The Geography of Working-Class Consciousness in One Academic Career*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 306 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

It never occurred to me that I was not talented enough for these halls, or that others would perceive me as incompetent because my early academic success was intrinsic to my otherwise fractured identity. If I bought into one myth, it had to be the idea that my talents would be recognized under a meritocracy. After my third grade teacher observed me undergoing a sudden intellectual spurt over a few short weeks, she saw to it that I was given a non-verbal IQ test. From that moment on, I was tracked into gifted programs when gifted programs were challenging, not just social clubs for bright kids. Growing up in the New York metropolitan area during the Sputnik era gave lots of baby boomers a rung up on the educational ladder.<sup>9</sup> The message conveyed to those of us lucky enough to be in decent schools was that we had to accept the call to contribute because our talent sorted us into what Kennedy era language described as “the best and the brightest.” These were the post war years of optimism and economic boom that were to lead to the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam War. The best and brightest would soon be a term of derision; optimism would soon turn into leftist rebellion.<sup>10</sup>

In 1968, I found myself attending the State University of New York’s (SUNY) brand new campus, the College at Old Westbury, SUNY’s answer to the University of California’s interdisciplinary and innovative Santa Cruz campus. While there, I helped plan an experimental college from the ground up and learned what it meant to be part of a group of scholars, activists, and politicians with cutting edge political and educational ideas. I worked for Old Westbury’s President, Harris Wofford, who had already insured his place in history by advising John Kennedy at critical points during the civil rights struggle and had been the Peace Corps special representative to

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<sup>9</sup> Serena Easton, *On Being Special*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 152 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

<sup>10</sup> DAVID HALBERSTAM, *THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST* (1972).

Africa and director of operations in Ethiopia. Because of Wofford's dedication to civil rights, Old Westbury admitted the highest percentage of students of color outside the historical black colleges of the South into its first cohort of students. In 1991, Wofford was appointed Senator of Pennsylvania when John Heinz died in a plane crash and won the subsequent special election against Dick Thornburg only to be narrowly defeated in 1994 by Rick Santorum.<sup>11</sup> Wofford's trajectory as a Democratic Party insider mirrored the country's rebellion and counterrevolutionary turns of the last forty years.<sup>12</sup> My foundation in radical educational experimentation and my interdisciplinary training at Old Westbury made my attraction to the History of Consciousness program at the University of California Santa Cruz inevitable, but it took me seventeen years to get from Old Westbury's east coast radical ferment to its far more famous counterpart on the west coast. Those seventeen years were filled with teaching at a university and community college, mostly as a full time tenured instructor who trailed the leftist fervor of the 60s into an increasingly hostile, increasingly corporatized educational establishment.

The obstacles I had to overcome not only included race, gender, and class, but also a series of social handicaps inflicted by my family, who, of course, assumed that females should remain at home under the protection of males, but also that mainstream American culture was dangerous. I was systematically denied the chance to mature into a normally functioning teenager and adult. In some ways, I was not raised in America at all, but in a strange hybrid reality, which trailed nineteenth-century sexist assumptions from both a Latino and an Eastern European culture into post World War II

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<sup>11</sup> HARRIS WOFFORD, *OF KENNEDYS AND KINGS: MAKING SENSE OF THE SIXTIES* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux eds., 1980).

<sup>12</sup> But by the twenty-first century, even UC Santa Cruz had ceased any pretensions of supporting innovative and interdisciplinary experimental education and replaced its credit/no credit grading system with traditional grades.

America. I was barely a teen when the Civil Rights movement appeared on my television, and the rebellion that was soon to follow in virtually every arena of culture remains the touchstone of my emotional and intellectual sensibility. To this day, the ferment I witnessed and participated in the late 60s seems the best hope the United States has had for fundamental change. It was easy for me to see the sense, logic, and morality of the radical projects of that era.

Because of the forced isolation of my childhood, I stepped into academia at seventeen with very little experience of the social norms of Middle America and without access to the behavior inculcated into white, middle class students and professionals. Unpacking the strange codes of higher education, a world unto itself, presented me with a problem on top of a problem.<sup>13</sup> My radical leftist consciousness presented another problem—everything I would instinctually think and say would question the fundamental assumptions of both academia and Western culture.

In the past four decades, scholarship has revealed a host of human behavior formerly accepted as “normal” and “essential” to human nature as cultural conditioning. The notion of identity formation as defined in the West is now recognized to be a cultural construction. My academic discipline questions the reality of everything, including notions of the self as a separate entity, and notions about how we perceive ourselves to be human in a postmodern juggernaut of culture. The core principles of my discipline are at odds with what Middle America defines as the de facto truth. This makes teaching young adults who accept norms as reality writ large problematic.

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<sup>13</sup> See Intro, *supra* note 6, at 2 (citing Stephanie A. Shields, *Waking Up to Privilege: Intersectionality and Opportunity*, in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 30-31 (Gabiella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012); Anthony, *supra* note 8, at 307.).

As someone who was virtually born an anti-capitalist, accepting the notion that capitalism and democracy are one and the same was impossible and gave me a strong bulwark against anti-socialist propaganda. The result is that I have never sorted out what part of the negative feedback I receive has to do with my personality and beliefs, and what part has to do with the category I inhabit once my culture has sorted me into rigorously policed stereotypes—woman, Latina, working class, radical, and now, aging and disabled. The fact that my ambiguous phenotype makes a lot of that sorting difficult even for sophisticated Americans only adds to the hostility I experienced and continue to experience. Americans do not react well to ambiguity.

So it is that I come to the end of my career in more confusion and stress than I endured at the beginning. The higher I ascended inside academia, the more ferocious the attacks I experienced. It has made me wonder if all my training was pointless, and if I would not have had a happier life had I downsized my personal expectations and accepted a working class life. At the very least, I would have had control of my time outside of a 40-hour workweek. However, I know my omnivorous appetite for information of all sorts would have been frustrated by a nine-to-five job. When I think of the stunningly beautiful and brilliant people I have met in academia, I cannot regret my choice. There were many key individuals who influenced my development even before I began my PhD work, but since then, I have been lucky to study with and alongside students and faculty such as Bettina Aptheker, Angela Davis, Donna Haraway, Hayden White, Maxine Hong Kingston, Chela Sandoval, Elena Tajima-Creef, Katie King, and Gloria Anzaldúa. All people I would never have met had I not decided to pursue a PhD, all people drawn into the sphere of History of Consciousness as professors or students, some as both. And all people involved in the issues surrounding *Presumed Incompetent*.

Because I began teaching college when I was just twenty-two, and because I was the sole Latina in virtually every professional situation I

found myself in for over fifteen years, I have had to deal with most of the strange and confusing aggressions *Presumed Incompetent* lists without the support of peers who could provide a critical perspective. Over time, my youthful, rebellious personality mellowed for the most part into a stoic silence; but, as a colleague once told me when I asked her why I received negative feedback from others in academia despite the fact that my behavior had mellowed into a stoic silence, “They see ‘it’ in your eyes.” The “it” must be both my ability to discern the nonsense embedded in academic ritual and the spark of rebellion and/or resistance to it shining out of my soul. The reality that Latinas are the lowest represented minority group, still only 4 percent of the professoriate,<sup>14</sup> pains me beyond measure. I cannot help but think of Gloria Anzaldua, my classmate at UCSC, who is recognized as one of a few path breaking Latina feminists of the 80s, and whose early death from diabetic complications was surely exacerbated by her radical lesbian position and the threat she represented to both the master narrative of Anglo-American culture *and* normative Latino culture. Despite widespread recognition for her contributions previous to enrolling, Gloria aborted her pursuit of a PhD in the English Department at UCSC after having been denied entry to the History of Consciousness program. I still believe Gloria would have blossomed in History of Consciousness in a way she clearly did not in the English Department. Gloria was highly regarded in the Santa Cruz community, but she still chafed under the restrictions of academic tutelage, and she could not carve out a comfortable niche even in one of the most radical environments of the early 90s. She would have

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<sup>14</sup> Anne-Marie Nuñez & Elizabeth Murakami-Ramalho *The Demographic Dividend: Why the Success of Latino Faculty and Students is Critical*, 98 *ACADEME* 1 (2012), available at [http://www.aaup.org/article/demographic-dividend#.UmLN\\_CSiTEM](http://www.aaup.org/article/demographic-dividend#.UmLN_CSiTEM).

caused good crises in History of Consciousness, the way we all should be encouraged to cause good crises at all our institutions.<sup>15</sup>

#### I. MICROAGGRESSION: WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, DEMOTE

Some colleges and universities seem to be attempting an end run around tenure by suspending tenured professors without pay. This brazen assault on tenure is being ignored by most professors who feel themselves secure. Faculty must realize they are workers, not professionals, in the corporatized university. The ivory tower never existed, but there has never been more need to reach out to the larger community, unionize, and fight for a panoply of rights, including resisting the commodification of higher education. Female faculty members of color must organize their own cohorts into sustainable organizations that will resist the victimization of their colleagues.

So where do I find myself at this late date? I am soon to retire from a very large, land- grant Midwestern University. Initial steps have been taken to remove my tenure and/or suspend me without pay, and I am struggling to motivate myself to continue to fight for a viable space in this academic environment. The global recession has made retirement for most of us a dangerous proposition. I am no different. My lifetime history of fighting oppression makes fighting my default mode, even if losing is inevitable. This is the one huge advantage I possess: very few can say they have endured the combination of challenges I have already survived. Universities need to be on notice that when they abuse faculty beyond any reasonable measure, they create antibodies inside the institution, antibodies that have no choice but to attack their host and have little to lose by doing so. Nevertheless, the vast majority of faculty at my institution remain passive

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<sup>15</sup> GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *BORDERLANDS: THE NEW MESTIZA* (2012); *See also* CHERRIE MORAGA & GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR* (Persephone Press, 1981).

and alienated, and our administration is able to delude itself into believing all is well.

## II. MICROAGGRESSION: PRESSURIZE TILL HEALTH FAILS

Presumed Incompetent has already established that women of color in academia who are exposed to extra pressures fall ill with a number of stress related diseases. Administrators need to recognize that not only are they destroying the health of these individuals, they are impacting the budget's bottom line by increasing medical coverage expenses. Under the guise of financial pressure, institutions have increased productivity requirements beyond biological tolerance for all staff. When women of color in academia have to endure not just the increased pressures on the faculty as a whole, but the special pressures applied to them as a group, they inevitably break down physically and psychologically. As elsewhere, short-term savings often lead to long-term losses. Administrators need to be taught that medical leave freezes productivity requirements. The assumption that someone can work from her sickbed fundamentally misunderstands the purposes of medical leave.

Speaking of the body and antibodies, given that I began life with less than robust health, the irrational attacks I have endured as a professional in higher education have further damaged my immune system. My health has been irreversibly damaged by these four decades of abuse.<sup>16</sup> The Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which I have lived with since my twenties, finally became unmanageable about a decade ago under the microaggressions I endured at my current institution. Also, an anomaly in my skeletal structure makes me susceptible to dangerous falls, and stress exacerbates this tendency. Inevitably, I break and even re-break bones. Finally, I have developed hypertension despite an inherited tendency for low blood

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<sup>16</sup> It is impossible to document all the cases of failing health amongst our cadre; however, I have been told that the theme emerging from the follow up collections to Presumed Incompetent is disability.

pressure, and have endured a major clinical depression directly as a result of three tenure reviews. This led to hospitalization after the second failed bid for tenure and the desperate decision to try electro shock therapy, which, in my case, did nothing except temporarily damage my otherwise excellent memory. A left ankle transplant and a right ankle surgery have caused dysfunction, walking is difficult and problematic, causing increased pain in many parts of my body. I now have multiple physical handicaps and can no longer function at the level I did before accepting my current appointment.<sup>17</sup>

My multiple physical weaknesses make putting up any kind of political resistance dangerous to my survival. I do so anyway. Some of us are just born that way.

### III. MICROAGGRESSION: DENY RECOGNITION UNTIL RESEARCH SEEMS MEANINGLESS

Diverting faculty energies into self-defense is sure to stall or eliminate their research agendas. This damages the institutional reputation far more than the fantasy that we are deliberate slackers or incompetents. Worse, self-defense, when logically carried to conclusion, results in discrimination suits.<sup>18</sup>

My research has slowed to a trickle; for example, I do not dare to schedule conferences when my health is fragile; after my second negative tenure review resulted in a clinical depression just as my book was gaining recognition, I had to turn down an invited presentation which would have led to publication; my teaching has necessarily suffered due to the fact that I have spent most of the last decade in survival and defensive mode.

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<sup>17</sup> Intro, *supra* note 6, at 11.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Ceasar, *Study Faults UCLA's Handling of Faculty's Racial Bias Complaints*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 18, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-ucla-discrimination-20131019,0,2297269.story>.

When I think of my accomplishments previous to this period of my life, I am angered that what I have suffered has irretrievably damaged my research agenda. Had I been allowed to develop my work, I would have contributed to the global discussion about race, gender, class, and disability in a meaningful way. I trained to be part of this vital discussion. By attacking those of us most likely to do this research, right wing forces are successfully slowing, if not reversing, the global struggle for social justice.

I arrived at my present institution trailing the following: a Ford Foundation Pre-doctoral Fellowship, one of the few in academia which supports scholars through at least three years of doctoral work; a Smithsonian Fellowship, which allowed me to write one full chapter of my book about the Smithsonian itself; and numerous other national and campus level awards, and an essentially finished book which was to go on to be one of two finalists for still another national award, the Frederick W. Ness Award for contributions to the understanding and improvement of liberal education from the Association of American Colleges and Universities. I consider my PhD from the History of Consciousness Program at UCSC during its golden age, an award which granted me entrance to the highest halls of academia, a world class imprint.<sup>19</sup>

History of Consciousness was a microcosm in which your very best scholarly efforts would lead to the exhortation from both the faculty and fellow students—make it better. Students and faculty at History of Consciousness have a collective vision of our project, which simply did not make space for anything that was not glittering with unmatched insight.

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<sup>19</sup> In the late 80s, the confluence of Hayden White, Donna Haraway, Angela Davis, James Clifford, Teresa de Laetis, and Barbara Epstein created a potent brew of internationally recognized scholarly activity in the context of a vibrant leftist community in History of Consciousness. I was not lucky enough to have been there when Frederick Jameson, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida passed through, but their influence was still simmering in the program. I was lucky enough to have overlapped the period when Stephen Heath and Victor Burgin passed through.

While the respect students are afforded in the program is empowering, it is also a heavy burden when our work is being evaluated against our world famous mentors. Students have to meet extraordinary expectations, and it is to everyone's credit to note that they do. The Faculty and students win more national awards than any other program on campus, perhaps more recognition than any other graduate program in the UC system. In this environment, excellence was the only thing that truly mattered. Trailing this level of expectation into an environment where mediocrity is rewarded and intellectualism is suspect set me up for failure. Neither my personality nor my training inclined me towards bean counting.

The hostile and anti-intellectual working environment I am enduring at my present institution has prevented me from fulfilling my potential and sharing my gifts with the larger world. This is my most serious accusation. I have important contributions to make that have been largely derailed by completely irrational workplace abuse. Time and again, I have had to put aside the work I was destined and trained for in order to defend myself or heal or just hold on.

#### IV. MICROAGGRESSION: PRESSURE THE HUMANITIES OUT OF EXISTENCE

Recommendation: The faculty as a whole must unionize, but women of color faculty need to organize and become a potent force in their own right. Faculty unions must enter into the debate about the commodification of education and the corporatization of the university. Faculty must stop their hand wringing and become public intellectuals who take this debate into the media. This is the real battleground, a ground we have ceded to the most reactionary forces in our civilization. Admittedly, they have been well funded by the one percent, but that is no excuse for capitulation. Faculty of color must insist that the university system be saved, but not just for white men and women. There is no reason why women of color in academia cannot unionize in their own right. This is ultimately not a struggle for fair recognition in the face of a system which is rational. The system is not rational. We must meet power with

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power. The only power wage earners have is the power of unity displayed via numbers. Let us stop deluding ourselves: academics are wage earners.

What are the salient aspects of this environment? My intellectual predisposition and training as a cultural studies scholar lead me to question and deconstruct virtually every assumption creating our normalized reality. However, even were I not so trained, teaching through the decades during which neo-liberalism turned American colleges and universities into for-profit centers has been a challenge for everyone involved.

The normative spaces, in which interdisciplinary scholars must work, structured as they are inside the artificial boundaries of traditional academic disciplines, do not allow for the sort of work we must undertake. US college students are justifiably cranky about their 1.2 trillion dollars of student debt which has now exceeded all credit card and automobile debt.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the pressure to earn a certification that will guarantee a certain standard of living is stronger than ever. A corporatized university demands conformity of every thought and action, hardly a setting for deep intellectual inquiry. In contrast, the field of cultural studies threatens our definitions of the nature of knowledge and what we perceive to be reality and implicitly opposes structures of control and commodification.

My interdisciplinary training in cultural studies is an anomaly in Western culture born of the radical experiments of the sixties. I have witnessed and participated in interdisciplinary programs for almost fifty years. In that half-century, they have been touted over and over again as the logical next step in improving our educational system. I have personally witnessed that when our economy is flush with dollars, interdisciplinary programs are

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<sup>20</sup> Cory Weinberg, *Federal Student-Loan Debt Crosses \$1-Trillion Threshold*, THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (July 17, 2013), <http://chronicle.com/article/Federal-Student-Loan-Debt/140427/>. See also Tamar Lewin, *College Loans Weigh Heavier on Graduates*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 11, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/12/education/12college.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/12/education/12college.html?_r=0).

encouraged and funded, but because disciplines remain the structural foundation of higher education budgets, they are starved during every slump. After almost fifty years of interdisciplinary work by faculty and students in virtually every corner of American academia, our institutional organization remains as hidebound as ever, and virtually no progress has been made regarding the economic stabilization of interdisciplinary programs for a nearly half a century. This reality is particularly important for scholars of color because our cutting edge research is *necessarily* interdisciplinary. The structure of knowledge as inherited from the Enlightenment is implicitly fractured and hostile to racial and academic integration: “What is needed is nothing short of an epistemological shift—a shift, that is, in the very assumptions of what constitutes knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> Miscegenation has its anagram in the halls of the academy—thou shalt not mix. Higher education is now being attacked for expanding interdisciplinary programs when times are good, only to cut them during financial crises. These programs have been mercilessly slashed since the 2008 economic crisis.<sup>22</sup>

I should have been more prepared for the resistance I would meet at a tier 1 research university, but ironically, my early academic success left me vulnerable as I never doubted my abilities and never presumed that the world of the mind, a world I loved almost more than anything else, would reject me. My naiveté stuns me after the fact. An academy that implicitly rejects female scholars would, of course, be *more* hostile to female scholars of color in ways I did not imagine.<sup>23</sup> Add to that baseline the reality that our country has steadily moved politically right for forty years and dragged its higher educational institutions along, and it is entirely predictable that

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<sup>21</sup> Montero-Sieburth, *supra* note 6, at 73

<sup>22</sup> Carl Straumsheim, *Interdisciplinary and Out of a Job*, INSIDE HIGHER ED, Mar. 8, 2013, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/03/08/liberal-arts-instructors-rally-around-interdisciplinary-studies-after-tenure-denials#ixzz2cGaZPnvv>.

<sup>23</sup> Easton, *supra* note 9, at 162.

interdisciplinary study would be treated as a frill, not the bedrock we need to build a twenty-first century educational system.

The list of ways in which I was doomed to fall ill and fail under this regressive system is too long to be digested. The interactions of race, class, gender, and disability represent just one juggernaut inside the complex picture that is American higher education. This picture includes the reorganization of my current department as well as the industrialization of higher education as a whole. For at least 30 years, this country's right wing forces have waged a largely successful war against equity and progress in virtually every sphere of American life. It is irrational to have assumed that academia would remain the sole bastion of forward movement towards social justice.

My intellect blossomed during my undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary training. The modes of analysis I regularly apply invert most assumptions about "truth." Thus, whether I am teaching about race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, radical politics, literary theory, or the questioning how meaning is constructed via language, every conclusion I present to my students flies in the face of what they accept as normative truth. Students who have skeptical inclinations like my own devour the material I present as if they have been intellectually malnourished. Indeed, they have been. Other students instinctively reject the same material, no matter how much scholarly evidence supports it or how brilliant the analysis. To have to hear what many consider wild theories about the politics of knowledge and the nature of reality is difficult for many Americans, even were they presented in a more normative package, the standard professorial body.<sup>24</sup> It has to be true that many of my colleagues are stranded on their

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<sup>24</sup> 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

own islands of oppression, which mimic my own, but the culture of high shame that is academia prevents deep discussions about anything that might jeopardize one's standing.

Some of today's students will argue with the professor about virtually everything, no matter how factual, so discussion of delicately threaded academic insights becomes virtually impossible. The notion of authority and expertise barely exists for a clear segment of the student body even when we are discussing less controversial topics. As it turns out, "the closing of the American mind"<sup>25</sup> applies to virtually every subject or fact which might be introduced in the classroom whether that subject be race, gender, class, sexuality, climate change, representation, or even what would seem non-controversial issues involving how signs create meaning. If any scholarly insight threatens the normative American reality machine, it is threatening and rejecting the professor's competence, is part and parcel of what is now deemed "critical thinking" in our highly politicized and corporatized academic system.<sup>26</sup>

Combine a natural oppositional consciousness<sup>27</sup> as a woman, a Latina, a leftist, a child of the working poor of the post-World War II era, an invisibly handicapped and aging body, a teaching history with roots in the community college system with an intellectually trained oppositional consciousness, and I find that it is impossible to sort out which "ism" is in play at any given moment when I encounter an irrational response. Even my

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173 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

<sup>25</sup> A play on the title of the anthology *MULTICULTURAL LITERACY: THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN MIND* (Rick Simonson ed., 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, *A Prostitute, a Servant, and a Customer-Service Representative: A Latina in Academia*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 41, 44 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

<sup>27</sup> See generally CHELA SANDOVAL, *METHODOLOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (2000).

height, inherited from my one grandparent with tall genes marks me as a different sort of Latina. What happens when someone like me walks onto the stage at a research institution with fantasies about its superiority—fantasies stimulated by its inferiority complex? If my history is to be taken seriously, very little that is positive.

#### V. MICROAGGRESSION: REMAIN PASSIVE IN THE FACE OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

We have to recognize that racial oppression has not diminished, just transmogrified. And as resistance to racial oppression provided the template for gender and class resistance, along with a host of other oppressions, in the 50s and 60s, we must insist on a serious and differently organized discussion about race. The notion that the younger generation will somehow solve our race problem is flawed at its root. I agree with Stuart Hall when he says, “The biological definition [of race], having been shown out the front door, tends to sidle around the veranda and crawl in the window.”<sup>28</sup> Sixties style workshops about race will not suffice in academia. Academics are allies with the power structure. This alliance has not been effectively challenged.

My present position was the result of being hired into an interdisciplinary department charged with delivering the standard required writing course to freshman. I rejected the job offer three times because of the low starting salary and the fact that I would have to leave California, which by that time, had been “home” for half my life. However, repeated calls to me as I attended an National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) summer seminar at the East/West Center in Honolulu, convinced me that my reluctance was rooted in timidity. The department chair insisted that the hiring committee had been unanimous in recommending me, that I was highly regarded by all and much desired as a colleague.

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<sup>28</sup> RACE, THE FLOATING SIGNIFIER (Media Education Foundation 1997).

My first semester on campus, I taught two sections of freshman-writing examining the ideology of race under the rubric of our theme, “The American Ethnic and Racial Experience.” More than half way through the semester, my department chair called me to his office to discuss a formal student complaint. A student letter listed a long series of my transgressions: I would miss classes to attend two conferences that semester; I had left the classroom to obtain help for malfunctioning computers and miscellaneous other irrelevancies. The mere fact that I had left the classroom had somehow astounded this student as if a few minutes of working at their computers without my guidance would have irreversibly damaged the learning environment. The student had concluded something was fundamentally wrong with me; i.e., I was incompetent.

I pointed out to my department chair that the subtext of this letter was “race” and that the student was complaining about non-issues in order to register displeasure with the course content. My chair agreed, but I was told that I should not try to determine who had written the letter and that this student would be allowed to remain anonymous. There was absolutely no discussion concerning the responsibility of the administration to support me against irrational attacks or how white privilege operates in the classroom. I should have taken the way this was handled as an indication of trouble to come.<sup>29</sup> *The assumption is that by ignoring privilege, we will avoid further problems down the road.* But what happens is that the privileged wins no

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<sup>29</sup> Delia D. Douglas, *Black/ Out: The White Face of Multiculturalism and the Violence of the Canadian Academic Imperial Project*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 56-57 (Gabiella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012); *See also* Angela Onwuachi-Willig, *Silence of the Lambs*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 149 (Gabiella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

matter what their status in the institution relative to the subaltern.<sup>30</sup> They win the small and large battles, and they are winning the war: “[F]aculty of color are often on the front lines of race, in the cross-hair focus of racial backlash from uneasy White students semester after semester without appropriate protection and assistance.”<sup>31</sup>

#### VI. MICROAGGRESSION: PRESSURE THE HUMANITIES OUT OF EXISTENCE

About one third of the way into my second semester on campus, our newly appointed dean called a special department meeting. She announced that the administration planned to reorganize us into an academically recognizable rhetoric and composition department. This proposed transformation was the result of the provost’s explicit desire for what she imagined was a more usual academic arrangement—freshman writing taught by “experts” in rhetoric and composition whose research would create a graduate program and whose students could then teach the freshman writing course.

Our program had been based in interdisciplinary American studies for decades, and individuals with PhDs taught all our classes. This proposal, really a declaration, was never presented as a cost-cutting measure. The department already made money for the university, but in hindsight, cost cutting had to be a major reason for the unusual move to change the department’s structure from above.<sup>32</sup> The corporatization of the university is at the heart of many of the problems we are encountering today. This is a

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<sup>30</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in *CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK? REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA* 21-78 (Rosalind C Morris ed., 2010).

<sup>31</sup> William E. Smith, *Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The Campus Racial Climate in a Post-Civil Rights Era*, in *A LONG WAY TO GO CONVERSATIONS: ABOUT RACE BY AFRICAN AMERICAN FACULTY AND GRADUATE STUDENTS* 180 (Darrell Cleveland ed., 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Lugo-Lugo, *supra* note 26, at 45-47.

moral question. The university must “privilege learning over money, students over corporation, and people over profit.”<sup>33</sup> Until we reverse the corporatization of the university, we will never achieve effective victories for social justice.

I raised my hand in that meeting and asked, “What does this mean for those of us who have just rearranged our lives to accept positions in this department?” My question was ignored, a sure sign of trouble for me. I believe the dean marked me as a troublemaker at that moment for having the courage to ask this uncomfortable question. After this meeting, my colleagues concluded that those of us who were on track for tenure should move forward for promotion as soon as humanly possible. I had received assurances in my appointment letter that I could apply for tenure after three years because I had almost thirty years of teaching experience at the community college and university level combined.

This department meeting occurred just two weeks after I had formally resigned from my community college position in California. My former institution had a longstanding policy that allowed faculty to take leave while teaching at other institutions. Had this meeting been held two weeks earlier, I would never have resigned my senior tenured position in California.<sup>34</sup>

#### VII. MICROAGGRESSION: REMAIN PASSIVE IN THE FACE OF PREJUDICED ATTACKS ON FACULTY

Never assume that your good will as an administrator protects any subaltern from unwarranted damage.

Devastated that I had fallen into an institutional trap, I had no choice but to press on. My course on the concept of race educated hundreds of students

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<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 49.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, to even ask me to accept a junior position is reflective of sexism as no man would have been recruited out of a senior position in the community college system into the four-year system. Only one advisor, a very savvy white man, out of hundreds I encountered as a doctoral student, was astute enough to tell assert this.

to the irrationality and political motivations surrounding the creation of race. Students initially react to the course theme with a flurry of resistance and confusion. Many students expect a course on race to introduce them to what I call “culti-multiculturalism,” a depoliticized space in which to celebrate difference without the least intellectual examination of the roots of or consequences of difference. The fact that my course described the *Invention of the White Race*<sup>35</sup> as a pure construction disturbs many students who are unable to accept its basic premise, which is scientific fact. Their realities are threatened and there is no teaching technique that can compensate for this psychological reaction.<sup>36</sup>

At one point, while teaching Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*,<sup>37</sup> one of my students could not suppress himself one minute longer. In the midst of class, he erupted, “This book is a lie.” Genuinely surprised and confused, I asked, “Why do you believe that?” From under his cowboy hat, he replied, “No white man would survive walking through the ghetto.” The twenty-first century classroom climate encourages this type of inane and insulting projectiles of irrationality. Often, as in this case, the projectiles are completely out of context and explicitly challenge the professor’s authority and competence.

When I told the class that Kozol had been famous for writing about education and race for more than thirty years and had taught in these communities all that time, not a single student confronted this explicitly racist claim or introduced evidence to refute it.

Another of my most memorable classroom moments occurred while I was still in California and teaching *Multicultural Literacy: Opening the*

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<sup>35</sup> THEODORE ALLEN, *THE INVENTION OF THE WHITE RACE* (2012).

<sup>36</sup> Lugo-Lugo, *supra* note 26 at, 44.

<sup>37</sup> JONATHAN KOZOL, *SAVAGE INEQUALITIES: CHILDREN IN AMERICA’S SCHOOLS* (2012).

*American Mind*.<sup>38</sup> A student in the back of the classroom exercised his white privilege by challenging me to “Go back to where you came from.” The content of *Opening the American Mind* disturbed him so greatly he had to lash out at my authority in the classroom and my status as an American born citizen. Most of the time, racism in the classroom is subtle, but examples like these demonstrate invisible racism is simmering just below the surface.

Racist comments and confessions can often be identified by their strange tendency to erupt into otherwise unremarkable moments. I was appointed faculty co-chair of the affirmative action committee at the same California institution in the 80s. The staff co-chair and I were sent to a conference meant to train us in the legal aspects of affirmative action and social issues surrounding racism and sexism. On the second day of a three-day conference, my co-chair and I entered an elevator alone. This moment of enforced isolation prompted her to confess that she had decided not to like me when she read my name on faculty roster. Obviously, the content of the seminars we had been attending had pressed on her conscience. She will never know how her confession helped me. Accepting her apology was easy, especially given her historical naiveté about her social conditioning. The fact is her confession concretized everything I knew about how racism worked and applied to me. Without this confession, it would be much harder to explain to others how my disembodied name carries tremendous negative signification. These incidents from the 80s are perversely cherished memories that surface when I try to sort out the muddle that is racial, gender, and class prejudice today.

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<sup>38</sup> RICK SIMONSON, *MULTICULTURAL LITERACY: THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN MIND* (1998).

### VIII. MICROAGGRESSION: INCREASE REQUIREMENTS WITHOUT NOTICE

The acceleration of American work has proceeded unabated for four decades.<sup>39</sup> At a time when our jobs should have been downsized to allow the young to enter the profession and the job market in general, we are moving in the opposite direction. Again, unionization is one of the few alternatives we have. Faculty of color must caucus within these organizations; and women of color, with the support of their male colleagues, must be enfranchised to caucus separately.

The department meeting described above signaled that life was not going to be pleasant at my present institution—even for senior, white, male faculty. Two years later, and six months earlier than anticipated, I applied for tenure alongside five other assistant professors in the department. Weeks after I had submitted my dossier, I received an email from my department chair informing me that the dean was requesting an outline for a second book *in 72 hours*. Unfortunately, I had not noticed the email for about 24 hours, and my department chair had not had the courage to actually call me about this new hurdle; therefore, I had about 48 hours left to produce a book proposal. This was my first indication that something was about to go very wrong.

Such is the vulnerability of those of us without tenure that I did not dare protest either the request or the ridiculous time restraint. Producing the outline was not all that difficult because I had a number of projects simmering, but the assumption behind the abusive request would eventually reveal itself. My book was in pre-publication; it was scheduled for an August release and I possessed proof pages and the actual cover.

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<sup>39</sup> See Dave Gilson, *Overworked America: 12 Charts That Will Make Your Blood Boil*, MOTHER JONES, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/06/speedup-americans-working-harder-charts> (last visited Mar. 21, 2014).

Nevertheless, the dean insisted it was technically unpublished because there would be an eight-week gap between the tenure decision and the physical reality of the book. Fair enough, had the circumstances been different. Much later, my department chair told me that the dean had wanted to review my research progress beginning with an article I had published before I had completed my doctorate and before I had arrived on campus. Clearly, the dean was searching for ways to disparage my record. Unfortunately, *pretense of secrecy* and confidentiality that is part of academic culture is used as cover for irrational and biased attacks. The veneer of gentlemanly confidentiality is part and parcel of what is wrong with higher education administration. In reality, nothing is secret; everyone eventually hears about the nastiness going on behind closed doors, but there is no way to address this practice given the structures available.<sup>40</sup> It would be far, far better to end this nineteenth-century pretense entirely and force all these evaluations into open forums where, at least, there would be the opportunity for rational debate. Fundamentally restructuring higher education policies for appointment, tenure, and promotion in order to achieve equity presents an almost overwhelming challenge to our city-on-a-hill ideology.<sup>41</sup>

#### IX. MICROAGGRESSION: PROJECT THE HOSTILITY YOU POSSESS ONTO THE SUBALTERN

Like the policeman who was angered by Professor “Skip” Gates’s demeanor when he was confronted as if he were a criminal inside

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<sup>40</sup> Margalynne J. Armstrong and Stephanie M. Wildman, *Working Across Racial Lines in a Not-So-Post-Racial World*, in in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 224-36 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

<sup>41</sup> See SHIELDS, *supra* note 13, at 30 (“Intersection[ality] create[s] both oppression and opportunity.”).

his own home in Cambridge,<sup>42</sup> we should expect colleagues and superiors to project their own racist, sexist, and elite anger onto us, no matter what our demeanor. Direct resistance will only increase that anger, but we cannot afford to remain passive in the face of aggression.

Almost a week before I was informed that my tenure bid had failed, I attended an informal meeting with the dean. The university had been told to increase the quality of communication between the administration and faculty because studies had shown the climate was far from ideal. The dean launched into praising a white, male colleague from my department who had been hired at the same time as myself and was also applying for tenure. Her soliloquy praised his class-related website and urged all of us to look at it. At the time, I had a series of webpages devoted to my teaching materials. Because our department did not possess a late-twentieth-century copy machine until 2008 (we owned a mid-century mimeograph), I had been forced to transform my extensive handouts into electronic form. They may not have looked gorgeous because I had created them with no knowledge of HTML, but they were chock-full of useful information. Given the historical moment and the fact that the vast majority of my colleagues did not know how to post a single webpage, I was quite proud that I had posted to my class website without any technical help whatsoever. Had I been a different person, less modest and more aggressive, I might have asked the dean if she had seen my webpages and delivered my own soliloquy. Instead, I pondered the significance of the dean's remarks for myself and knew they did not bode well.

When my chair called me into his office the next week to inform me that my tenure bid had been rejected, he mentioned that the dean had told him

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<sup>42</sup> Liz Robbins, *Officer Defends Arrest of Harvard Professor*, N.Y. TIMES (July 23, 2009), [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/us/24cambridge.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/us/24cambridge.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (“Professor Gates said...that it was Sergeant Crowley who became angry.”).

about my attendance at that informal meeting. She had assumed my presence at her meeting had been a form of passive aggressive behavior, that I already knew that my tenure bid had rejected, that I had attended just to make her uncomfortable. Talking more to himself than to me, he told me he knew I had no such information at the time of the dean's conclave. The level of judgment applied to women of color in academia is such that we are suspect at all times.

To this day, I have not the least awareness of a single concrete reason for the dean's prejudice aside from my comment when she first informed the faculty that our department was to be reorganized. I had not been the least bit hostile in the informal meeting, which was meant to increase communication, not stifle it. In fact, I had done what I could to offer support concerning her academically wayward son, suggesting that he could probably be helped to succeed. In retrospect, she probably thought my comments were one imaginary thorn in her side supporting another.

#### X. MICROAGGRESSION: BLIND YOURSELF TO THE COMPLEXITIES OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS

We have to renew calls for the education of our colleagues regarding all these issues.

My chair admitted that with five assistant professors applying for tenure in one year, he had not paid close attention to my case. His assumption that all would be well for the only woman of color in the group illustrates how the academy's illusions concerning rational and confidential procedures feed into the blithely held notion that all will be well for us if we are truly worthy. My chair had told me that my tenure review committee chair had not followed proper procedure during my teaching review. As a result, there was some material in it produced by an administrator who, unbeknownst to me, had a negative opinion of me, material that would not have been included had proper procedure been followed. My chair told me that my female colleagues and friends in the department were not, in fact, friends

and that the chair of my committee, when confronted with the fact that she had not followed proper procedure, had told him that she simply had not had the time.

My heart sunk in my chest. This professor, my best friend at the university and in the community, had convinced me to accept the position after I had rejected it three times. Both she and the department chair told me the hiring committee had been unanimous in its recommendation to bring me aboard. She also told me there was a problem between the men and women in the department and that my considerable feminist credentials were one reason the female faculty were anxious for me to join them. Ironically, or perhaps, predictably, the minute I defended myself in a faculty meeting as a male colleague exercised dismissal of my point of view, I not only received no support from my white, female colleagues, I had to endure a reprimand from them.

I pointed out what this senior, female colleague had said to me before I accepted the position and reminded them that their colleague, sitting at the table with us, had recruited me by insisting that the female faculty members wanted someone with my strong feminist credentials who could bolster all the women in the department. During this recruitment, she went on to complain about the isolation of the male heavy hitters who even had a males-only lunch club. This full professor admitted she had said exactly this to me. The conversation ended there. It was clear the white, female professors involved wanted to claim discrimination without addressing discrimination, which in this case had created a 1950s type of workplace segregation that was persisting into the twenty-first century. Life, for the white, female professors was tolerable, and it was far too risky to address these climate issues, even ignoring these problems could lead to serious issues for those who did not have the protection of race and class privilege.

## XI. MICROAGGRESSION: ABANDON ALLIES AT KEY MOMENTS

White, female faculty members need to learn that they are part of the problem. Female faculty members of color need to fight our naiveté without ourselves becoming reactionary.

It is under this multiply-negated category that I again tried for tenure the following year. Immediately after the first bid, my friend—the chair of my first tenure review committee and the same professor who had recruited me—called me and urged me to file a grievance against her on the basis of the procedural mistake mentioned above. Her tone throughout that short phone call was breezy. When I told her that the chair had told me my chance for tenure the next year was 98 percent, and that even thinking of filing a grievance against her felt horrible, she considered her duty done. She had called me when I was distracted and kept the conversation short; she had done nothing to signal to me the seriousness of the situation; she had not asked to talk to me face-to-face in the way something like this should have been handled.

Even at this late date, I remained seriously naïve as to the dynamics of my situation. Had she protected me at any point, had she really clued me in, I probably would have filed a grievance. For her, tenure and a full professorship had come easily. She had not written a book and had stopped publishing, yet had attained full-professor status based on her charm and service, something which I have since discovered all too common at this university. I could not have been given a more naïve and pampered mentor at the very moment the university system was moving towards neo-liberal corporatism and escalating requirements for tenure. Although she and I were the same age, she had ascended inside a system whose climate was radically changing as we spoke.

Given my lifetime of academic and professional success, it still seemed impossible that I might not be granted tenure after having produced the *sine qua non* of academic requirements: a book published by a major university press. I knew my work was excellent. It is important to realize that many of

the scholars around me who had earned tenure and gone on to be promoted to full-professor status and were part of my review process had not produced a book even at the full-professor stage of their careers.

Still in denial as to the danger I was facing and after reassurances that my second tenure bid would be successful, I held my breath and waited to re-file for tenure the next fall. As the year progressed, I grew more and more anxious. At the end of the spring semester, I was informed that once again, my tenure case had made its way positively through department and university committees, and once again, the dean had rejected it.

## XII. MICROAGGRESSION: PRESSURIZE TILL HEALTH FAILS

Faculty members who take medical leave are in jeopardy. Administrators need to create systems to help us survive and recognize that academic work cannot be pursued when the body is in crisis.

At this point, I broke. My finances were in a dire state as I had not anticipated managing my mortgage long-term without a tenure-related raise. When my book raise was applied to my salary, it was about half of what I had been led to expect. However, the worst part of the scenario was the reality that I had never heard of someone earning tenure as a result of a third tenure review. By that summer, I was experiencing a clinical depression. I sold my home, rented an apartment and held on for one more year. During that teaching year, I lost 70 pounds and friends were alarmed. I was experiencing all sorts of strange physical symptoms and spent the summer in emergency room after emergency room. The stress had even caused me to bleed profusely post-menopause.<sup>43</sup> The very fact that I repeatedly called

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<sup>43</sup> Stress can cause increases in persistent estrogen levels. See Tracy J. Shors et al., *Acute Stress Persistently Enhances Estrogen Levels in Female Rats*, 3 STRESS 163 (1999) (finding a strong, positive correlation between stress and increased estrogen levels).

911 during this period is a measure of how disorganized my bodily integrity had become.

I am quite stoic, and in fact, have gone so far as to drive myself to the doctor's office in a blizzard, shifting my clutch with a broken left leg and driving myself home again. It would be months before I realized that my physical symptoms were psychological in the sense that they were a kind of metabolic spillover from the clinical depression. Slowly and painfully, I learned that our medical system is as discipline hidebound as our academic system: it is unable to treat the whole patient or evaluate when physical symptoms are a manifestation of psychological problems. My medical doctor could not even influence the psychiatric system to take my illness seriously.

At this point, I was forced to take my first of many medical leaves. I could not afford to take the time I really needed as one semester was the maximum allowed before my salary would be reduced 40 percent and I would lose all my benefits. Nevertheless, minimally healed, I returned to work. I was still so ill my medical doctor, himself an honored professor at the same university, did not feel I was well enough to work. By this time, I was a shell of my former self. My entire working career had been devoted to college teaching since I turned 22 years of age. My family and friends did not understand that a tenure rejection meant the end of my academic career, that the chances of being hired for any tenure track full-time position after a tenure denial were virtually zero. Now past 50, in the most fragile state of my life, I could not imagine any other career. I could not retreat, and I could not move forward.

### XIII. MICROAGGRESSION: ERASE EXCELLENCE

Ignore all positive evidence of quality work so that harrassment can contnue.

After I returned from medical leave, I filed a grievance. The grievance chair told me that my case was the most egregious he had seen in a long

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time. Even had I won that grievance, my institution does not recognize grievances with a formal remedy. If the provost wants to ignore a successful grievance, this is completely within his or her purview. During the hearing, one of the panel members asked the dean why my book was not sufficient proof of my scholarly abilities. To the shock of everyone in the room, the dean responded that without the help of my dissertation committee, I was not capable of writing another book.

I was too stunned to speak: according to this administrator, the major intellectual achievement of my life was not mine. It is impossible, even a decade later, to describe how this statement and the fact that it was not challenged by anyone sitting in the room destroyed my appetite for producing intellectual work under the imprint of this university. According to the dean, my book, which reflected my many years of college teaching and demonstrated the range of my interdisciplinary intellect, was really the work of the brilliant scholars who had been part of my doctoral committee.

A Fulbright Fellow from Europe later told me that I had written five books in one and recommended I write five separate books next time. While turning a dissertation into a book is not typical, the History of Consciousness program is famous for producing scholars and dissertations of such quality that they are almost inevitably turned into books. My dissertation director, Donna Haraway, considered the dean's statement an attack on her personal integrity. At the time of the grievance, I had no idea my book was being considered for a national award or that it would be one of two finalists in that process.

The only reasonable supposition for her ludicrous statement is that the dean presumed me incompetent and thought that the quality of the book suggested someone else had written it, supposedly the world famous intellects that had signed the title page of my dissertation. In her mind, I was not a nationally awarded scholar, even though the awards were sprinkled throughout my CV. Despite the egregious nature of the situation, my grievance was unsuccessful although the committee did note that I had

not been given clear guidance as to the requirements for tenure. At this point, it is perhaps relevant to note that a woman of color who claimed our work was inferior attacked both Latinas in my department during tenure review. Both our books went on to earn national recognition.

When subalterns attack other subalterns, one has to wonder what sort of game is afoot. In this case, I am sure the quality of the work was, itself, the threat. The fact that I know about these maneuvers puts to lie the idea that academic review is confidential. We need to let air and light into this process which was developed by protected elites who understood how to undermine meritocracy while pretending to reward it. Administrators need to know how to sort mediocrity from excellence, but they are never going to be able to do this if this sort of petty and secret backbiting is rewarded as it often is.

By the time I digested all of this, the seven-year-to-tenure clock was winding down. I was faced with the prospect of no teaching employment at all after a lifetime of service. My psychological and physical health by this point was so tenuous that I dared not subject myself to another tenure review. I had to request that the tenure clock be stopped while I continued to heal.

When the time came for the third tenure bid, I had *not* added substantially to my vita, but my department chair asked one of the most prestigious members of the department and university to chair my review committee. Had this highly regarded colleague not fought hard for me, I would not have survived that third bid. I earned tenure, but the cost had been so high that I have still not regained my health, confidence, or intellectual energy.<sup>44</sup> By

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<sup>44</sup> The costs are so high that I agree with Francisca de la Riva-Holly that “. . . I truly do not know that I would take this road again in life. I cannot say that it is worth having the job that I now have. . . .” Francisca de la Riva-Holly, *Igualadas*, in *PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA* 287,295 (Gabiella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012). Our wounds are soul wounds as many have noted in

this time, the department's new and old members viewed me negatively because controversy of any sort upsets the apple cart in an inherently conservative organization; the vast majority of them were not aware that it was the dean who had twice turned back my tenure bid, assuming that my dossier had been rejected by college or even department committees.

#### XIV. MICROAGGRESSION: WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, HARASS AND KEEP THEM GUESSING

Under these conditions, I became the only caregiver for my nearly 90-year-old mother whose Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease required round-the-clock oxygen. Eight weeks after she moved in with me, I was informed that a human ankle was available for transplant into my body. Having to travel 2,000 miles to San Diego on less than 36-hours' notice required others to pick up my classes for the rest of the semester. After my transplant and during the 72 hours I was recovering in the hospital in California, my department chair told me we had not planned well, thus foisting the responsibility for my sudden departure onto me, not the institution. It is true that the transplant became available less than six months from the time I became eligible, but it is also true that I actually *considered* turning it down, not because of my mother's needs, but because of my job.

Two hours after I got the call from California, I attended a celebration for newly tenured professors and had not yet decided to accept the transplant. An associate dean in my college, who knew something of my history, looked me in the eye and told me to go. Bless him. I was on the plane the next day. Not once during the 18-month healing process did my chair ask

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*Presumed Incompetent. E.g., Michelle A. Holling et al., Dis/jointed Appointments: Solidarity Amidst Inequity, Tokenism, and Marginalization, in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 250, 257 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).*

me about the operation or my recovery or the pain of lying in bed for months waiting for my bones to knit together above and below my ankle. He *did* try to protect me by not placing me on medical leave until the following semester, preserving my finances at a critical moment. His idea of protection did not include clueing me in on his thought process, leaving me wondering why I was marking papers from my recovery bed for students I would never again see, my head a swirl with pain medication and the fear that I might never walk again. Luckily, the operation was a success, and I now walk without a cane although far from perfectly and not without pain.

After the operation, I concentrated on trying to regain my health and taking care of my disabled mother who, in another year or so, would be diagnosed with cancer. She was able to recover fully from this cancer, with minimal treatment as her doctors had determined she could not survive chemotherapy and radiation. Luckily, the worst of her cancer issues were concentrated over one summer, which meant I could visit her in the hospital and manage her outpatient care without interfering with my teaching. A year and a half later, she was declared cancer free. Still, I had lost another summer to illness, a summer that should have been used for research.

The university droned on; my mood and circumstances seemed to stabilize for the time being. The department was renamed. The new cohort, hired to create a rhetoric department out of what was essentially an American studies department, made a game out of freezing out the old cohort of faculty, even some senior professors. A new chair was appointed as the new cohort moved to control the department. I needed to take medical leaves for a semester at a time during the next two or three years, once in the middle of the semester. I was obviously close to becoming permanently disabled at almost any time, but the financial cost would have been horrendous and I felt that I still had, and indeed still have, a great deal to share with students and the world.

XV. MICROAGGRESSION: USE VULNERABLE FACULTY AND THEN ABANDON THEM

During this same period, another senior, white female professor in the department, who had been a close friend, organized a mini-rebellion of the American studies faculty now stranded in a department that wanted all of these faculty members to disappear. This professor organized a series of meetings that demonstrated our extreme displeasure over our situation. After one of these meetings, we all decided that it was time for a few of us to speak with the new dean. During a debriefing meeting, it was agreed that I would be part of that cohort. Unbeknownst to me, the white, female professor, who had been the *de facto* leader of this rebellion, disinvited me from that meeting, which was then held in “secret.” The full professors in our department negotiated their transfer to the English Department *en masse*, leaving all the associate professors who had formerly been part of the rebel group stranded. The cynical ploy to demonstrate widespread discontent amongst the American studies faculty had been used to provide an escape for the full professors – all of whom just happened to be white.

This then was the second instance of abandonment by a white, female professor whose feminism did not extend beyond vague pronouncements of alliance. My story echoes the stories of many other women of color who are recruited in the battle against sexism by their white sisters and then abandoned when race gets stirred into the mix.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough,

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<sup>45</sup> See Angela Mae Kupenda, *Facing Down the Spooks*, in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 20, 24 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012) (“I reminded [my white colleague] that she seems to count on my support on gender-based issues, but she and some other white females disappear and leave me standing alone on racial or racial/gender-based issues.”); SHIELDS, *supra* note 13, at 38–39 (“[S]ome white women. . . are offended by any reminder that unearned privilege and undeserved equity exist in the world they move through.”); DOUGLAS, *supra* note 29, at 60 (white colleague downplaying impact of racial differences); Bell Hooks, TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM 104 (New York,

during these meetings it became clear that some of the hostile feedback I was experiencing by the new cohort was directed not just at me but at senior, white male professors. To this day and after an entire decade, three female colleagues in my department refuse to acknowledge my presence in the narrow hallways of our office wing. Two of these professors are Native American woman who have obviously managed to jettison their cultural conditioning, which suggests modesty and graciousness as a core value. Unless everyone takes responsibility for such behavior, academia will continue to destroy the best of us while allowing those with sociopathic tendencies to succeed.<sup>46</sup>

#### XVI. MICROAGGRESSION: HARASS UNDER THE COVER OF PROFESSIONALISM

The following fall, I contracted Cytomegalovirus, a mononucleosis-like infection.<sup>47</sup> I had been teaching most of the semester without realizing I was running a low-grade fever. My doctor put me on medical leave for the last three weeks of the fall semester. Before I fully recovered from this infection, I fell *again*, breaking my good right ankle. My department chair, the second chair during my time here, representing the new cohort of faculty, was incensed that I had not kept her informed of my ongoing issues *during* my medical leave. When I applied for funding to present at an international conference in July, she called me and insisted that I would not be allowed to

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Routledge 1994) (“[White women] forget that the very focus on race and racism emerged from the concrete political effort to forge meaningful ties between women of different race and class groups. This struggle is often completely ignored.”).

<sup>46</sup> See Yolanda Flores Niemann, *The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe*, in PRESUMED INCOMPETENT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA 336, 345 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez & Angela P. Harris eds., 2012).

<sup>47</sup> See *Cytomegalovirus (CMV) and Congenital CMV Infection*, CDC, <http://www.cdc.gov/cmV/overview.html> (last updated Dec. 6, 2010).

attend, claiming that the university could not assume the liability for my travel when I was ill. I pointed out to her that my doctor had already cleared me to travel, that my plane ticket was already purchased and that July was months away. At this point, she backed off saying, “Well, you certainly are determined.”

Later that spring, the paperwork for my medical leave was incomplete, largely because responsibility for these matters had passed from one university office to another during my illness. My department chair treated this glitch as if it were a crisis, insisting that I had done something wrong and informed me one Friday in May that I was no longer an employee. I spent an anxious weekend wondering if I had fallen into still another academic crevasse even though I knew her statement was merely wishful thinking and an attempt to further break my spirit. When I called human resources on Monday, the secretary in charge of this paperwork was incredulous. She had to remind me that I was a tenured professor. When it came time to prepare for the fall semester, my chair caught me cleaning and painting my office on a weekend, something that over a dozen professors had already done and for which I had asked permission more than a year earlier. She was again incensed. The painter I had hired to help me was astonished to witness her screaming at me: “You are not teaching this semester. Your paperwork is not completed.” As it turned out, while I was abroad at the international conference, still another step in the paperwork process had stalled. The HR secretary knew I was not in the country, so she contacted the department without realizing this would create a problem for me. Once again astonished at the petty nature of my chair’s fury, I informed her that my doctors would complete the necessarily medical leave update posthaste. The imagined crisis regarding my medical leave was easily resolved; however, my chair had used this minor glitch as yet another excuse to harass me. Despite her threats, I returned to teaching in a couple of weeks.

A few semesters prior to this particularly difficult time, I was lucky enough to have three Fulbright Fellows from three separate countries auditing my upper-level class on race. The behavior and comments of their young American classmates shocked these Fellows. At one point, the Indonesian Fellow exclaimed, “How much evidence is enough? There are literally thousands of sources for all of these ideas, yet I am watching in disbelief as too many students dismiss the facts.” In this same class, an African American student in her late 20s became more and more agitated as the semester wore on. In the last third of the semester, I was shocked to learn that she had constructed or absorbed the notion that African Americans possessed three-stranded DNA. Somehow, she had taken a white supremacist theory, which also appears in some dubious psychic theories and inverted it to demonstrate the imagined genetic superiority of Africans. To hear that all humans everywhere have their genetic roots in the same small group of humans who left Africa tens of thousands of years ago, and moreover, that all humans in Africa were descendants of these same humans, utterly denied her ideology. Were she the only student rejecting the course material, her beliefs would have been an interesting and disturbing, blip, but she managed to coalesce a cadre of malcontents whose main agenda was to reject the course material because it denied their racist ideology.<sup>48</sup>

When I took this problem to my department chair, she was really not in the least interested in understanding the situation. I was concerned that this student was setting me up for a grievance over her grades as she had chosen to omit a question on the midterm exam, guaranteeing she would fail that

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<sup>48</sup> See Armstrong & Wildman, *supra* note 40, at 238 (“‘What I couldn’t believe was the level of rudeness in the class. . . . The behavior gave me an insight into the class culture—how they must have behaved when my [black, female] colleague was teaching. I know that classes presume I [as a white woman] am incompetent until I prove myself, but their behavior was at a whole different level of acting out based on that presumption.’”).

exam, a major part of her semester grade. This student protested that I did not have the background to teach about the genetics of race.

Interestingly enough, my department chair did not have enough science background to know that humans do not have three stranded DNA.<sup>49</sup> (A British child was discovered to have a third strand on one of his chromosomes, causing multiple health issues.<sup>50</sup>) Multi-stranded DNA has been studied in the lab under special circumstances.<sup>51</sup> As a former biology major and the student of a philosopher of science, I was more qualified to teach about the scientific construction and deconstruction of race than most of my colleagues across the university. I am certainly more qualified to address this intellectual subject than anyone else in my department as a former biology major, the student of a philosopher of science and the graduate of a doctoral program that emphasizes science studies.

My institution, like so many others, has promoted so many mediocre scholars it no longer has the institutional capacity to recognize excellence. Excellence is actually threatening in the current neo-liberal, corporatized university environment. Concerned about this particular student's volatility, I asked my chair to review my semester grades for fairness. At no point did I receive the least bit of sympathy or support. Neither did the chair wish to educate herself as to the dynamics that could lead to the attacks I was enduring. I told my chair I thought the student was potentially violent, that she worked with women escaping domestic violence, and that I suspected her volatility was the result of her own victimization. The fact that her oppression as an African American woman was complicated by her

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<sup>49</sup> *DNA Structure*, UNIV. ILL. CHI., <http://www.uic.edu/classes/phys/phys461/phys450/ANJUM04/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> *Boy, Two, Is First Known Person in the World to Be Born with an Extra Strand of DNA*, DAILY MAIL (06:24 PM, Apr. 11, 2011), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1375697/Alfie-Clamp-2-1st-person-born-extra-strand-DNA.html>.

<sup>51</sup> *See, e.g.*, Dara E. Gilbert & Julie Feigon, *Multi-stranded DNA Structures*, 9 CURRENT OP. IN STRUCTURAL BIOLOGY, 305–14 (1999).

probable history disturbed me greatly. I was actually quite empathetic regarding what I surmised she had suffered and understood about her irrational attacks were not unrelated to her personal history.

I managed to emerge from the semester without repercussion by curving grades upwards for everyone in the class. Although I never grade on a curve, I decided to do so based on the fact that the negative dynamics of the classroom had affected even the best students. By the time I had adjusted the grades for those I felt should earn As, our three-stranded DNA advocate was passing, although just barely. No grievance was filed. But what happened to the education of all these students? What happened to the standards of our institution? Most importantly, the way my department chair handled this crisis caused me to lose whatever shreds of respect I still had for my institution. Her ignorance of the dynamics of teaching about race demonstrated that she had no comprehension of the issues which arise in courses of this nature, courses everyone should be required to take, far more professors should teach and every administrator should know how to facilitate.<sup>52</sup>

The corporatized university structure cares nothing for truth or justice, cares nothing for rationality or even the safety of the humans caught in its structures. Its purpose is twofold: collect tuition and tamp down all controversy. Clearly, had this controversy moved to a grievance, I would have received not the least support from my department chair. At one point, a white student who was witnessing all of this turmoil called me at home to let me know that he would be happy to testify in support of me should any of these controversies result in an inquiry. He was distressed to think that I could be under this sort of assault. “You have done absolutely nothing wrong,” he told me.

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<sup>52</sup> See generally, EASTON, *supra* note 9, at 160.

## XVII. MICROAGGRESSION: HARASS TO DESTRUCTION

But the most horrible period of this far too long story happened as my mother entered the health crisis that would lead to her death. In November of 2011, she was admitted to the hospital four times in ten days. This sort of bouncing around of the very sick and very old is now common practice in our medical system. No doctor wants to have an elderly patient die on his or her watch and there is intense pressure to “treat and street.”

About a week and a half after her fourth admission and only a year after my last emergency medical leave, one of my worst nightmares came true. The stress had built up in my body to the point that I could not stand during my first class of the day. I had my students workshop while I met with them individually at the front desk. At the end of the period, I gathered my belongings and stood up. By the time I reached the door, I was so faint I had to hold on to the wall. I fought my way down the long hallway to the elevator, desperate not to faint in public sight, and stumbled into the main office. The department chair happened to be in the office, saw how ill I was, but went about her business. A secretary brought me some water, and after about ten minutes, I asked her to walk me down the long hall to my private office. In a few minutes, the pain running down my right arm paralyzed it; I was unable to pick up the phone to call for help for a good half an hour.

I knew this was a symptom of a heart attack. No one checked on me during that time. I would not have been able to stand to unlock my door. One of my most persistent nightmares actually became a reality: I was hauled away from the building by ambulance. My blood pressure and heart rate were so low I had to be given morphine to stabilize them. At this point, my mother was in one hospital, and I was in another, as our first winter blizzard struck. For the next four days, my department chair harassed me in my hospital bed, insisting that I call her soon as I knew I was being released. I refused, telling her that I would call her when I arrived home.

What followed was the worst abuse I was to experience to date. My mother remained in the hospital, my car was marooned at school, and I lay

at home desperately trying to understand what had happened and what was still happening. The four days in the hospital had not lead to a clear diagnosis. A few days after I was released, my mother was also released from her hospital, but my car, which had been retrieved from campus by some friends, refused to start. I negotiated with the hospital to have my mother returned home via ambu-cab. Anxious to get my mother inside the house during a light, freezing rain, I joined her at the curb. The cab driver and my mother urged me to go back into the house. Without the least warning, I found myself zigzagging like a drunken sailor, literally hitting the side of the house next to the garage. I do not have the faintest recollection of how I made it inside, but at least both my mother and I were relatively safe at home after these harrowing weeks of chaos.

Earlier that day, my department chair had called me. She wanted me to meet immediately with herself and an associate dean. I told her that I had no transportation and that my mother was due to be released from the hospital that very day. She suggested the associate dean and herself come to my home. Incredulous, I refused. It is not clear exactly what was wrong with me during these few weeks. My heart rate was low, my doctors had discovered an ovarian cyst, I had had a full body allergic reaction to the emergency room chemicals, and it appeared that I had an intestinal virus. I have learned that stress can cause literally every symptom in the book. That night, the first my mother was home with me, my gastrointestinal virus bloomed. By the morning, I was dangerously dehydrated and mentally confused. My department chair called me *repeatedly* that morning, insisting we had to have a conversation. I told her that I had relapsed and that my doctor was sending her son to pick me up and bring me to her office. She persisted and informed me very quickly that I would not be teaching the next semester, that I would be given an alternate assignment. I replied that teaching next semester was hardly anything I could think about at that moment, and that I really had no idea what was happening to me or if I would be able to return to work at all. When my doctor examined me in her

office, she told me I could either go back to the hospital or she could try to treat me on an outpatient basis. My veins were collapsed by dehydration, and as a result, it was impossible to start an intravenous line. Two cups of tea later, the nurse was able to insert a needle and force saline into my system. A few minutes later, I projectile vomited the tea.

By this point, the semester was over. It was finals week, and I needed to submit final grades. My foggy brain, my mother's illness, and the cruel irrationality of what I had been subjected to led me to attempt to grade papers electronically from my sickbed into the early morning hours. This decision, in fact, had led to the relapse. I managed to finish grading one class by the deadline, and thought I had successfully submitted the grades; however, my brain was so disorganized, I did not realize that the grades had not uploaded correctly. I spent the rest of the Christmas vacation trying to finish grading the second class's work. That course was under another department whose department was very sympathetic to my situation. I finally finished grading that class sometime in January. Since my department chair had already told me that she was removing me from my teaching assignments for the spring semester, my doctor made sure that I had recovered from the virus before clearing me to work. As soon as she cleared me, I made an appointment to meet with the associate dean and my chair, thinking that I would be given a special project.

Still fragile, I went to that meeting thinking we would discuss a meaningful project. Why do I remain so naïve? Instead, I was handed an evaluation of my performance, which condemned my research, service, and teaching. Hardly able to comprehend what was happening, I pointed out the sustained abuse I had been subjected to and the factual errors in the plan the department chair had constructed for "my improvement." At one point, she blurted out that I should never have been hired.

The sheer viciousness of this statement from an administrator, who had not been part of the department at the time of my hire, who did not know or care that the hiring committee had been unanimous, who did not know that I

had been lobbied to accept the job after rejecting it three times, who had never witnessed my teaching and was ignorant of most of my background, and whose own record of publishing did not include a single book stunned me. That she said this in front of a witness who sat there silently was even more surprising.

This is emblematic of my history at this institution. Completely irrational and unsustainable assertions are part and parcel of what I have had to endure. I now suspect that this is a problem across academia for women of color. Administrators and other faculty do not fear to make any claim, no matter how absurd, when the subject is a woman of color who is presumed incompetent. Any allegation can be made to stick in a culture of this sort. The wholesale rejection of everything that I represent and have accomplished without the least desire to verify a single fact is a demonstration of pure power absent rational reasoning. My pillorying was to include supervision by not one, but two colleagues who were to oversee my syllabus planning. After 40 years of college teaching, I was deemed too incompetent to *construct* a course without tutoring.

I stumbled out of that meeting in a state of shock. By coincidence, I had an appointment with my doctor the next day. One check of my blood pressure demonstrated that the low blood pressure that had sent me to the hospital, was now, literally overnight, dangerously high. My doctor insisted that she wanted me out of “that toxic environment.” Despite specialist consultations, several doctors were unable to control my blood pressure for over six months. I spent weeks afraid to move because I knew that my particular risk for stroke was extraordinarily high because of an anomaly in my brain. Ten weeks after the peak of this abuse, my mother died, knowing that she was leaving me trapped in a cycle of abuse.

I began the 2012-13 school year with one goal in mind: making it through the entire year without having to take a medical leave. My confidence destroyed, my taste for my work as negative as it had ever been, I concentrated on giving my students the best experience I could. When I

finished the fall semester, I was gratified to read my students final essays evaluating the course. Some of them had spent all semester hanging out in my office to the point that students from different sections became friends. Interestingly enough, two of those students decided to leave the university by the next semester because of their disappointment with their overall experience. One student from the People's Republic of China told me he wanted to transfer because he could not get the kind of interaction that he had with me anywhere else on campus. The other student who had to pay the same out-of-state tuition and fees as the student from the PRC told me that I was the only professor who had taught her a single thing during the whole school year and that she had paid almost \$50,000 for a year of advanced high school.

The standards at our university have been lowered to an absurd degree, and she knew that she had paid for a college experience without receiving one. This is the end result of a corporatized educational establishment that seeks to enroll and graduate students without the least regard for standards. Despite this feedback from students who treasured me, my *anonymous* student reviews contained the usual negativity. I have stopped reading these reviews if possible because every negative comment wounds me. I know that many other professors do the same.

As a 60s student radical who lobbied for student evaluations of teaching, I could never have imagined what they would devolve into—evaluations of our physical appearance, statements about our sanity, global negativity across all categories if a student does not care for even one aspect of his or her course experience. Even though there were a majority of positive comments and ratings, the existence of even a few negative ratings is enough to ruin a professor's averages. I was now teaching in a department where creating a film was considered equivalent to writing a college-level essay, and writing an informal narrative sufficed for at least one other major

assignment.<sup>53</sup> Against that backdrop, my teaching ratings would never be any more than they were, absent a miracle. The fact that I know I am a gifted teacher matters not one whit in a system which rewards mediocrity and is threatened by any vision that does not conform.

Why did I even read these evaluations? My yearly evaluation from my chair, the first since my mother's death, arrived in June. It was succinct: I was incompetent in every single aspect of my job. I would have to meet with the new department chair to create a plan not unlike the one I had rejected a year and a half earlier. The writing plans I had for the summer receded into the background as I attended a series of meetings with advisers all over campus. At this point, there is no clear agreement as to whether this "plan" is the first move towards removing my tenure, but I have received a written threat of suspension without pay. It was clear in my meeting with my new department chair that he had never read my CV because he had no idea how old I was, something anyone would see the instant s/he scanned it. I tried to hint that any plan to remove my tenure could not possibly succeed before I retired. My chair seemed blissfully immune to this realization.

So, my writing plans changed. Instead of working on the essay I had begun 14 years ago and placed on the back burner due to the chaos of my experience here, I wrote this narrative. The meetings I had all over campus with various individuals who might have helped me led to a kind of impasse. Yes, just about everything I claimed made sense, but there was indeed no effective mechanism for addressing these problems. Grievances, even when successful, are not binding on the administration; power, even when abused, did not carry with it the need for rationality or even factual evidence beyond SIRS (Student Instructional Rating System) forms. After more than 40 years

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<sup>53</sup> I certainly do not object to these sorts of assignments. Ideally, they would be part of a well-rounded educational experience. However, when they replace rigorous writing assignments that require students to digest and integrate academic materials, they do a disservice to everyone involved.

of educational radicalism, I could see that a lifetime of effort had led to little, if any, meaningful change for those caught in educational institutions based on repressive hierarchies and filled with race, gender, and class prejudice.

My current department chair, the third since I arrived, and I agree on one thing: higher education has failed. I am quite sure our reasons for that conclusion are diametrically opposed. It is no coincidence that the collapse of our entire educational system all the way through to the doctoral level has occurred at the same time our culture has disintegrated and our politics has become a twenty-first century version of the Roman circus and gladiator ring. I would gladly spend my retirement years in political rebellion against the juggernaut we have created; however, the larger world outside the ivory tower is as resistant to amelioration as the tower itself. Without a vision of a better world and more justice for everyone, nothing we do within the walls of the ivory tower has any meaning.

I have no interest in educating students to be addicted consumers whose self-esteem is tied to the purchase of granite countertops. Any movement to address the injustices that *Presumed Incompetent* reveals must take into account the corporatization of our colleges and universities. It must address how anti-intellectualism and general conformity has permeated the university system and how our general culture has affected the psychology of our students. I think that cases like mine should be *formally studied* because we should know how the dynamics of my personal situation interacted with the corporate structure of the university and demonstrate how this corporate structure has little to no commitment to deep learning and justice. And we should identify how the corporate structure cannot *foster deep learning*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Sylvia R. Raxos, *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, 173 (Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez &

It is not to say substantial change is impossible, for I believe it is completely possible, but unless the political moment changes, unless we are willing to stare into the mouth of the monster of culture and education and the culture of education that we ourselves have created and tolerated, our educational system will simply produce more and more fodder for the kind of *Matrix* described in the franchise of films our students love to admire but hate to recognize as their current reality. Someday, we may have a higher educational system that reflects a just world, or at least an educational establishment that can *lead* to a just world, but today is not that day.

Today, we have a corporatized university system which has lost its moral compass, has not the least idea how to foster justice, is terrified of excellence rooted in an incisive critique of our culture, and inevitably rewards mediocrity because bureaucracy does not have the least idea how to handle excellence and vision. Someday, we will look on the record the *Presumed Incompetent* project is collecting, and our descendants will wonder about the “long cry of pain” recorded in our journals. The Joanna Russ’ epigram at the top of this essay is from “When It Changed,” a science fiction short story.<sup>55</sup> Men have disappeared from the planet Whileaway.<sup>56</sup> The journals that are “one long cry of pain” are the journals of women enduring gender oppression.<sup>57</sup> The journals of those of us caught in a more complex web of oppressions cannot fail to be less.

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Angela P. Harris eds., 2012) (“Regretfully, the recent Air Force Academy study argues that evaluations are negatively correlated to students’ deep learning.”).

<sup>55</sup> Russ, *supra* note 2.

<sup>56</sup> *See id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*