

BOOK REVIEW

Degrees of Difference: Reflections of Women of Color on Graduate School

Kimberly McKee and Denise Delgado (editors). Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020 (ISBN: 978-0-252-08505-5)

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Late fall of 2020 witnessed an open attack in the *Wall Street Journal* on women in the US who hold higher education degrees (Tracy 2020). Although hardly a new experience of women in the academy, it did make one thing painfully clear to the public at large: not even an advanced degree confers legitimacy on scholars and faculty members if they are women. But, more important, it exposed something all too familiar: that using the word *woman* requires nuance, given the disparities in treatment between women of color in the academy and their Anglo-US counterparts, as shown in anthologies such as *Presumed Incompetent* and *Presumed Incompetent II* (Flores Niemann et al. 2012; 2020). An important question arises, one that identifies an important lacuna within these discussions: what do women of color encounter as graduate students, and how do these encounters inform the ways that they will navigate the academy as they transition into their roles as professors and members of staff in those same institutions?

The edited anthology *Degrees of Difference* addresses this gap by creating a space where women of color speak directly to what they endure as graduate students, and connect these experiences to the structures of social inequality that foster and maintain them. In the introduction, editors Kimberly McKee and Denise Delgado note:

by centering the lived realities of this recent generation of junior scholars, *Degrees of Difference: Reflections of Women of Color on Graduate School* serves as a tool for women of color and indigenous women doctoral and masters students, as well as their peers contemplating entering the academy. We feature feminist analyses that combine radical critique of the current model of higher education with work toward progressive social change from within and outside of the Ivory Tower. (2)

The anthology, comprising a Foreword, Introduction, and eight chapters divided into four major sections, provides insights for women of color entering the academy, and thus offers tools to help navigate what can be a hostile terrain.

Importantly, the chapters include voices from different racial and ethnic communities, backgrounds, geographical locations, and fields. This variety illustrates that there is no monolithic experience for women of color and that daily interactions are as varied as each individual person's identity. The editors also identify a commonality that creates a

bridge between their graduate school experiences: the burden of academia's default to Western-Eurocentric/Anglo-US masculine notions of who is an authentic student, and the tailoring of programs and requirements to these very specific and limited parameters (2). Echoing works such as *Presumed*, the genealogy to which this anthology contributes is one of brave academics refusing to be silenced by the status quo of "who" is the authentic presence in academia (8–10).

Degrees begins with the premise that women of color not feeling at home in the academy is not of their own making. Instead, this anthology identifies the variety of ways that women of color are taught that the academy is not designed with them in mind or intended for them (2). It explores the negative effects of from both micro- and macroaggressions, and argues for the importance of rejecting these and even countering them. To do so, the editors as well as contributors draw upon the concept of "feminist killjoys" (5–8) to expose how people with power in higher education often methodically structure the process of degree attainment as a gauntlet to be run, with the criteria for success being—consciously or not—racially, socioeconomically, and sexually determined. Anthology contributors directly challenge these as a "natural" part of degree-acquisition by giving voice to the multiple violations women of color endure.

Anthology contributors deploy their personal narratives to help women of color who join the academy to navigate it *as women of color*. This book emphasizes the importance of first-person narrative (8), and also identifies that "[a]s universities assert a commitment to diversity and inclusivity, this directive must translate into actual support for students and faculty from underrepresented communities" (11). Thus, this book refutes the notion that it is those who endure marginalization who must take on the full responsibility of changing the status quo. Instead, the authors show the need for administrative and programmatic shifts that can and should be made to support the variety of students who enter graduate school.

Degree's four main themes, each covered in two chapters, are: 1. "the body that constructs women of color as Other" (13); 2. women of color's "deep investment in giving back" to higher education (13); 3. strategies for self-care and building networks of support inside and outside the institution (13–14); and 4. the importance of "poise" and "self-confidence" in the face of the imposter syndrome brought about by "encountering assumptions based on their raced and gendered presentations of self" (14). Integral to all of these are the real-life, qualitative examples that contributors provide. In narrating their experiences, each author gives texture to the ways that institutional undermining happens in sometimes subtle and other times obvious ways, which can, and should, be addressed.

The first two chapters focus on the interconnections between institutional and private-life experiences of women of color. Carrie Sampson's "Evoking My *Shadow Beast*" opens this discussion by exploring her daily realities inside the home in connection to academia by placing them in conversation with scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and Tara Yasso. Sampson's chapter disproves the myth that an academic's home and work lives are separate. Further, she demonstrates that lived experiences provide poignant insights into how different structures of socialization work and influence her as a graduate student woman of color. Following this chapter, Soha Youssef's "*Sett bmit ragel 'A Woman as Good as 100 Men'*" highlights how microaggressions are manifested as part of a complex network of systems of power both in the academy and in social settings outside the academy. In so doing, she disrupts the silencing effects that result from them and shows the need to provide a space where challenges to this

silencing can occur (37). Integral to this reality, as her chapter demonstrates, is remaining vigilant about respecting the differences that socioeconomic privilege, family educational background, religion, and colorism create.

The next two chapters are designed to “encourage readers to consider nonwhite women’s deep investment in giving back to their peers, programs, and undergraduates even if higher education was never designed for their presence” (13). Chapter 3, Delia Fernández’s “You’re Going to Need a Team,” emphasizes programmatic work that can be undertaken to support students of color, and specifically women of color, as they move forward in higher education. A Latina of working-class background from Michigan, Fernández identifies the instrumental role that the McNair Program played in her graduate school success. For example, she describes experiences with structured community-building and mentor meetings, and the implementation of self-care schedules. She also describes ways she learned to implement these into her own life and career. Chapter 4, “Stats and Stories: The Path of One Native Scholar in the Medical Sciences,” by Regina Emily Idoate, “critically analyzes forces that both stifle and support Native academics and encourages teachers and learners to engage in constructive discourse that questions the institutional processes that are destabilizing our learning communities,” and continues, “[i]t is my hope that in sharing our voices we will transform the dismal quantitative data and statistical reports into powerful stories that illustrate significant qualitative realities of Native academics” (92–93). Her chapter provides insights into the continuous stress of intervening in systemic oppression, such as refusing to support racist activities. She also identifies examples of actively supporting change even as she endures the strain of sociosexual, geo-racialized aggressions. This chapter also challenges the ideological underpinnings that demand woman of color submissively “fit in” to a homogeneous image of what an “academic” is or looks like, and how such an “academic” acts.

The next two chapters focus on community-building and include consideration of what it means to engage in self-care practices and the need to forge supportive networks and relationships. Chapter 5, “Disciplinary Peripheries,” by Jenny Heijun Wills and Délice Mugabo, presents challenges to the multicultural myth of academia. It does so by narrating the kinds of interpersonal relationships that are needed to sustain the personal and professional development of women of color in spaces that invalidate them while making token gestures toward inclusion. Chapter 6, “For Those Considering Medical School: A Black Queer Feminist Perspective” by Nwadiogo I. Ejogu, provides insight and tips to students of color, informed by real, lived experience, to enable them to make it through medical school/graduate school. Her statement, “Survival *is* resistance. Just existing in these spaces not made with us in mind *is* radical” is indeed emblematic of not only this chapter but the anthology as a whole (118).

The anthology’s final two chapters are designed to “move our attention forward to consider how contributors remain poised and externally confident even as they may second-guess whether they truly belong in the academy while encountering assumptions based on their raced and gendered presentations of self” (14). To do so, chapter 7—“Finding Grace,” by Aerial Ashlee—details how Asian Americans experience racial microaggressions. Ashlee intervenes in stereotypes regarding the ways that Asian American women circulate in graduate programs. She also shows that exposing these experiences can act as a form of resistance to microaggressions (135–36). Chapter 8, “How to Help: Learning the Legacy of the Social Work Professional,” by Arianna Taboada, describes her experiences getting into social work after being inspired by a Chicano social worker who runs a health center and whose ethos is based in social

justice. She notes that she wrote this chapter by engaging critical race theory and LatCrit theory to tell the “story of learning on the margins, of deconstructing an inherently racist curriculum, and of forging a way forward for Chicana social workers—even when our education was not designed with us in mind” (147). Her chapter moves forward to describe token gestures by predominantly white programs/faculty to “include” histories of people of color in the curriculum, and the realities of how poorly these are done because of the nature of what is being done, by whom, and why. She argues that graduate school programming is steeped in a history of racism and sexism, but counter-stories from the margins do exist, and by moving these to the center a shift can happen that is based in a social justice praxis.

The epilogue for *Degrees of Difference*, written by McKee and Delgado, opens with a description of the book including their own experiences and how the anthology came to fruition. Echoing the Introduction, they note that it first emerged five years earlier as a result of a conference panel and from their awareness that the experiences of graduate school women of color students are nuanced and exacerbated, so that though men of color and Anglo women might have similar experiences, the depth and breadth of the experience of women of color is compounded as a result of the intersections of race and gender. Further, this book provides tips for allies to help transform the environment of higher education and its structures. Importantly, they note that “[i]n sharing their experiences, these women embody the feminist killjoy, pushing back against an academy that expects a particular level of gratefulness that we were even let into the door, let alone the room. These women interrupt and disrupt notions of what higher education *is* by offering reflections on what it *should be* to allow them, and other women of color and Indigenous women, to thrive in the academy” (166).

Degrees of Difference is a valuable book for those in education, gender studies, and administration. This anthology provides an intervention into the silences that envelop the experiences of women of color in graduate school, and a shift in how to perceive the underlying factors causing the “imposter syndrome” that scholars write about as plaguing academic institutions. It shows that women of color do not create the circumstances in which they experience feeling that they are imposters, nor do they submissively accept being imposters as their fate. Instead, this anthology provides different mappings that legitimate women of color graduate students and their multitude of experiences, while also providing strategies to navigate the institutional structures with which they interact. Further, *Degrees of Difference* provides administrators and others in academia an opportunity to consider ways that altering the campuses where they work can more authentically attempt to gain and retain women of color graduate students to change the meaning of diversity work from token gestures to real social justice activity.

References

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