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[Introduction to] Counternarratives from Women of Color Academics: Bravery, Vulnerability and Resistance

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Counternarratives from Women of Color Academics

Bravery, Vulnerability, and Resistance

Edited by Manya C. Whitaker
and Eric Anthony Grollman

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1 Introduction

*Manya C. Whitaker and
Eric Anthony Grollman*

This anthology is a celebration. It is a celebration of the women of color in academia who refuse to play it safe, who define what it means to be a scholar on their own terms, and who challenge the status quo within, and outside of, the ivory tower. This collection of original essays and creative works represents our effort to recognize and honor the bravery, vulnerability, and resistance embodied and enacted by women of color academics in their scholarship, teaching, mentorship, service, activism, and leadership.

We have two main goals for the anthology. First, we aim to change the discourse surrounding the professional and personal experiences of women of color academics from conversations about mere *survival* to a celebration of *thrival*. Since the 1982 publication of the pivotal text *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, at least two dozen anthologies on the experiences of women of color in the academy have been published. These texts, including the very popular 2012 anthology, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women Academics*, do the essential task of naming the harsh realities of racist, sexist, and classist discrimination, harassment, and microaggressions that women of color face on a daily basis in academia. However, the preponderance of stories of victimization and marginalization have painted a rather bleak picture. Accounts of tokenism, isolation, marginalization, exclusion, and other manifestations of oppression are only one part of the story for women of color in academia. Through *Counternarratives*, we aim to tell another key part of their stories. In particular, we aim to shift the narrative from victimization to empowerment, from inauthenticity to self-definition, and from conformity to resistance.

Our second goal is to challenge the dominant definition of success in the academy. As our contributors and many other marginalized scholars know first-hand, the academy privileges the interests, needs, and experiences of middle- and upper-class white heterosexual cisgender men without disabilities. Even when we attempt to succeed by their rules, we come up short. The essays in this anthology confront the norms about what it means to be a successful academic, including how we dress, speak, and behave, the topics we study, the research methods we use, and how and what we teach. In many cases, the authors offer concrete strategies for effectively challenging

the status quo while guarding against the penalties of such actions in the academy. It is our hope to celebrate the indomitable spirit of 21st-century women of color academics, and to inspire the next generation of women of color scholars and scholar-activists to be both brave and vulnerable as they resist the outdated and exclusive norms of the ivory tower.

Methodology

In June 2016, we widely distributed a call for essays and creative works for an anthology about academic bravery, inviting women of every racial and ethnic minority group in the US to contribute. We emphasized our desire to include the voices of women of color from intersections that are too often overlooked, namely LGBTQ women of color, women of color with disabilities, immigrant women of color, and first-generation and working-class women of color. We welcomed women of color academics from every academic discipline and career stage, as well as minority women in contingent faculty positions, and those who pursued non-academic careers. Our goal was not to tokenize women of color academics from various backgrounds; rather, we knew there was much to learn from the lived experiences of women of color from every intersectional social location.

We were pleased to receive nearly 350 submissions of essays, poems, photographs, plays, and paintings from women of color academics around the country. The sheer volume of submissions proved daunting to evaluate one by one. And we also found the process of reading these submissions emotionally taxing, even depressing at times. Many, or perhaps even most, of the submissions featured narratives of trauma rather than the stories of resilience, resistance, courage, and authenticity we'd hoped to read. The overwhelming tales of pain and disappointment made us more certain that an anthology that centers happiness and serenity was essential for the healing and continued success of women of color academics in the US. In the end, we selected the twenty-nine abstracts that told stories of triumph—big or small, personal or professional—from which other women of color academics could seek inspiration or guidance.

Once accepted, we encouraged our contributors to use a personal, rather than scholarly, approach to telling their stories. If they were to sit down with a friend, mentee, or colleague, how would they tell their tales? What advice would they give? You will see that citations of academic literature are minimal, with some essays using none at all. We asked our contributors to let their own descriptions serve as evidence of their bravery, vulnerability, and resistance. In that vein, we echo the critical race and critical race feminist emphasis on storytelling, as well as the Latina feminist practice of *testimonio*, as forms of knowledge-production about the lived experiences of women of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Wing, 2003).

For contributors unfamiliar with such emotive forms of writing, we suggested they utilize the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) approach articulated by Robert J. Nash in his 2004 book, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. Nash developed the SPN methodology as an alternative to traditional academic writing, which forces marginalized scholars to suppress their humanity and emotions in the face of oppression. Instead, he offers SPN as a liberatory writing praxis focused on self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-growth.

It became apparent throughout the revision process that few, if any, of our contributors had prior experience with the SPN method. Some essays underwent as many as four rounds of substantial revision because many authors struggled with personal meaning-making. Having to articulate what about their decision-making or actions demonstrated bravery, vulnerability, and/or resistance proved somewhat challenging. Some authors admitted that they did not really know *why* they acted in a certain way at the time, just that they *had* to act. Others struggled to even name themselves as brave or to claim their own inherent bravery, explaining that bravery was akin to boastfulness or arrogance in their culture. To us, their hesitation to identify and explicitly name positive attributes about themselves echoed how the academy and society consistently demean and devalue women, particularly women of color. This only further proved the urgency of our anthology.

We are therefore grateful to the twenty-six women who stuck with us as we attempted to create a space for narratives about and for women of color academics that does not publicly exist. We are pleased that our contributors span the academic range from PhD student to administrator, with a few who have left the academy. There is representation across disciplinary fields, including English, psychology, political science, sociology, education, women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, theater, anthropology, and engineering. And our contributors come from diverse racial, ethnic, nationality, sexual, and cultural backgrounds. True to our initial goals, there is no singular voice, as "woman of color" is not a monolithic category.

The twenty-one essays and poems herein—roughly 5 percent of the large pool of submissions we initially received—reflect the emotional labor of our contributors who courageously use their voice within a world that prefers they remain silent.

Organization

In Part I of the book, "Resisting Convention: Counternarratives to Conventional Norms and Practices in the Academy," we feature essays by women of color who have bucked the dominant norms of the academy. Some of the authors reflect on strategies they have used to leverage their professional position to create change on campus and beyond. Others discuss their refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice, no matter the consequences. Still others share their courageous decision to leave the academy all together,

finding that the profession stifles, rather than fosters, their creativity, passion, and commitment to racial, gender, and economic justice. These authors demonstrate the heights women of color can reach in and beyond the ivory tower when they are bold enough to go against the grain.

Part II of the anthology, “Collective Resistance: Counternarratives to the Ethos of Individualistic Meritocracy in the Academy,” presents narratives of women of color academics who resist the American ideal of individualism. Despite this norm, these women work with their mentors and mentees, students and teachers, colleagues, and friends to ensure their own and each other’s personal and professional advancement. They create or transform interpersonal spaces within academia to collectively work toward their goals of success, community well-being, and social justice. They subvert the common conception that bravery means overcoming obstacles without help from others; rather, they draw from traditions in communities of color to “lift as they climb.”

The third and final part, “Embodied Resistance: Counternarratives to Hegemonic Identities in the Academy,” includes essays by women of color academics who do something that many find counterintuitive: harnessing their bravery by being vulnerable. These women describe their intentional efforts to undermine middle- and upper-class white masculinist norms of professionalism in US higher education. While the common view is that vulnerability is a form of weakness, these women articulate that the most courageous thing you can do is expose the most intimate, delicate parts of yourself in a cold, impersonal context. These contributors literally use their bodies as sites of resistance against the academic status quo.

We see *Counternarratives from Women of Color Academics* as offering a new perspective of the lives and experiences of women of color in the academy. This anthology is not an attack on academia nor a call to transform it, per se. Our intention is to recognize and celebrate a little-known fact in our profession: there are many women of color who are doing more than barely surviving—some are actually thriving. However, we also do not intend to paint an unrealistic, rosy picture of the experiences of a select few women of color in the academy. The stories in the following pages are not necessarily happy endings, but they do an excellent job of documenting and celebrating journeys of overcoming, speaking up, and owning your personhood.

As we said at the beginning of this introduction, this is a celebration. Please join us.

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