BOOK REVIEWS

Narratives from Women of Color in the Halls of Academe

by Pat Washington

Rochelle Garner, *CONTESTING THE TERRAIN OF THE IVORY TOWER: SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE ACADEMY.* New York: Routledge, 2004. 137p. notes. bibl. index. \$105.00, ISBN 0-415-94798-7.

Conchita Y. Battle & Chontrese M. Doswell, eds., *BUILDING BRIDGES FOR WOMEN OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SUCCESS*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004. 184p. \$40.00, ISBN 978-0761827856.

Theodorea Regina Berry & Nathalie D. Mizelle, eds., *FROM OPPRESSION TO GRACE: WOMEN OF COLOR AND THEIR DILEMMAS WITHIN THE ACADEMY*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2006. 264p. \$24.95, ISBN 978-1579221119.

 \mathbf{T} he few women of color who manage to enter the halls of academe as students, faculty, or administrators quickly discover an entrenched and finely tuned system of gendered and raced privilege, power, and exclusionary practices. Learning to navigate the multi-tiered academic systems of oppression and pass survival strategies along to other women of color is both a rite of passage and a badge of honor for academic women of color. We are ever eager to learn more about the lived experiences of our academic sisters, and we are ever hopeful that they will show us the way not only to survive, but also to thrive, within the increasingly multihued but, nonetheless, still overwhelmingly "ivory" tower.

I recently had the mixed pleasure/pain of reading three books that promise meaningful recommendations for enhancing the likelihood that women of color will succeed in the academy. In my estimation as both a casualty and a survivor of predominantly white universities, these books cover a wide spectrum in terms of the quality of their insights and recommendations for

women of color in today's U.S.-based, post—Civil Rights institutions of higher learning. I begin with what I perceive to be the least satisfying of the three texts and conclude with the one that met, and often exceeded, my expectations of what a survival manual for women of color academicians should be.

Rochelle Garner's *Contesting* the Terrain of the Ivory Tower: Spiritual Leadership of African-American Women in the Academy promises to show how the spirituality of African American women college administrators "manifested itself in their everyday leadership practice and how it could serve in a transformative way to help create change in higher education" (p. xiii). The book purports to be a response to Garner's central research question, "What are the ways in which African-American women have used their spirituality as a lens to lead, and how does this leadership impact the social, cultural, and political construct in a male-dominated arena?" While the value added when African American women are given the rare opportunity to assume leadership positions in U.S. universities and colleges is a significant topic for consideration, Garner's book falls short of its promise and is problematic for several reasons.

To begin, Garner places the weight of her hypothesis — that "spirituality" manifests itself in the everyday leadership practices of African American women in ways that "transform" the academy - on the backs of only three research subjects, all associate deans at predominantly White institutions. This she does without offering the traditional caveat about the limitations of the study or the dangers of generalizing the study's findings to all African American women leaders in the academy - and indeed, she implies, via sweeping generalizations throughout the text, that her findings are widely applicable. The reliability of data drawn from Garner's small pool of research subjects is further compromised by the process of participant selection. The author tells

us that she got referrals from "various administrators and faculty members [whom she asked to identify] women who might possibly 'fit' this study." Presumably, women who did not "fit" were not recommended, or included in Garner's study; therefore, no data emerged that might have called the book's hypothesis into question.

Garner attempts to make up for these shortcomings through an extensive literature review and a brief history of Black women's experiences within higher education, including glimpses into the lives of three iconic African American female educators: Lucy Diggs Slowe, Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Mcleod Bethune. Nonetheless, surprisingly absent from Garner's literature review are the works of Toni Denton King, who writes extensively about Black women's leadership, and Deborah King, who writes extensively about Black women's spirituality. The latter's absence was especially troubling, given the way Garner subsequently attributed her recognition of Black women's "triple jeopardy" to reading DuBois. Moreover, although Garner provides evidence of a nexus between Bethune's spirituality (specifically her Christian faith) and educational leadership, her accounts of Slowe and Cooper are void of any explicit or implied references to spirituality and, hence, lend nothing to her hypothesis that African American women "use their spirituality as a lens to lead" (p.4).

The case studies of the three contemporary African American women associate deans suffer a similar defect. The connection between spirituality — however defined — and leadership — however enacted — is unclear. To be sure, we learn that "Adjuoa" defines spirituality as "listening to and being talked to by whomever you consider

your higher being," that "Jewell" defines spirituality as "matching up personal and collective energy and synergy," and that "Chaka" defines spirituality as "a belief in that supreme being whose essence is one of holiness with total positive regard for us and always wanting us to aspire to be like that being" (p.59). However, the reader never sees, except in the most abstract terms, outcomes that have been informed by spirituality. These abstract terms — replete with references to "service," "servanthood," and "othermothering," are inherently connected to the master narrative of Black women as nurturers. This, for me, is the most problematic aspect of Garner's work. Although she promises to reveal "a more pragmatic model of leadership" by showing how her three subjects "have acquired and maintained their success by interweaving their spirituality into their leadership" (p.40), Garner largely defaults to unfortunate stereotypes about Black women's "servitude" that are rooted in an historically racist dominant culture, as well as in an historically sexist Black culture.

Ultimately, Contesting the Terrain of the Ivory Tower: Spiritual Leadership of African-American Women in the Academy is just another testament to how Black women are "mules of the world," or "handmaidens of the academy" — selflessly serving, serving, serving. I must confess that I wasn't prepared to have a book that was supposedly about Black women contesting the academic status quo be so resoundingly about Black women's presumed "natural affinity" for service — yet again.

Women of color in *Building*Bridges use a lot of water imagery to describe their experiences of the academy: "calm waters," "troubled water," and "white water." And they don't

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forget the women who "waded in the water" before them. Indeed, *Building Bridges for Women of Color in Higher Education* is a monument to foremothers who struggled to make a space for women of color in the academy, as well as a signpost for successive generations.

The book is designed to be a resource manual for women of color in the academy. As the editors astutely note, however, women of color need more than book smarts to survive an environment where their very presence is a threat to a racial and gender hierarchy that revolves around White males maintaining their grip on positions of power and authority. Thus, *Building Bridges for Women of Color in Higher Education* is intended to "complement the reader's competitive edge by creating a forum of collective voices from women of color in the academy."

A number of recommendations in this volume will be useful to women of color pursuing academic careers, particularly those in tenure track positions or those interested in administrative posts. There is timeless advice about choosing one's career path carefully because of the difficulties one is likely to encounter if one attempts to "cross" academic career ladders; there are examples of women of color who entered the academy late but, nonetheless, were successful in their pursuits because of the particular constellation of events and circumstances in their lives; there are also important insights about the consequences for Black women faculty

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when department review committees fail to acknowledge ways in which a faculty member's race and gender may impact student teaching evaluations. A number of additional themes are covered in this volume, including the notion that women of color pursue careers in the academy to build legacies or create pathways for those succeeding them; the pitfalls of being the first faculty of color hired, the only faculty of color hired, or the faculty of color who gets hired under duress; the expectation that women of color will teach and conduct research about their racial-ethnic group versus more expansive disciplinary subjects; and the importance of viable mentoring relationships. Given the paucity of writings about experiences of women of color in the academy, Building Bridges for Women of Color in Higher Education will be a welcome resource for the discerning reader.

I emphasize discernment, however, because — in contrast to the Garner text, which was overly abstract and lacking in direct applicability — Building Bridges for Women of Color in Higher Education may suffer from being overly prescriptive — too much of a one-size-fits-all "dress" for success. Although the contributors to this volume offer many important insights from the trenches of academic life as they have experienced it, they fail to provide caveats regarding the particularity

of some of the situations described, as well as the unique configurations of intellect, street smarts, mentoring networks, geography, and other factors that may or may not work for other women in other circumstances. This is a significant drawback for a book purporting to be a "practical guide for success" in higher education.

Granted, the collection offers a multitude of voices and a variety of recommendations for successfully navigating a system that is largely inhospitable to women of color. As a result, there is a vast array of survival strategies from which to choose. Here, again, however, discernment is necessary because some of the advice given is overly simplistic and, taken in context of the collection as a whole, often contradictory. What stands out for me in this respect are contrasting perspectives on the relative levels of visibility, or invisibility, women of color should maintain in order to survive in the academy. For instance, some contributors advised staying under the radar of potential detractors by being quiet about one's successes so that one is not perceived as a threat to departmental colleagues. Other contributors urged women of color to become their "own public relations persons," or to turn hyper-scrutiny on its head by touting their successes throughout their academic networks. How women of color should be present in the academy (and just how present they should be) is one of several critical issues that could have benefited from editorial intervention or contextualization — for instance, having the editors situate contributors' voices along a continuum of experiences, or within a framework that explored the "triple jeopardy" women of color experience in the academy because of race and gender stereotypes. Without such context or framework, the collection runs the risk of being viewed

simply as an eclectic mix or, worse, an under-moderated cacophony of voices.

Missing also, in terms of editorial framework or contextualization, is any reference to the contemporary, post-Civil Rights environment for women of color currently entering the academy. Given their lengthy academic careers, it is likely that many of the women who contributed to this volume "came of age" in the academy during a radically different sociopolitical climate. This is not to say that women of color who "benefited" from judicial rulings and legislation of the 1960s and 1970s had an easy time of it; it is simply to suggest that the women of color for whom this book is intended as a resource will be trying to navigate a terrain that may differ markedly from that of previous eras. Again, the book would have benefited from an overview of the worsening climate for academic women of color in this post-Civil Rights era, including the losses incurred through affirmative action rollbacks, the growing conservatism of the judiciary, and the narrowing of educational access.

One final, albeit minor, criticism of the book is the number of typographical errors that made it past the proofreaders — e.g., "a rye" instead of "awry"; "skillin" instead of "skill in," etc. My annoyance with these errors is not so much that I am a stickler for perfection. It's more that, as a Black female academic myself, I know that women of color don't need to give detractors reasons to discount their work. The information provided on these pages is too valuable to be dismissed because of a few editorial gaffes.

Despite the weaknesses I outline above, *Bridges for Women of Color in Higher Education* is well worth reading and makes a significant contribution to the body of work on the experiences of academic women of color. At the end of the day, the book reinforces the deep and abiding sense that — despite the numerous challenges confronting women of color in the academy — working in the academy is a luxury and

a privilege that our forebears struggled to attain for us, and we must, in turn, do all in our power to keep the academy accessible and make it increasingly hospitable for those who will come after us.

 ${\bf B}_{\!\scriptscriptstyle y}$ all accounts, to be a successful woman of color in the academy is to be an anomaly. As noted in the introduction to From Oppression to Grace: Women of Color and Their Dilemmas within the Academy, "some facet of [our] multidimensional being[s] is always a problem, a dilemma for someone" (p.xiii), and being problematized means constantly struggling to avoid being maligned, eradicated, and explained away - physically and philosophically. One of the contributors to this volume appropriately questions the underlying

assumption of the title, stating that it wrongly implies "development and growth from being freedom impoverished to freedom enriched" (p.69). Indeed, her observation reflects one of

the resounding themes of the book: women of color don't reach a point where they are firmly ensconced in a place of "grace" within the academy. Rather, they find themselves occupying "in-between spaces" of empowerment and oppression at every level.

FROM OPPRESSION TO GRACE Women of Color and Their Dilemmas within the Academy

One of the book's many strengths is the racial and experiential diversity of its contributors, who include women of African, Latina, Korean, East Indian, Japanese, and Native American descent. The book is divided into three

parts to reflect what, under "normal" circumstances, would be the "traditional" life cycle of the academic. Part One, "Move On Up a Little Higher: Completing the Terminal Degree," offers narratives from women completing their doctoral studies. Part Two, "Pride

and Prejudice: Finding Your Place after the Degree," moves to the next segment of the academic continuum by adding the voices of junior faculty women who are largely coming to grips with the demands of the tenure process. Part Three, "Words of Womanhood Wisdom: Voices of Senior Faculty Who Are Women of Color," is both informative and symbolic. With only two contributors, this section reminds us of how few women of color hold senior positions within the academy.

This edited volume delivers on its promise to use a critical race feminist approach to discuss the multiple identities and social positionalities of women of color, including the ways in which women of color navigate academic environments, as well as the broader environment of the dominant culture. The authors use personal narratives as discourses of resistance. Through these narratives we learn that if "grace"

means reaching a place of empowerment, then the "grace" that women of color experience within the academy is precarious at best. Contributors describe "vacillat[ing] between feelings of success and defeat," or "occupying multiple and sometimes overlapping spaces" that don't coexist easily with each other. For example, Tiffany Lee reflects on having to endure the marginalization of Navajo culture and personal challenges to her Navajo identity, only to enter the academy to be faced with similar manifestations of marginalization. Menthia Clark's characterization of herself as someone who is "dis-dancing" between the dictates of academia, or her "intellectual" self, and those of her "Southern" self compliments Kiran Katira's recognition of her multiple identities as an" East African Asian Indian." An international scholar, Katira occupies a revealing position as someone who has experienced multiple forms of racism in the Unites States and abroad. Indeed, the multiple positionalities of the women featured in From Oppression to Grace make it one of the richest texts available regarding the contemporary experiences of women of color in the academy.

Key themes of the book include identity formation and reformation; tensions around gendered expectations of women of color students and faculty; expectations that women will fulfill their biological roles as mothers, regardless of academic accomplishments; stereotypes about how successful women somehow emasculate the men in their lives; biases around the intellectual contributions of women of color; expectations that a single woman of color can "stand in" for an entire racial-ethnic group; the travails of graduate study; necessary adjustments in academic understandings and endeavors; setbacks in academic pursuits; and analyses of the impact of race and gender on decision-making processes.

The narratives of oppression and resistance are powerful, and the accounts of daily exposure to overt and covert racism and sexism are all too familiar, ranging from Huckaby's account of the statue of the Klansman that graced her campus to Baszile's

description of the "epistemic violence" of an academy that "profess[es] a commitment to critical thinking and social justice, but at the same time continue[s] to prescribe to standards, traditions, and ways of knowing that are meant to maintain the hegemonic order" (p.197). Ming Fang He makes a significant contribution to the "resistance to oppression" theme by reminding us that women of color also have to resist the oppressor that is within us, and that we need to recognize the ways in which some aspect of our own privilege allows us to victimize others. This is an important insight, particularly given the fact that, as Kiran Katira reminds us, Asians are "basically ignored by more marginalized people of color; sometimes dismissed as hopelessly assimilated to White culture," despite "the long history, tradition, and present-day reality of Asian social justice activism" (p.83).

An interestingly different slant in this particular book can be found in the way several of the contributors offer refreshingly unapologetic acknowledgments that, while they intend to share the benefits of their academic training with their communities of origins, they are also pursuing doctoral studies and academic careers for personal fulfillment. These writers also remind us that we certainly cannot move from oppression to grace without first acknowledging that we cannot be "all things to all people" — a healthy antidote to Garner's altar call to "servanthood."

The most resounding theme in From Oppression to Grace is the pressing need for more women of color to occupy meaningful roles at all levels of the academy. Each section vividly reminds us that women of color do occupy a unique role in the academy — a role that is fraught with multiple burdens that require the use of multiple resistance strategies. And, while we

do achieve a measure of grace because of the opportunities we are afforded through our privileged positions as academics, ultimately, any "grace" we enjoy comes from our amazing capacity to "make a way out of no way" — our recognition that we are there to empower our students, our communities — and, yes, even the academy that questions our right to belong there.

In both form and content, From Oppression to Grace captures the "lived experience" of diverse women of color in the academy. The contributors provide nuanced understandings of the experiences of women of color both as individuals and as gendered members of particular racial/ethnic groups who find themselves at various career levels. The one quarrel I have with this otherwise stellar work is its heteronormative subtext. One of the editors and several authors discussed the impact of being seen as less than adequate as women because they hadn't produced children or married, were divorced, or had to jostle dual-career realities. One contributor had an entire section on "spousing," which detailed the various stages of an ultimately failed marriage. While these women cannot be expected to theorize about lived experiences beyond their own personal identities, hopefully future texts will build upon the issues handled so well in this volume by being more inclusive of a broader array of academic women of color — to include sexuality, disability, and other social locations.

Nonetheless, the writers in this volume make profound contributions to a broader understanding of the richness that emerges from attending to the intersections of race, gender, class, nationality, and other factors. They chart multiple courses for developing more effective resistance strategies and strategies for ending the isolation that

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so many women of color still experience in academic environments. This book opens us to a world of women-of-color academics who are dynamic and resilient, women who won't allow themselves to be strait-jacketed in gendered and raced systems of oppressions of either the dominant culture or our communities of origins. These women remind us that none of us should allow oppressive academic environments, cultures, and practices to kill our spirits, unduly stunt our intellectual growth, or diminish or discount our contributions.

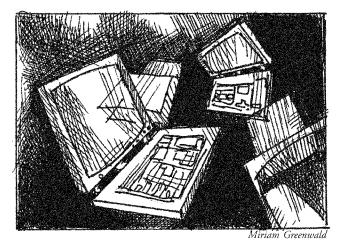
As more women of color pursue higher education, we can only hope

that an increasing number of them will stay on to build life-long careers in the academy. If this hope is to be realized, we must do all we can to eliminate the barriers that confront aspiring women of color academicians or cause women of color, in general, to bypass the academy altogether. The editors, authors, and contributors of the texts above speak to a number of these barriers the social isolation, excessive tokenism, raced and gendered stereotypes, and both covert and overt hostility. Equally important, they offer counternarratives of hope and resilience, as well as practical strategies for survival and uplift. Although not all three texts are equally thought-provoking — and although

each has shortcomings — all, nonetheless, provide a potential pathway "from oppression to grace."

[Pat Washington is an award-winning teacher, scholar, and activist who has published extensively on the impact of race, class, gender and sexuality on people's access to social resources. She has received numerous awards and commendations for her service, civic engagement, and commitment to social justice, as well as for her efforts to promote alliances across categories of age, race, sexuality, gender, social class and disability.]

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