



## **From Oppression to Grace Women of Color and Their Dilemmas within the Academy**

Eds. Theodora Regina Berry and Nathalie D. Mizelle, Stylus Publishing, 2006  
*Reviewed by Susan J. Weaver, University of the Cumberland*

**D**r. Theodora Berry and Dr. Nathalie Mizelle Sterling have compiled a collection of narratives that help readers to understand the unique framework within which women of color experience personal and professional challenges. Contributors represent diverse racial and ethnic groups that fall under the category of women of color. The writers reflect on cultural traditions, determination, critical thinking, and strong decisions that they have faced. Their candor is refreshing, and, at times, borders on edgy, as each contributor shares a struggle to clarify personal goals and values while fighting internal and external expectations that try to force them into compliance with the expectations of others.

Although every writer focuses on relationships, each adds a unique dimension. Some of the articles reflect dilemmas of career women in general: how to deal with status conflicts, role expectations, and status inconsistency. Other articles involve topics that range from research, theory, history, glass ceiling, cultural conflicts, and immigration to national security in a post 9/11 world. For example, Tinaya Webb shares her story of independence while acknowledging historical and social roots of male power issues, traditional gender expectations, and the temptation to nurture a toxic relationship. Ming Fang He reflects on awareness of the treatment received by her father, an intellectual, during the Cultural Revolution, in discussing levels of “in-between” experiences in education, cultures, languages, values, political ideology, and connection with other Chinese people. Sonia Nieto explores differences in perception between “Nuyoricans” and people born in Puerto Rico, and the sense of feeling like an outsider in both America and Puerto Rico. Kiran Katira uses Critical Race Theory to analyze status inconsistency caused by her connection with higher education versus status as a woman of Asian descent living in the Southwest. There are many more, and each is unique.

Although enhanced by these reflections, the book’s core theme is the experience of women in higher education. Dr. Berry, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, at Lewis University, and Mizelle, Assistant Professor in the Department of Rehabilitation Studies at East Carolina University, chose articles that touch on different aspects of studying and working in a highly competitive system that lacks awareness of the ways that race and gender become factors in that competition. There is allusion to an intensified version of what Bernice Sandler called the “chilly climate” for women. Minority women often have difficulty finding a mentor, especially one who understands the challenges facing minorities. Search of mentors sometimes leads them to the offices of persons with the attitude of “I got mine, now you get yours.” They are made painfully aware that they are “filling all the slots” and deal with expectations of employers who are so happy that “we got one.” They are expected to serve “as a model and as a resource” to mentor, teach, and serve on

committees, regardless of the toll that this takes on their academic pursuits. There are professional pitfalls as they try to walk the line between being a “pushover” and being “completely unreasonable”. Despite seemingly unending expectations, women of color are considered “the outsider” and have a difficult time finding the collegiality that is expected of the academy. Tiffany Lee talks about academic research standards that expected her to see her heritage from the outsider’s perspective, and the challenge that she had to use her strong sense of self to defend the value of a community based approach of indigenous research. In addition to identifying the higher education issues, this book provides many ideas for solving problems. Cassandra Sligh DeWalt outlines the necessity of identifying support persons and maintaining a level head while talking with others to identify rational resolutions.

In addition to a source of encouragement, analytic insight, and guidance for minority women, I think this book would have great value as a reader in a higher education administration, personnel, women’s studies or sociology of sex and gender course. Although each article is excellent, they vary considerably in complexity. The detailed index, rare in a reader, enhances the books value as a teaching tool. Most importantly, this book does an excellent job connecting historical theories and perspectives with contemporary contexts. Berry reminds readers that identity is a gendered, racialized, and historical construct that usually places women of color on the periphery of society. She provides clear explanations of how the evolution of Critical Legal Studies (which challenged assumptions behind the law) led to Critical Race Theory (which distinguished the experience of White women from that of men of color), which led to Critical Race Feminism (which distinguishes the unique experiences of men and women of color) (p. xvi). Dr. Craig Nelson, author and faculty developer, asserts that there is value in having students in the dominant group stand back and listen to dialogue of minorities talk about their educational experience. With this book, Dr. Berry and Dr. Mizelle bring forth important issues and insights. A reader feels honored to sit in as these amazing women share their educational, cultural, and personal experiences.



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