REVIEW ESSAY:
No Day at the Beach: Women “Making It” in Academia

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The closet, it matters. The admitted “inspiration” for the first of these three “making it” collections (Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition [WWMIRC] 2008) begins, anecdotally, with deep admiration of another senior female faculty member’s “impeccable” wardrobe and style (alongside her other impeccable features). The coeditors of WWMIRC (Bal-lif, Davis, and Mountford) predicate their work in bringing together this 2008 volume on “the desire to spy on the closets—or the personal and professional choices—of the successful women in our field, in order to see how they ‘made it’” (viii). This closet study (and perhaps even closet envy) circulates—sometimes literally but always figuratively—throughout each of these three collections.

In starting with/in the closet, we couldn’t, then, help but think of our own literal and figurative closets. Here is Brenda’s story.

Although I was told often in the “developing” years of my academic career that I dressed well—“with such clean lines,” said one sign language interpreter who often worked with me, and “with cool colors and accents,” according to a student in an evaluation—I always felt that my literal (and figurative) closet was somewhere in the late August near-wild state of a once-great backyard garden: Lots of great things growing but also now a bit sprung out of control as well. And this great growth bordering on being just a bit weedy and wild applied not just to my clothes closet, but to my to-do list and “projects in progress” as well. I tried to throw it all together as best I could. Some days, no doubt, were better than others.

Rachel has a similar story.

Returning to graduate school after acts of downsizing (both marital and spatial), I learned that one closet can serve many purposes: coat, clothes, linen, and utility. With an extra wardrobe cabinet, I can squeeze in my collection of Ann Taylor slacks and scarves for every season, but the doors don’t close. For me, the “impeccable closet” is not an option—and I’ve been relieved to find mentors who live in the mess. One of my transformative grad school moments (as I narrate it now) was opening one of my mentor’s kitchen cabinets to find an assorted jumble of boxes and jars—and crumbs. Like my closet, my professional persona seems to expand and shift, not containable behind a neat, sleek façade, and I feel most confident and competent when learning from, with, and alongside women for whom things are not kept in the “perfect” place—because there is no such thing. I no longer want to be “the” successful female academic with an impeccable closet; I want to be “a” generous feminist educator with crumbs in her cupboards.

One thing is very clear coming out of these closets: how we (women) in the academy present ourselves—and relate to each other—really matters. In an effort to organize the closet(s) of this review essay, we intend to first critically summarize each of the three collections; then we will narratively synthesize our
own experiences with four prominent themes across these collections: knowing, balance, mentoring, and change. In our four-part woven analysis, we see (and tell) tales from women about what has been lurking in the academy’s closet and what still needs to change.

**Triangulating the Art and Acts of “Making It”**

The first of these three books, chronologically, *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition* (2008) [*WWMIRC*] situates itself squarely (and roundly) in the already feminized field of rhetoric and composition. It is addressed to a newer generation of scholars who are just beginning to enter the field (wave to Rachel), and it does so by shining light into the somewhat darkened closets—the strategies and stories—of those who have already “succeeded” in the field (wave to Brenda). It is a baton-passing book. The common concerns, or pulse points, in this volume center around sexism (including that from other older academic women), balance (between career and family, personal and professional), earning respect, mentoring, being/becoming productive (publish!), finding a/your voice, and once you’ve found that voice, using it to say NO.

A survey of some 180 women in the field stands behind the construction of *WWMIRC*, and “succeeding” is clearly the mantra as echoed in many of the chapter titles. The volume makes other interesting structural moves by offering four major sections: (1) *Becoming a Professional*, a section focused, in dual chapters, on the graduate school years and being on the job market. (2) *Thriving as a Professional*, three chapters that address success across various levels and points of one’s career. (3) *And Having a Life, Too*, two chapters that consider ways to “have a life” beyond one’s academic/work life. (4) *Being a Professional: Profiles in Success*, a concluding section of 130 pages (just over one-third of the book) that features more developed case studies based on interviews with nine important senior women in rhetoric and composition. Overall, this collection seems aimed at the “pretty seamless” integrated academic life that one interview with Cynthia Selfe leans toward. Ironically, Selfe’s real “in the closet” story about getting to that seamless integration is definitely one of a wardrobe seeming to not quite “fit” for some time.

*Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers* (2013) [*RS*] is a collection edited by three women featuring 14 essays; out of the 17 total authors, four are men. The volume began, the three coeditors claim, as a critical response to the limited ways they believed that *Women’s Ways of Making It* presented “success” for academics overall and for academic women in particular. We might say then that *Rewriting Success* pulls together an outfit from the back-of-the-closet clothes not much worn in *WWMIRC*. 
Amy Goodburn, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz began their work on this volume by contacting 18 PhD programs in Rhetoric and Composition and asking for help locating graduates who had chosen nonacademic jobs. They report that there was considerable befuddlement from the program directors they contacted even over that question, as many expressed difficulty in “imagining how a PhD in rhetoric and composition might lead to anything but a tenure-track job” (xiv). Yet clearly it does. The authors in this volume hold a wide variety of positions outside the vaunted tenure track. Some of those include teaching writing in marginalized institutional positions not on the tenure track (at a community college, at a tribal college, as a technical communication director), being a writer at large, working as a nonprofit executive director, empirically researching technology design and use, editing technical writing, consulting for a law firm, and serving as a technology specialist for a major textbook publishing firm that produces many of the books in our field. From these alternative career vantage points, the coeditors of Rewriting Success then come back, in the book’s third section, to offer a closing four essays (two of which are collaboratively written) all leaning toward intervention and change “by providing alternative forms of training and professionalization, models of scholarship, and faculty work profiles” (xx). Both WWMRIC and RS, situated in rhetoric and composition, demonstrate that stories of success in our field are mediated by disciplinary narratives of the woes and wonders of writing research, teaching, and administration.

Weighing in at 570 pages, the combined length of WWMRIC and RS, Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia (2012) [PI] breaks out of disciplinary silos to ask how higher education reflects, reproduces, and (sometimes) subverts inequitable social hierarchies for women and men of color and those who identify as working class. Presumed Incompetent organizes essays from 42 women of color across disciplines into five sections: General Campus Climate, Faculty/Student Relationships, Networks of Allies, Social Class in Academia, and Tenure and Promotion. The introduction articulates that this collection offers qualitative research (in the form of surveys, interviews, and individual as well as collective experiences) to put stories to long-standing (and perhaps therefore familiar and effaced) statistics. While numerical representation of faculty members of color has increased, the percentage of full-time faculty members of color is not rising in proportion to the number of enrolled students of color. More troubling still, women of color are even more underrepresented in full-time positions and overrepresented in lower ranks and at “less prestigious” institutions.

The problem, editors Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris, argue, is not just numerical—it is cultural, even for those who have advanced to more prestigious academic institu-
tions or higher ranks. And it is a problem—of power, structure, and paradoxical expectations—that both precedes and infuses academic workplaces. One key paradox is writ large in the title: women of color are hired as academic faculty but are always already presumed incompetent by their peers, administrators, and students. For example, in one essay, “Present and Unequal: A Third-Wave Approach to Voice Parallel Experiences in Managing Oppression and Bias in the Academy,” Kimberly R. Moffitt, Heather E. Harris, and Diane A. Forbes Berthoud argue that female faculty members of color struggle to appear competent, experienced, qualified, educated, and expert in ways that we as a culture typically link to education but that are also complicated by our own outdated, inaccurate—and continually pervasive—assumptions regarding race and gender. The felt paradox of presumed incompetence extends further when female faculty members of color are then asked to do more than their white male or white female counterparts in the form of service on diversity committees and in additional teaching and mentoring of both undergraduate and graduate students.

The stories—and arguments—presented in *Presumed Incompetent* echo some of those in our own disciplinary narrative grooves in rhetoric and composition: of “having” to work harder just to survive in a hostile work environment (Holling et al., ch. 17), of being asked to do more institutionally invisible care labor at the expense of much-needed self-care (Wallace et al., ch. 28), and of deeply internalized feelings of alienation and isolation (Bowen, ch. 8). As this collection’s existence implies, what we need in the academy is more testimony. We need wit and wisdom from women with a variety of experiences to help us face the challenge of the twenty-first century—which still remains the challenge of equity and equality and the continued need to speak truth to power (González, Part V, intro.). The call that this collection renders most visible—and attempts to respond to—is the need for balance, for critique, and just as importantly, for story.

In sum, these three collections hold the accumulated wisdom and stories of 10 coeditors and 62 authors in a total of 60 chapters. Yet the tone and tenor of each collection by no means presents a singular solution—or an impeccable closet. Many of the tales in the two rhetoric and composition collections—*WWMIRC* and *Rewriting Success*—are tinged with exhaustion, bitterness, and disappointment—an enduring narrative in our field (see Enos; George; Holbrook; Micciche; Miller) as a result of being made to feel inferior and inadequate in departments historically dominated by predominantly (and increasingly now problematic) period-based literary studies. Both *WWMIRC* and *RS* have emerged, then, from a complex disciplinary landscape. The first wave of composition scholars established our field, creating a discipline out of textbooks and lore (before we even called it lore). The second wave added their growing clout to make our field even more robust (think “foremothers” like Andrea Lunsford after “forefathers”
like her mentor, Edward P.J. Corbett). Now the third wave (represented by the editors of these collections), with additional distance from those origins, is looking back, assessing how far we’ve come (or not), and rewriting the scripts we’ve been given and the ones we’ve written ourselves into.

As a foil to these two collections, Presumed Incompetent shows us that, while our departmental wounds might still run deep, problems for women in the academy are not limited to our disciplinary disappointment—and this interdisciplinary collection makes this point by adding agentive anger to the mix and asserting that it is everyone’s responsibility to take action and speak back to power. Presumed Incompetent has emerged from and alongside persistent national narratives of campus and community protests about racial injustice, particularly after the deaths of black youths in police custody and in the public eye. Racial inequities extend into higher education, where calls for faculty diversity are present but difficult to carry out in light of the lack of diversity recruitment and sustained support in graduate programs. Before female faculty members of color arrive at their hiring institutions, white privilege and myths of meritocracy have contributed to and masked pervasive racism and sexism as part of campus culture (Harris and Gonzalez 1–3). Daily injustices are doled out in academic microaggressions (Boyd, ch. 19) while long-term institutional barriers to change and advancement are embedded in the obduracy and fickleness of tenure and promotion practices (Armstrong and Wildman, ch. 15; Gonzalez, part 5, intro; Wing, ch. 24). Amid these challenges—which are even more tangled and treacherous for women of color than they are for white women—Presumed Incompetent vehemently asserts that inequity is a higher education problem that demands transcending disciplinary silos in order to speak back to power, oppression, and stereotypes and contribute to abating social injustice in and beyond the academy (Cantor, Part 3, intro).

Finally, although tone and tenor, approach and emotions vary some across these three collections, they all share significantly in their attention to four predominant themes that shape women’s lives in the academy overall, and in rhetoric and composition as a field more specifically: knowing, balance, mentoring, change.

Learning in the Land of Knowing

Most of the women writing in these collections occupy positions as both knowers and learners, and they acknowledge that, as scholars, we generally understand that we should and can be both. However, when performing in the workplace, academics seem to prefer knowing, and safe spaces for learning are often elusive. Thus, in all three of these collections, knowing is often emphasized as integral
to “success.” And with good reason, since the material consequences of not knowing include being taken advantage of by those who do know and who, then, also have and exercise their power to speak that knowledge into being as an uninterrogated norm.

For the women in these collections, performing knower and learner is a delicate balancing act to be sure—both because they are (often) new and because they are female. Newcomers have an especially difficult time grappling with authority and expertise in their transitions from graduate students to junior faculty members. Graduate students are imbued with a “need to know” but situated within an authorized position of learning across domains of teaching, research, and professionalization. Yet, as faculty, women feel expected to have mastered the professional learning curve and to be ready to perform constant knower. The challenge of being a newcomer is further compounded by gendered and raced expectations for female faculty members at any level, particularly for tenure-track female faculty members of color—who are supposed to know by virtue of their ascension into academic ranks, yet also “presumed incompetent” across areas of professionalization by multiple groups (students, colleagues, administrators).

In *WWMIRC*, the (knowing) standard is not necessarily male, but the notion of a single standard is not shaken or interrogated enough. The knower-learner split is still markedly present in the book’s opening narrative of the immaculate closet. Faculty members already know how to “make it,” and graduate students need to know in order to unlock the secret to success and get “it” together. *WWMIRC* works to crack open the unknown in handbook/guide (i.e., learner) form using the anticipated chronology of a standard academic career: finding a mentor, conferencing, publishing, dissertating, going on the job market. Even in doing this work, *WWMIRC* does not suggest alternative paths to knowing or learning outside of laying bare the secrets of success confirmed by the impeccable closet.

Yet women’s struggles in academia occur in scenes that are anything but impeccable and do not end with the learning curve of graduate school. In *Presumed Incompetent* and *Rewriting Success*, women’s struggles have largely to do with transparency and values in ways that crack the prefabricated and triangulated work plan boundaries of research, teaching, and service. In *PI*, what female faculty of color need to know is a lengthy list that includes negotiating and enduring microaggressions behind closed doors (Armstrong and Wildman, ch. 15; Boyd, ch. 19); addressing biased measures of assessment (e.g., teaching evaluations; see Lazos, ch. 12); navigating extra committee work or teaching loads to meet the needs of diverse students (Kupenda, ch. 1); and learning the confidence for self-promotion (Võ, ch. 7), even while this might be in conflict with home cultures and ways of being (Jacob, ch. 16). Unfortunately, female
faculty members receive uneven support from peers and administrators, who are themselves unevenly informed. For example, in “Stepping In and Stepping Out,” Cerise L. Glenn frames her experience in terms of anticipatory organization socialization—the process by which people learn professional roles in occupational settings (135). Glenn tells the story of a colleague who was presumed to know everything about race and gender because she was a black woman, but had to prove her competency to the department chair in order to teach core subjects not marked by race and gender (138). For female faculty members of color, then, the process of learning to be an academic involves learning what your colleagues think you know (that you may not) and having to continuously prove what you actually do know about your field.

In Rewriting Success, we have the disciplinary possibility of laying bare “how” non-tenure-track faculty and alternative academic professionals—and those who mentor them—help themselves and each other to refashion alternative models of success. On this score, RS delivers, expanding what we know about success—in the two-year college, for contingent faculty, or as a technical writing editor. But the narratives of success, alternative though they may be, still often occlude the messiness of how alternative narrative trajectories might be learned, made more transparent, and supported systematically.

What we still need are not more tellings of knowledge not as a static object, a singular or collective set of things we should know, but mappings of knowledge-making as a dynamic process, as the ability to figure out how to know and learn in unfamiliar, unfriendly, often outright hostile institutional environments. Unfortunately, this is no easy feat when the status quo of knowing—and knowledge as static object—is so historically entrenched in our institutions, practices, and our very thinking. Learning how to learn, rather than to know, cannot be emphasized enough in these triangulated collections. In a recent review of feminist WPA work, Laura Micciche and Donna Strickland maintain that there has to be more to feminism than collaboration; similarly, knowing how to be a (female) academic, there has to be more to success than identifying specific (and/or alternative) paths and explaining their difficulties. Our reading of these three collections together suggests to us that there needs to be more “how to learn” in our “how to” stories—not a step-by-step narration, but genuine attempts to dig into the multiple epistemologies and axiologies involved in learning flexible (and fierce) ways of being in academic workplaces when the tools and contexts for our work are rapidly changing. We need stories that do not hold up knowledge as a static object to be acquired that then somehow catapults women (or men) onto a trajectory of success, however long- or hard-won. We need instead to crack open how our situated knowing and learning are mediated by embodied affective responses to institutional pressures and unresponsive structures and
through relationships we make and maintain and not just from knowledge acquired. As Mary Catherine Bateson, author of the classic (feminist) case study/essay/treatise, *Composing a Life*, claims at her website’s home page: “We are not what we know but what we are willing to learn.”

**Balance Be/am**

Balance itself—as a direct term or an articulated concept—really never appears in any of these three volumes. That is, it does not appear in any chapter title or indices. Yet it pulses and flows throughout. It is the beam that shines through all three of these volumes and all sixty of their chapters. Balance pulses in these three collections as the driving force, the push to “be” balanced and the aim to claim “am” balanced—the goal, dream, yearning, and mystery—of academic women’s lives.

In *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, balance appears as a key theme from the survey that Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford conducted online, yielding 142 total respondents. Of the four key themes that emerged from their survey, balance not only appears in, but instigates two of those themes: “Balancing Professional Roles” (9–10) and “Balancing the Personal with the Professional” (11). Yet balance also essentially operates in the other two key themes as well: “Working (with) the Rhetoric/Composition and Literary Studies Tension” (no small balancing act there!) and “Dealing with the Queen Bee” (where surely personal and professional moments of breathing and balance must take place).

Where balance most plays out in *WWMIRC* might well be in Chapter 6, “Searching for Well-Being: Strategies for Having a Life.” This middle-of-the-book chapter even begins balanced between two quotations. The first quotation/epigraph comes from the venerable Mary Catherine Bateson and her groundbreaking little text in 1989, *Composing a Life*, where the binary of “forced choices” gets broken by women (between “work or home, strength or vulnerability, caring or competition …”). The second quotation/epigraph offered to open that chapter is, pointedly, from an anonymous survey respondent who tells us: “If you don’t live a balanced life, your initiatives probably aren’t sustainable.”

Yet somewhere between just breaking binaries of balance (Bateson) and a dictate that a “balanced life” equals sustainable initiatives, the nine case studies in this volume illustrate, again and again, that this work/life and personal/professional balance is … what you make of it. While Patricia Bizzell is called out as a notable example of a woman who has successfully isolated her home and work life, (ch. 8), others like Cheryl Glenn (ch. 10) write at/from home (in
the morning)—thus starting and centering their home life with work—and then
go to campus in the mid-afternoon. Or, as Cindy Selfe offers in her case-study
interview, a more work-at-home and home-at-work approach might be taken
where, she happily admits, “our scholarly life and our academic life and our life
outside of school are very integrated” and “my work and my life are the same
thing” (304). Balance then, on the be/am, can be a separation of the spheres (of
work/home and personal/professional), a re-placement of the spheres (working
at home, making work very home-like), or a more fuzzily blurred “line” between
and “integration” of these often-presumed separate spheres.

In *Rewriting Success*, at least two chapters particularly work “balance” through
the near-parallel constructions of “negotiating” and “bridging.” Jennifer Ahern-
Dodson’s “Composing a Life: Negotiating Personal, Professional and Activist
Commitments within the Academy” not only suggests balances (between two
life-work elements) but triangulates, importantly, between personal, professional,
and academic sides of herself and her “work.” And as is rhetorically fitting, each
side of this triangle impacts and relates to the other two sides. Ahern-Dodson’s
triangulation also invigorates her passion for, and skill at, carrying out “a research
agenda over time through community activism, interdisciplinary collaboration,
and faculty development” (186). Score: Win, win, win.

Likewise, in a balanced project that involved academic undergraduate intern-
ships to help carry out an annual academic conference (SAML, the Southern
Atlantic Modern Language Association), the volume’s final essay bridges “town
and gown” alongside faculty research and undergraduate field-service/intern-
ship work. In “Bridging Town and Gown through Academic Internships,” Lara
Smith-Sitton and Lynée Lewis Gaillet characterize many moments of balance
that interning students must encounter and work through alongside faculty men-
tors in order to successfully carry out a truly collaborative internship program
that offers substantial “benefit [to] both students and the organization” (225).

Balance be/ams are likewise everywhere in *Presumed Incompetent*; presump-
tions (and proof) and incompetence (as well as knowledge and experience)
often rely on being on/in balance. As Beth A. Boyd articulates in “Sharing Our
Gifts,” academic work for women is often “a space where we balance what we
need with what we must do” (281); balanced between needing and doing comes
“success,” which is more than “things like rich, famous, published, or funded”
and perhaps, on balance, more often about “helping our people, connecting to
others, being real, and making things better for our families and communities”
(281). In Boyd’s articulation of academic balance then, the so-called equilibrium
and separation between “work/home” and “personal/professional” becomes
unsettling and imbalancing.
Balancing the presumed academic ideal of a “joint appointment” (across multiple departments of programs) makes for a strong specific case in the myth and mayhem of (academic) balance in *Presumed Incompetent*. In a trialogue between “three self-identified women of color feminists of working-class background who are Chicana, Asian American, and Native” (250), Michelle A. Holling, May C. Fu, and Roe Bubar discuss experientially and politically how their varied “lived experience of joint appointments has differed dramatically from [the] definition [of joint appointments given by their mutual university]” (251). Their triangulated conversation certainly indicates that joint appointments—though first seeming as if they are meaningful ways to balance the interdisciplinary work one wants to do, especially as a woman/academic—are absolutely no day at the beach. Sunburn, sand, soggy sandwiches—it all happens. Holling, Fu, and Bubar chorus, in a three-note chord, on the “double duty and double bind” (260) of this dis/jointed academic work, and they make clear (yet also blur and blend) the myth of such (first seemingly balanced) labor. In the end (and the beginning, too), the balance/lines between work and life can get really blurry, especially when, as Holling indicates in this trialogue, coming from a working-class background, “working is the way you cope: you work to cope and cope by working” (260).

Many mixed emotions arrived at my [Brenda’s] doorstep when I reviewed these three volumes and found my own “academic woman” balance narrative written several times (and some time ago) in the pages of *Women’s Ways of Making it in Rhetoric and Composition* (183, 187, 193). Since this book was published in 2008, I am guessing my survey notes to the editors came to them around 2006. So I am reminded of how *Things Change*, and not always “in balance.” (Much in line, perhaps, with Patricia Bizzell’s own note about her changed marital relationship that occurs as a “Postscript on Changes” [216].) On several pages in *WWMIRC*, I narrate the way that I worked with my spouse at that time, also an academic, to “balance” our workloads while also sharing and raising two young children. Yet as I read that back now, I realize that, while I worked then to carefully narrate a Fairy Tale of Balance . . . it was really not so. The tale was fractured from the outset, but I wanted, desperately, to imagine and render it as one of balance—to make balance BE the story that said, “I AM in balance.” Yet for all the “balance” I claimed in that decade-ago narrative of our toggling schedules and our balanced times with our children and our ways of alternating writing days and child care . . . well, the not-so-balanced reality is that all that happened because I set the schedule and I created the balance.

I was also the only one of the two of us, imbalanced, who took time off the tenure-clock for the birth and care of these two children. I hired the sitters, negotiated their schedules, paid them, wrote up the meal plans, set all the appointments (medical, school, musical, etc.), filled out pretty much all the school
forms, colored and coded the family calendar every day. For the most part, my spouse followed well. But the balancing, I'll be honest, was definitely not mutually shared. And from this decade-past vantage point, I must also then imagine and question at large: How many of us academic women tell ourselves the fairy-tale about the “balance” in our lives? And what are the perceived advantages—and risks—in doing so? What is at stake in believing balance as The Thing We Must (we must!) achieve? Is “balance” an act of “narrative normalcy”—an overdetermined narrative—that also limits other stories we might (and maybe even should) tell?

One thing rhetoric so importantly teaches us is the warp, weft, weight, and wonder of triangulation. Balance is so often thought of as the successful toggling between two major forces. But if you throw in a third, balance takes on a whole new dimension. Triangulation breaks binaries. If, for example, balance is placed in triangulation (as it is even by reviewing these three collections together), it can certainly be an act, carried out by an individual agent, but it can also be a scene—one that incorporates actors, agents, experience, and context.

All three of these volumes—especially triangulated together—create a meaningful tapestry that threads balance throughout the life of academic women.

**Mentoring: Making a Net that Works**

If, as these collections attest, women in academia need to Know and to Balance, the means through which we often seem to learn these acts is mentoring. As a vital relationship-building activity, mentoring is implicit in each collection and often explicitly marked in multiple profiles in *WWMIRC* and in separate sections of *Presumed Incompetent* and *Rewriting Success*.

In *WWMIRC* and *PI*, for their assumed audiences, mentoring is situated in relation to success in academia. In *WWMIRC*, advice begins early on: find a mentor who is “smart, savvy, and successful” (Ballif, Davis, and Mountford 13), find mentors in your department and discipline as well as outside of those bounds, and do it as soon as possible in graduate school. In some sense, *WWMIRC* then attempts to serve as a mentor (presumably in lieu of one for those who might not have one), offering recommendations on everything from job interview fashion to selecting a journal for publication. Roxanne Mountford argues that mentors provide what seminar courses do not, such as guidance on “negotiating power and authority’ in academe” (Ballif, Davis, and Mountford 142). Women profiled in *WWMIRC* paint various pictures of what this looks like: helping people not to wing it (Bizzell, ch. 8), being honest, not easy (Crowley, ch. 9), intervening for others with kindness and diplomacy (Glenn, ch. 10).

These qualities align with calls in *Presumed Incompetent* for mentors to help women of color learn how to survive in academic institutions. In “On Community
in the Midst of Hierarchy (and Hierarchy in the Midst of Community),” Ruth Gordon acknowledges the need for mentors as role models to show female faculty members of color paths that they do not even know they don’t know or cannot imagine (317), especially since white male middle-class academic norms are not “givens” or equally transparent to all. In “Sharing Our Gifts,” Beth A. Boyd narrates what survival looks like for her as a Native American woman in clinical psychology: getting tenure, choosing her battles, developing a vision for who she is and who she wants to be, and mistrusting the lure of success as promised.

By contrast, Goodburn, LeCourt, and Leverenz’s central mission in *Rewriting Success* is to unpack and interrogate the unstated assumptions that there is only one “lure” of success and that this singular lure must be tenure-track or academic at all. Scholars throughout *RS* maintain that those who want to privilege and pursue alternative paths of success—in this case, non-tenure-track positions and alternative academic careers—need mentoring support, too, but are often overlooked. In “Mentoring for Change,” Cindy Moore suggests that “throughout the [mentoring] literature [in rhetoric and composition], while there appears to be a conscious effort to change the dynamics of mentoring, the imagined product of mentoring has remained amazingly consistent: a full-time, tenure-track job at a research university” (159). Reimagining “the product of mentoring” not as a single kind of job but as a dynamic relationship with someone whose identities are complex and shifting requires its own kind of balancing act for mentors: to encourage newcomers to pursue their own goals while not suppressing or ignoring the more familiar aspirations of academic faculty success (Moore 161). For Moore, working toward this balance has resulted in three mentoring principles that guide her practice: “determining—and honoring—students’ goals,” “helping students explore goals,” and “supporting students as they refine—or change—their goals” (163–8) (see also Moore and Miller 2006). Each of these acts—honoring, helping, supporting—is not just a “what” of mentoring but also a “how” that suggests mentoring is more than a one-on-one relationship defined by inherited hierarchical divisions between teacher and student, knower and learner, mentor and mentee.

The “how” of feminist mentoring implied throughout each collection—which includes (but is not limited to) nonhierarchical learning relationships and rhetorical listening—helps us attend to (and improve upon) two important possibilities for academic mentoring: (1) defining and enacting an ethics of care and (2) fostering networks that move beyond single individuals, departments, or institutions and that imagine mentoring as mutuality.

Across these collections, scholars tell newcomers to “find a mentor! early!” Less clear is just how challenging it is for mentors to learn *how* to honor, help, or support a diversity of students within an academic workplace not historically
open to humanist (or even humane) treatment of the individuals who constitute our institutions. Though as a (feminist) field we attend to ethics of care in our scholarship, “care” is a slippery term dependent on many variables. What does mentoring care look like for a female graduate student in English or clinical psychology? And what does care need to do for a new female faculty member of color in an entrenched masculinist field like law? Does care mean that we encourage women to publish—or to percolate? Or, as has been more effective for me (Rachel) as a graduate student, to talk through how to come to know—and articulate—the difference for myself?

In part, questions of care can only be answered on a case-by-case basis (see Holling, Fu, Bubar in PI, 255). Yet, in another part—like pieces of a pie—these questions also need to be answered not by each individual alone once she has “found” her mentor, sought her advice, and then retreated to her cloistered space of decision-making. Instead, these collections also hint at the second possibility for academic mentoring: building larger networks of support (different from the command to “find a mentor”). In WWMIRC, Andrea Lunsford calls for building many relationships as opportunities for colearning in which not all mentors are faculty members and not all mentees need act as “students.” Peers are mentors, too, and this mentoring does not have to be formalized within a department or any institution. The third section of Presumed Incompetent is called Networks of Allies, not because misery loves company—which, unfortunately, can sometimes be the case in disciplinary tales of writing program woes—but because women need larger networks of allies on the ground to speak truth to power in daily interactions regardless of official mentoring status or institutional position or affiliation.

Presumed Incompetent further makes clear where these allies should—and do—reside and what potential they hold for transforming the academy for white women and women of color. In “Working across Racial Lines in a Not-So-Post-Racial World,” Margalynne J. Armstrong and Stephanie M. Wildman suggest that we need friendship and coalition, connection and voice, spaces for women to speak truthfully and safely (240) via institutional and human relationships across disciplines and beyond the academy. Women of color often receive less equitable mentoring in graduate school and at hiring institutions. But networks of allies can be built across disciplines, universities, and communities outside of academia. Armstrong and Wildman (among others in this collection) argue that creating safe spaces for others to speak is as easy—and as challenging—as bearing witness to, and intervening in, daily acts of oppression:

Being an observant coworker, speaking out against observed oppression, and seeking to ensure workplace fairness for everyone may lead to friendship. An individual must consciously choose friendship, a much more personal relation-
ship, to deepen the connection beyond that of coworker . . . Friendship provides a space for speaking the truth about an institution, rather than suppressing or silencing it. (240–1)

In other words, genuinely seeing and coming to know others’ struggles—and fighting along with and for them—might also entail the risks of friendship, genuine relationships, and connections. Many of us love our students and our work. Why not expand that to include networks of allies who make our teaching and research possible and fruitful?

What women need are networks of allies, yes, but not just within academic institutions. We need to learn to make relationships beyond the familiar (especially when the familiar is so often unfriendly), to follow the love (one motto that we, Rachel and Brenda, used together in our shared writing program administrative work this year) wherever it leads and learn to make it work toward the kinds of change we want to see. Being open to and choosing love and friendship from a grounded position in an academic workplace, in wider networks of allies not assigned or officially “authorized,” might get us even further outside of the one-to-one hierarchical power structures and get us, too, to make, see, and feel more substantive webs of support, comfort, and calm. This affective component of networks of allies can be easily seen across these collections; and any one of us who has experienced moments of stress and duress in the academy can remember (we hope) how it feels to be seen, heard, and loved at work by human beings whose generosity models how individual action makes a difference.

As a graduate student, I (Rachel) turned the page and moved on when I got to the list of “essential resources” for “becoming a professional” in WWMIRC—because I have learned how to be a professional academic more from personal interactions than published texts. I have been privileged to participate in close peer and reciprocal mentoring relationships with women who have modeled how to be present in daily interactions and generous in research and administrative interactions. Above all, these relationships rely on seeing the crumbs—neither ignoring them nor attaching shame to them, but instead turning our critical minds and actions to the inequitable behaviors reproduced within the academy.

My relationships within networks of allies have enabled me to feel, know, and realize two key graduate school takeaways that have already shaped who I am (and am becoming) as an emerging scholar who imagines herself in an academic workplace. The first is that the generosity of allies keeps me in the academy when I could very well go, be, and succeed elsewhere (following the leads and examples, perhaps, in Rewriting Success). The second is an obvious extension of the first: what keeps me here might keep others here, too, so I need to be and become an ally for others. Though the activism of being an ally may not appear on a faculty member’s annual work plan or CV in the same way that some
authorized acts of formal mentoring do, a good feminist mentor—make that “good enough” (see Reid 2010)—knows that most of the work we do is neither visible in institutional documents nor explicitly valued by those in power at our institutions. But we know, too, that such work, such friendship, keeps institutions and disciplines going; and it is such friendship (and work) that allies need to sustain and reward themselves with as they work to create a healthier, safer climate in academic workplaces where the work of love (and the love of work) can be made visible and valued.

For me [Brenda], although I could certainly sing the high praises of mentoring—and call out my own astonishing network of mentors (some of whom were not members of my own field on the campuses where I grew up and into the profession, and some of whom were not even on my campus at all), I think I’d rather focus here on the mutuality of mentoring. I could also certainly focus on a few personal/professional examples of how massive, meaningful, and even material (saving me from leaving the profession entirely) some mentored moments throughout my now 30-year academic career (as graduate student and faculty member) have been for me. But since I’ve written about those elsewhere, I won’t recount all that here (Brueggemann 1997; Brueggemann et al. 2005; Brueggemann and Kerschbaum 2015; Brueggemann and Moddelmog 2002). Instead, I’d rather focus for a moment on the mutuality of mentoring. Because when those who are assumed to Know or to be/am Balanced (the Mentors) are truly engaged with those who are assumed to be Learning or to be/am Seeking Balance (the Mentees), those roles can swap. Things can get switched at the beginning of the process as a mentor learns things she didn’t even know (or knew that she knew) because of a mentee’s sometimes simple, sometimes profound question or in-need-of-mentoring situation.

For us (Brenda and Rachel), mutual mentoring has stretched across our teaching and research (formally and informally) in the last three years we’ve worked together, but it has been most visible and meaningful in our shared administrative and community engagement projects. Together, in the last year, we have inaugurated a “turnkey” digital assignment as part of our first-year composition core curriculum (see “Louisville DCC”), and we’ve also completed a coedited film—Voices Together: The Art as Memory Project—that documented a community art project with adults and children with developmental disabilities in Louisville, Kentucky.

Not only did these projects require friendly (and sometimes fierce) flexibility in the division of labor, we also learned from and for and with each other in at least two significant ways. The first key mutual space of mentoring and learning—arising from carrying out the composition curriculum’s first-ever required
digital assignment—took place in the recursive and toggling relationship, the endless back-and-forth, between our need for big-picture vision with previous experience navigating multiple institutional structures (wave to Brenda) and our need for adaptable detail management with knowledge of current departmental resources (wave to Rachel).

The second powerful moment of mutual mentoring was shaped in our deployment of digital and rhetorical savvy in time (and vision) management and in the endless stream of logistics and decision-making involved in documenting 13 different art-making workshops in the Louisville community (with citizens with disabilities) and then collaborating on a 20-minute film designed and operationalized by a 7-person team. We learned, most of all, to talk openly about frustrations and delights—what we were learning from each other, for better or worse. Our mutual mentoring stories do not neatly fit the overdetermined narrative of “mentor-mentee success despite all the odds (or not).” Instead, we are left with memories of moments when one person’s exhaustion led the other (like the women in these collections) to say NO for both of us, or when one person’s vulnerability revealed otherwise invisible cracks in her personal and professional foundations. Whether we were video editing (for the Art as Memory community project) or video assessing (for the Composition program’s “turnkey” digital assignment), we learned, mutually, to toggle within the space of learner-knower and to swap out our positions as bow-paddler and stern-paddler from time to time.

**Change, Spare and Seasonal**

Change, like balance, is written everywhere in these three volumes. It is sometimes spare (on institutional fronts), sometimes measurable-to-monumental (on personal fronts)—but it is always, of course, meaningful. Together, these ten coeditors and sixty-eight authors/interviewees across sixty essays/chapters chorus how change moves us—through knowing, balancing, and mentoring—in our personal/professional lives.

*Rewriting Success*, for example, seems to arise directly in concert with change and some resistance against what they deem “the status quo,” when editors Goodburn, LeCourt, and Leverenz begin by noting that those seeking power, like programs in rhetoric and composition, feel compelled to adopt the values held by those in power. What we have learned in putting this collection together is how differently success is being defined by those who have resisted these dominant values and who are thus not typically authorized as speaking subjects in our scholarly conversations—those working in community
colleges, in non-tenure track positions, and outside the academy [with terminal academic degrees]—whose very locations on the margins can provide them with a clearer perspective from which to gaze upon the discipline critically. (ix)

From this marginalized “clearer” and critical gaze, *Rewriting Success* pointedly offers a third section focused on Working for Change that is targeted at the ways professionals (not just women) with degrees in rhetoric and composition can compose, bridge, create change. For example, in a particularly poignant chapter in this volume, Ahern-Dodson writes about the post-graduate school job she expected she would be working at and the “nine years later” reality of her “circuitous path” in her “non-tenured position” that has offered her ways to work “in line with my social values and commitments” and to “make active, creative choices about my work in the academy” (175).

Making similar (but different) active and creative choices about work in the academy, the three coeditors of *Women’s Ways of Making It* predicate their volume on addressing an unnecessary arrangement—that of the “leaking pipeline” for women achieving tenure in the academy. Seeking to engage, question, and purposefully alter such conditions, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford write in their introduction of their necessary focus on women who have “made it” in our profession in order to “address this ‘leaking pipeline’” with stoppers made of “stories and strategies” that were solicited specifically with an eye and ear toward “success in dealing with these current [academic climate] challenges” (4). The volume’s closing section of case studies (created from interviews) offers nine variations (from nine successful women in the field), summarily labeled as “profiles of success.” Change is anything but spare in these profiles, and it courses heavily through the self-described seasons of many of their (now long and established) careers. These nine women made change happen (for themselves, for others), for example, in just some of these ways: saying no to department traditions and discrimination (Bizzell); coming to peace and levity with tendencies toward “high anxiety” and overcommitment and learning to better “compartmentalize, concentrate, and say ‘no’” (240) (Glenn); learning to work harder to *speak up*, engage conflict, *act* on difficult things (countering then the will to step back from conflict) (Logan); surviving a deep personal relationship “implosion” through work dedication (Lunsford); saying no to budget cuts made to programs you are asked to run/administrate (Royster); using her father’s “failed woman” sexist perspective of her as a deeply educational and abiding experience that would guide her own academic life (Worsham).

Much like the case studies that conclude *WWMRIC*, the forty-two authors of the thirty essays in *Presumed Incompetent* pile on many strategies and stories of change—not always narrated with the “success” sugarcoating. Nancy Cantor, the
president of Syracuse University at that time, characterizes the course-changing of this weighty volume, in her introduction to the Networks of Allies section:

As the authors in this volume argue, we must create a healthy academic climate. This requires a culture of collaboration where issues of intersectionality can be addressed. Inclusion requires justice and due process. It also needs the give and take of social support, of flexibility of models and respect for individual and group differences, and, perhaps most daringly, of risk taking where leaders and others are free to make mistakes and change course. (233)

In changing course(s)—particularly over the “presumption of incompetence,” the essays in this volume engage with four “interrelated themes that place the contradictory predicament of women of color faculty in a larger historical and cultural perspective” (3): the negotiation of identity in the academic world (Lugo-Lugo; Bowen; Easton; Anthony); links between agency and structure, the individual, and the collective (Shields; Wilson; Niemann); an interrogation of academic culture at large (Vô; Lazos; Spade; Holling et al.); and mechanisms for meaningful structural change (Moffitt et al.; Lerum; Boyd; Wing; Arriola; Wallace et al.).

Yet change, much like balance, can be illusive and elusive. Change for the sake of change mirrors a mirage—it beckons like the promising water on the horizon that disappears before you arrive yet shimmers, once again, at another distant point. And perhaps more so than Women’s Ways of Making It and Rewriting Success—the two volumes focused more exclusively on (women in) rhetoric and composition—the authors comprising the pages of Presumed Incompetent are onto the mirage and myth of change. As John Dovidio notes in his introduction to the Faculty/Student Relationships section, “For everything we have seen—or seen change—there is so much more we haven’t seen (yet)” (113). Likewise, in “Lessons from a Portrait: Keep Calm and Carry On,” Adrien Katherine Wing muses meaningfully, “I see, sadly, that not much has changed. All of the narratives that talk of pain, isolation, and discrimination are still relevant. They are not merely historically interesting even in this day when we have a former black male law professor as president and a black female lawyer as first lady” (358).

While these three edited collections document change/s at many turns, we believe that they also continue to call for—and call us toward—change. In reading across, through, and with these texts and the voices and perspectives of the sixty-eight authors represented in them, we’ve noted the places where we still see change in the making, needing to be made, and being questioned (even as we worked together on this essay, our Google Doc kept flashing to us, “See new changes”). We’ve questioned the way we typically value knowing (over learning) in the academy. We’ve suggested needed changes in the way we, especially
as academic women, make “balance” a (too primary) be/am. We’ve called for changes in the way we imagine and make mentoring happen, moving it more toward mutuality and also networks of allies rather than paired knower-learner units. And finally, we’ve considered an approach to change from a more toggled perspective, where change is held in both belief and doubt as “a good thing,” and where the myth and mirage of change does not become the never-ending means to a never-reached end.

Works Cited


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