

Maxine Craig: On Being a Woman of Color in Academia

Interview with Maxine Craig

Interview by Alexandrine Mailhe

This week the Graduate Student Chronicle invited Professor Maxine Craig to share her experience and her outlook concerning gender and sexuality-based discrimination in academia. Professor Craig is the chair of the Designated Emphasis in Feminist Theory and Research at UC Davis where she also teaches very dynamic classes on Masculinities. Her book, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford University Press 2002) was awarded the prize of Best Book of 2002 on the Political History of Ethnic and Racial Minorities in the U.S by the American Political Science Association.

Professor Craig cordially accepted to talk to us about her experience in academia (graduate school and her current appointment) as a woman and a person of African descent.

Graduate Caucus Chronicle: *We are interested in hearing about your comments on your experience as a woman in academia. Have there been moments in your career in which you or those in your surroundings were exposed to a form of gender-based discrimination? If so, how have you or your acquaintances dealt with this encounter and what advice could you give to graduate students that could help in dealing with such issues in the future? In other words, could you comment on the existence of such a “glass ceiling” in academia and the humanities more specifically, a professional field oftentimes associated as a space in which such encounters are thought impossible.*

Maxine Craig: First, let me frame the question in terms of intersectionality. I'm a woman of African descent. I come from a

working-class background. All these things also shape my experience of being a woman but also entered into my experience of navigating a career. I think one of the ways that I may have experienced gender bias is that some of the topics that I have studied were seen as fun and not serious. I was writing about women, I was writing about black women, I was writing about black women's embodiment. I sort of had to prove that these topics were worth studying. I remember in grad school, in the program I was in, theory was always the most important thing to do and yet there was the perception that there was theory and then there was feminist theory. There was a way in which feminist theory was not treated as theory, it was not treated as critical theory, it was not treated as high theory. It was often a corner and I think that still happens in a lot of places. There's a way in which our work gets trivialized and marginalized and doubly so if you're working on black women. This is probably part of the reason why it will be interesting to see what happens now that I've written a book about white men. I've written it from the perspective of black feminist theory, so who knows what will happen. (Craig, Maxine L. *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move*. Oxford University Press: New York, 2013). The other thing that happens and it was true for me, is that I think that when a woman gets hired in a department, there's an assumption that just because she's in a woman's body, she does work about gender. This happens a lot and there's no reason to assume from someone's body what they are studying.

A word of advice to anybody who is a graduate student: "don't get discouraged". Everyone needs to have a big sign in their room or wherever because rejection is part of the process of being a scholar. You cannot let people discourage you. You have to find allies that are doing work that is like the work you want to do and that will encourage you to keep going and these people will provide support for you. You're building your networks and you know at this point there is a great deal of great feminist work going on and there are lots of places to do good work even though you might be trivialized in other academic environments just don't get discouraged.

GCC: The University of California at Davis champions in advocating the rights of the LGBTQ community. Would you say this type of activism is widespread in today's academic world and to what extent do you think is there room for improvement?

MC: UC Davis and other universities are doing pretty well but they could do more in hiring faculty who work in queer theory to support graduate students. I see a great need. There are some great scholars on this campus and there need to be more. I see students looking for mentorship in queer theory. There is a growing interest in queer and gender studies and the universities need to respond. I'm thinking about the case of one of my students for whom I'm writing letters. At the University of Arizona there was a cluster hire announced for four faculty positions in transgender studies, and I thought this was great. I see some universities responding by hiring clusters, specifically looking for new assistant professors positions. So it was a great sign that there these positions were available but of course it's not enough.

GCC: When it comes to your own teaching, both on graduate and undergraduate level, have you identified effective ways to approach or engage with students, who seemingly have little previous exposure to gender studies/awareness?

MC: I'm actually doing that right now. I'm teaching 195 students in a course titled "Introduction to women and gender studies". Teaching a class this large is a little strange because I don't know the students. The TAs are the ones who grade their work, the ones who engage with them. However, a handful of students come to see me in office hours.

I don't know why students take the course but some of them have clearly been thinking of these issues deeply but there are a lot of students, and I can see on their faces that they are astounded and sometimes they write me emails, generally very positive emails saying "I never thought gender was socially constructed". They are just blown away. I have to say this is

a wonderful experience for me because having been in this world and because of the kinds of things I read, I feel like I often don't really have anything new to say. Such emails and reactions make me realize that this is quite fresh for many people, that it's important work, it's really helpful work and it can be life saving work, it can be life changing work to give students the tools to think critically about sex and gender.

That's what's good about teaching this. On the one hand, everyone in the class knows something about living in a gendered world, they've done it for 18-20 years, depending on how old they are, so you can draw on that experience and that's an easy way to bring people in. I also make the classroom a space where, especially when teaching a big class, it's comfortable and where we use humor. I also use my own self to laugh at because it's sometimes funny to stand up there and to talk about our bodies. It's always a judgment call how much to make a spectacle of yourself when you're standing in front of the room. Particularly for a woman, for someone in a woman's body because I'm already going to be treated as a body and yet I'm someone who is always talking about bodies so I'm aware of myself as a body. A body talking about bodies and asking people to think about bodies so there I am exhibit A. I think if you do it with humor it creates a safe space. It's always a balance and sometimes I feel like it works and sometimes it doesn't. It's always risky teaching. Sometimes I wish I was teaching math because it's kind of exhausting to be exhibit A and to talk about personal things in an impersonal space which is what teaching gender very often is and especially so because I teach masculinities.

What do you do when people are enacting masculinity in conventional ways in a classroom? How do you manage it? I'm always trying to balance not losing the people in the room that don't have a critical analysis, who didn't walk in with it, who don't see how they're doing traditional masculinities. I don't want to shut them down and lose them because I feel that's where some of the most important work needs to be done. On the other hand, it's balancing that with not letting the politics of masculinity play out in your own classroom. It is a thin line that I

walk and sometimes I succeed and sometimes I don't. Anyone who teaches gender is so critically attuned to those dynamics that I think we care about them a great deal. We are very critical about ourselves and also the expectations in the room are very critical because we are giving students these tools and then they're looking at the classroom with those tools. It's exciting and hard. So when it works it's great but it won't always work. So what you do is that you just go back in there and try again.

I also learn from my students and I learn a great deal with my students. My students keep me on my toes. This is the difficulty and also the pleasure of teaching something like gender. I feel that I grew up as a cisgendered person and I've had certain privileges and my students had to teach me about those privileges and about the very language I use to talk about gender. And that is as it should be! Language is constantly being remade, so I'm learning with and from my students and I hope they are learning too.

GCC: Have you noticed a visible and satisfying change in the way that textbooks or other teaching materials we use in our classrooms have adopted more inclusive approaches in representing such matters?

MC: Sometimes and sometimes not. It's all changing and it's not like there is a correct way to represent things. There are certainly problematic ways. For example, I teach with a textbook and sometimes one article contradicts the language use in another article. I am the deputy editor of a journal and when we meet, we have discussions about questions, which we cannot answer. We have discussions about the very basic language, about what the words mean, if we should hold authors to particular practices in using the word sex, if we should hold authors to particular practices in using the word male. Should we hold authors to particular practices in capitalization around racial words? So far we have decided no. The only thing we can do is to encourage our authors to be thoughtful about these things. However, there are valid and thoughtful different practices. It's all changing but we have to be careful about the

way things change. Sometimes, the way in which they change is powerful, sometimes it's just new ways of propping up the old structure. Using difference as novelty, using difference to sell, using difference that actually keeps others in difference. Such strategies do not challenge the norm. So yes, there is some change but still we have to sharpen our critical abilities and always ask when is this just using difference in order to profit in ways that don't really displace heteronormativity, that don't really displace whiteness as the norm.