



Mary Armstrong

## INTERVIEW WITH MARY ARMSTRONG

**Department Chair of the Women's and  
Gender Studies Department at Cal Poly**

Mary A. Armstrong is Chair of the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Cal Poly, where she is also appointed in the English Department. Her WGS research focuses on LGBT issues and on the role of Women's Studies in advancing equity in the STEM disciplines; her work in literature explores how Victorian fiction organizes the formulation of modern sexual identities. She also has an inexplicably persistent liking for critical theory. Professor Armstrong has received both the University Distinguished Teaching Award and the Richard Simon Teaching Award (College of Liberal Arts).

*Moebius: When did the Women's and Gender Studies Program (WGS) begin at Cal Poly?*

**MA:** The original Cal Poly Women's Studies Program was established at the late date of 1990. Cal Poly was actually the last university in the entire CSU system to approve a Women's Studies Program. It's clear from the records I've seen (and the stories I hear!) that back in the late eighties and early nineties, there was a struggle involved in getting the program up and running. Many faculty and staff members had to make a lot of real noise before it happened. However, it's great to see how times have changed! Over the course of the past two years, we slowly but surely jumped through all the hoops necessary to become the Women's and Gender Studies Department. And the support for that transition has been amazing. College of Liberal Arts Dean Linda Halisky really provided the critical leadership in helping Women's and Gender Studies achieve departmental status, and the enthusiasm of faculty from other departments has been wonderful, too.

*Moebius: What are some of the courses offered?*

**MA:** We offer some terrific courses and, if I do say so myself, the faculty who teach for WGS are uniformly outstanding. We have a number of core classes, which include basic WGS courses like Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WS 301) and Feminist Theory (WS 450). We also have more topically focused courses such as American Women's History (HIST/WGS 435), Sexuality Studies (WGS 340), and Gender, Race, Science and Technology (WS/ES350), which I am happy to say is cross-listed with Ethnic Studies. Most of our courses have a General Education designation, or fulfill United States Cultural Pluralism (USCP), or both. We have good things ahead, too. Right now, two of our jointly appointed faculty members, Devin Kuhn and Jane Lehr, are planning to develop and regularly offer a new WGS core course on sustainability/environmentalism as related to gender, race, and social justice.

*Moebius: What will students cover in the WGS minor?*

*MA:* We offer a comprehensive minor in Women's and Gender Studies. Students get a background in feminist theory and encounter a number of more focused topical areas. One of our great strengths is that the WGS curriculum is so powerfully interdisciplinary—we are one of the few departments at Cal Poly where students really encounter cross-departmental, integrated courses that are taught by an array of faculty who have a broad array of intellectual specialties and hold a spectrum of different PhDs. Over twenty-five additional courses offered by multiple departments across the university count as WGS electives, as well. Our minor is special because it is so fundamentally embedded across the curriculum—which also gives it the added advantage of fitting well with any major. WGS minors really have an incredible interdisciplinary experience.

*Moebius: How does someone find out more about WGS?*

*MA:* Our brand new and completely redesigned website is just up and running at <http://www.cla.calpoly.edu/wgs/>. It is the best place to learn about us—and actually it is really worth a visit in and of itself. The site has been designed and created by one of our jointly appointed faculty, Rachel Fernflores (along with Francisco Fernflores). It is breathtakingly comprehensive. Users can see all of the usual information and then some (courses, faculty, requirements, events), but it also has wonderful additions like an online form for minors, a donations page, and a scrapbook. No one has donated a million to WGS yet, but the scrapbook is great! You can see great historical stuff like the actual article that the Mustang Daily ran about the formation of the program in 1991. I am also very proud that the site is groundbreaking in terms of accessibility, too. Of course, phone or e-mail will work very well for getting in touch with the WGS Departmental office with specific questions about course offerings, curriculum, events, or the minor. Phone: 756-1525, Email: [wgs@calpoly.edu](mailto:wgs@calpoly.edu).

*Moebius: In your experience, which courses tend to present more difficult moments for a professor to sort through?*

*MA:* Teaching Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies (WS 301) can be challenging during the first week or so. Like many GE classes, a WGS instructor is likely to have a good number of students with little previous interest who are taking the class to fill a requirement. In fact, many of our minors got started simply because they needed a GE area requirement covered and took a WGS class. Which means, by the way, that GE works: because it asks students to walk through a doorway they might otherwise never have entered; it can lead them to a completely new world. And WGS is often one of the new worlds people find through GE.

However, with WGS, the teaching can get interesting because many people have a lot more invested in ideas about gender and sexuality than they consciously realize.

Additionally, we live in a pretty strongly anti-feminist culture and there is a script about feminists that many people sometimes unconsciously bring to class: feminists are male-bashing, angry, over-sensitive, irrational women and WGS is a big PC brainwashing session where it's toe-the-party-line-or-fail. Sometimes my students (both female and male) come into the first class looking like something absolutely awful is about to happen to them. But this is also one of my favorite Women's Studies classes to teach, too, because it is so rewarding to watch these stereotypes fall away and see them replaced with an understanding that, yes, WGS is an actual academic field and, no, there is not one personal or political script you have to follow and, gosh, we actually do very challenging intellectual work, so doing the reading and coming to class is a really, really good idea.

*Moebius: How many men usually enroll?*

*MA:* One of the reasons why we recently changed our name from “Women’s Studies” to “Women’s and Gender Studies” was to make the stronger statement that WGS addresses gender from all perspectives and that both women and men are more than welcome in all WGS classes and at all our events. Usually, in a 35-student Intro to WGS class, I’ll have seven to ten men. It’s great when male students take WGS classes. Everybody has a gender, and having a gender matters whether you are male or female, so men bring an important perspective to class. I think both female and male students often start WGS classes initially afraid there is going to be some kind of crazed frenzy of “male-bashing” and that all the women (with me as ring-leader) are going to rise up as one and blame the men in the class for everything from the Cal Poly parking situation to the common cold. But that imagined moment never comes, and everyone quickly figures out there is not going to be any bashing (male or female) of any kind.

I really wish we had more male minors. Of course, you have to be pretty secure in your masculinity to be a male Women’s and Gender Studies minor at Cal Poly. But judging from the numerous male students I have taught since I arrived here in 2000, there are lots of Cal Poly men here who aren’t too frightened to think about the complexities of gender and sexuality. I have found my male WGS students to be uniformly interested and thoughtful, and their perspective is so valuable.

In general, students enjoy WGS classes, regardless of their gender or political stances. There are few parts of your identity that are going to drive your life in certain directions more powerfully than your gender. Students are smart and they understand that they need to think through it. And lucky me—I get to think through it with them. There’s no doubt in my mind, I have the best job in town.

*Moebius: Do you have any funny teaching moments to share?*

*MA:* Although there is a general stereotype of feminists being humorless, disagreeable, and generally miserable human beings, my students and I often find ourselves having a

good time. Honestly, we laugh a lot. Of course, when you think about it, there are few topics that can be more absurdly hilarious than gender and sexuality. What could be more ridiculous than the lengths we go to protect ourselves in regard to such topics? Plus, a lot of the issues we learn about and analyze—such as domestic violence or sexual assault—are not only deadly serious but have often profoundly touched the lives of the students in the class. So we try to enjoy the lighter moments when we can.

I do find that one of the best aspects of WGS classes is that they offer students opportunities to think about things that are part of their everyday experiences and yet which often remain invisible and completely unexamined. Recently, I was teaching a unit on theories addressing the origins of systemic gender inequality. I was lecturing on our cultural obsession with biological explanations for gender behavior and the frantic eagerness with which we seek explanations for human gender behavior based on animal behavior. It's as if we somehow believe that finding the right example of animal behavior will justify what we do to each other as humans. Everyone was looking pretty unmoved by all this, so I offhandedly asked if anyone knew an example of a gender-related "animal theory"—and my entire class simply devolved into a mob of people shouting things like "Female praying mantises kill the male after sex!" and "Male wolves are always leaders of the pack" and "15 percent of rams are gay." Honestly—gay rams.

It took five full minutes to get everyone to stop screaming out his or her "true animal story." And what really got me was that about two weeks later an animal science professor called me to say a student from my class recently came by his office to ask about gay rams and what the hell was I doing in my WGS class. Talk about interdisciplinarity! ☺

*Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Sadie Johann, Winter 2009.*