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Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice
Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve
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'CROOK COUNTY' AUTHOR NICOLE GONZALEZ VAN CLEVE FINISHES OUR SENTENCES



Assistant Professor Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve has devoted her career to uncovering disparities and truth in the American criminal justice system — with a powerful focus on telling the story of the poor and marginalized. Van Cleve's new book, *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court*, has been compared to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* for doing with Chicago's criminal courts what Sinclair's work did for the American meatpacking industry: laying bare a system ripe for reform.

Crook County — which began as an undergraduate thesis, became a dissertation and was published by Stanford University Press — is based on 10 years of research and more than 1,000 hours of observations into the lives of the accused and convicted, as well as the attorneys, judges and police officers of Cook County. The book is an empirical text (complete with a "methods" appendix), yet at times reads like fiction. All names are pseudonyms; all descriptions of physical features are alterations; yet Van Cleve manages to share the stories of all the players as ethnographer and narrator, sociologist and storyteller.

WE ASKED VAN CLEVE TO DO A LITTLE NARRATION FOR US ...

It was exhausting for me as both a researcher and a person to watch people getting abused in our court systems and have to keep it

to myself to protect their identities. To share this with journalists and wrongful conviction centers, people who are listening and who can lend voice, that's enormously rewarding.

Rachel Maddow is brilliant. Just brilliant. She had my book and was able to read and absorb the thesis in probably an hour. Sitting next to her, I could see her revising her script during commercial breaks.

Most people don't know that when you go on live television you have to manage your own emotional reactions. Being on MSNBC and CNN, watching traumatic video of an unarmed black teen being shot 16 times, you have to channel those emotions and put it into the advocacy you speak. I made a choice to watch that clip only twice. Once before I wrote an article for NBC and another just before I went on live TV. Watching it again gave me the passion I needed to speak about it.

Writing a 75-page college thesis that becomes a book 10 years later is incredibly rewarding. At that time, back in 1998, it was my Everest. I didn't realize that I'd create new Everests to tackle. So, I tell my undergrads to find a research question that they are so passionate about, a question they just hunger to answer. That way, they'll actually finish.

The most important thing to remember is to be a truth teller. Sometimes, the simplest research questions, the ones no one cares to ask, or people are scared to ask, are the one that need to be answered. When I was an undergrad, I'd lament that I was so scared to report on what I was seeing. My husband's advice was, "Just tell the truth."

The White House is a place where you are consistently aware of history. You walk through the rose garden on route to do small task and you have an awareness that President Kennedy once walked those same hallways and spaces where you are trying to learn, contribute and be inspired. Despite the stress, grunt work and late hours, I was grateful to go to work every day. [*Prior to receiving her PhD, Van Cleve served in The Office of the Chief of Staff at the White House during the Clinton Administration.*]

One of my biggest embarrassments was that I could not understand James Carville's accent. I used to answer the phone and he would call and I just couldn't understand the "Ragin' Cajun." So he would hang up and call back hoping to get someone else on the line who could understand him.

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Wolf Blitzer once told me not to get discouraged about Washington. He watched the Lewinsky scandal unfold and lots of young people getting discouraged. I got a photo with him in 1998, right after the map room confession. And it was a time where politics was extremely discouraging. His response was to not give up on this process and this system.

When your curiosity becomes your career there will be a lot of naysayers who tell you not to do what you know you should do. As an undergrad, you should follow your intense curiosity down that rabbit hole, and put together a toolbox that makes you the best at what you do. That's the ultimate. The curiosity has to be backed up with work ethic and hunger.

You should embrace your weirdness because you might just be weird enough to not listen to the naysayers. There are probably people who are smarter than you and more talented than you, but if you work harder than everyone else, it won't even matter.

My two sons love that I used to be a skating coach and tell people that my real profession is teaching figure skating. My book is dedicated to them. My hope is that when they are old enough to read and comprehend the book, it is outdated and they can read it as a historical text. I hope the world that they inherit will be better.

Crook County means that Americans are having trouble telling the difference between those who are supposedly criminal and the attorneys and judges and police officers who are supposed to ensure that we are law abiding. It's a pun, but it's not meant to mock. It's a serious critique of the legitimacy of our American criminal courts and the criminal justice system at large. We have to be able to distinguish between the law abiding and the law breaking. Right now the boundaries are so foggy that we really can't.

I love this country because of free speech. I thought about the cost of coming forward and in some ways having my research whistleblow on a corrupt system. And it is only possible because an alum of Northwestern donated enough money to put me — a Pell grant recipient — through college. It allowed me to develop the tools to have the free speech that would protect me and allow me to write a book that many see as controversial.