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Samantha Smith

Loyola University Chicago and Dominican University

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2015 Louisa Bowen Memorial Scholarship Winner Shares Her Thoughts

By Samantha Smith, MA/MLIS, Loyola University Chicago/Dominican University



Samantha A. Smith

As I write this essay for the MAC newsletter, I am preparing for my final year as a graduate student in the dual public history MA/MLIS program through Loyola University Chicago and Dominican University. It feels surreal to be where I am, a space I refer to as the future now. During my first archival internship at Gettysburg

National Military Park, I came across a photograph of summer interns from the 1960s. The photograph impacted me, because in it were people like me, people who preserved and interpreted history by, for, and with the public. Or put another way, people who loved stories and storytelling. For me it is all about stories, and I get to experience them in so many different ways as an archival professional, public historian, and historian.

People often ask me about what I do. “What is public history?,” some casually ask, or, “Do you want to continue your work in research libraries?” Some want to know more about my research interests or even conferences I presented at in the past. For me, though, it is not what but why. Why did I want these degrees? Why do I want to go on for a PhD in American history? Why do I want to bridge gaps between public history, academic history, and archival science? Why do I want to teach students? The answer to all these questions is the same. I want people to know that who they are and where they come from matter. I want the people who enter my corner of the world to know that their histories and their stories matter.

I do what I do because not everyone believes that who they are is historically significant or historically relevant. I see myself as an advocate, and I also see archival spaces as opportunities for advocacy. I advocate and want to

continue to advocate for people and their stories. My advocacy efforts focus on individuals and communities who identify with and/or above, beyond, and outside the LGBTQIQA umbrella; individuals and communities with alternative and nonconforming gender expressions; individuals and communities with alternative and nonconforming sexual expressions; individuals and communities of color; individuals and communities with invisible, emotional, mental, and physical disabilities; and individuals and communities who struggle with issues related to immigration and citizenship.

In *Silencing the Past: The Power and Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies four areas in the historical process that create silences. The four areas are “fact creation (the making of *sources*); [...] fact assembly (the making of *archives*); [...] fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and [...] retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)” (p. 26). Archivists help determine what histories get preserved and whose stories get told. Each day, archivists encounter opportunities to either further silence an individual, community, or story, or to advocate on its behalf and create a space. I commit myself to the latter, because, as Audre Lorde once said, “Your silence will not protect you.”

I did not learn about the archival profession in isolation, but rather as a part of a larger community. My archival mentors are not the only ones to thank for that but also MAC, an organization devoted to professional reflection. My relationship with MAC does not end as a scholarship recipient, as I hope to get more involved once I graduate from the dual-degree program. I want to be there for graduate and undergraduate students the way MAC members were there for me: with confidence and support. Or, more important, as an advocate.