

Essay #1 "From Working Poor to Elite Scholar"

Statement of Purpose, Dept. of History

One of the proudest accomplishments of my life was earning my college degree, despite the fact that my early adulthood pointed in the opposite direction, beginning with my marriage at the age of 19. Throughout the 1990s I lived as one of the "working poor," someone who slipped through the cracks of supposedly historic prosperity. By the age of 25 I was divorced and frustrated with menial, low-paying jobs: clerk, receptionist, housecleaner. There is nothing like scrubbing someone else's toilet to inspire one with determination toward obtaining an education. Because of my absolute commitment toward earning my degree, I got a flexible shift at a retail warehouse which enabled me to acquire my degree while supporting myself financially.

Enrolled at the local community college, I experienced a different world opening up to me; excited by a new encouraging environment, I excelled academically. I learned that if I tried hard, I could succeed; if I wanted something badly enough, I possessed the ability to take advantage of these opportunities. I worked a minimum 35-hour workweek for five years to put myself through school without succumbing to the temptation of a student loan. I paid tuition up front with the money I earned. It was the example of my mother, a Puerto Rican immigrant working diligently to provide for her family, who instilled a work ethic into me that has stood me in good stead.

With a lifelong passion for history, I have developed an interest in the cultural history of early modern and modern Europeans, especially women's history. The experiences of ordinary women fascinate me: how they constitute their world through popular folk tales and literature; how the seemingly irrational paradoxes of the past to modern eyes are completely rational when taken within the historical context; and finally, how these historical changes and transformations in culture constitute the present. I enjoy studying the early modern period of English history, especially the Tudor-Stuart period, because of the tensions that existed between medieval philosophies and the rising Enlightenment intellectualism. My influences have been diverse. I read the popular historian Barbara Tuchman, not for her technical accuracy, but for her beautiful prose. Natalie Zemon Davis's research inspires me in the way that she cleverly picks out fresh life from tired sources. And finally, Michel Foucault's philosophies have profoundly influenced the way I write, for now I have a philosophical grounding that makes me highly sensitive to my own biases. In fact, Foucault's post-structuralist matrix has been instrumental in shaping my current project focusing on the 17th-century midwife Elizabeth Cellier. In this project, I am reexamining the current histories of English midwifery using Cellier as a case study, detecting a decided bias embedded within them. The underlying assumption of these histories is that pre-industrial professional women—and Cellier in particular—struggled against patriarchy and oppression from the male medical community, when in fact Cellier's literature shows that she utilized the accepted discourses of patriarchy available to her in her writing and turned them into useful tools of political and religious power.

This essay uses an outstanding combination of personal information and academic exposition. The personal information makes the reader interested in this young woman as a person, and the academic information proves that such interest is warranted. Notice that the woman is a matter-of-fact about some rather large challenges she has faced in her life; she doesn't ask for special consideration, rather she explains certain decision-making processes and turning points in her development as a person and a scholar. This is an outstanding essay overall.

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