

Personal History Statement:

In an essay, discuss how your personal background informs your decision to pursue a graduate degree. Please include any educational, cultural, economic, or social experiences, challenges, or opportunities relevant to your academic journey; how you might contribute to social or cultural diversity within your chosen field; and/or how you might serve educationally underrepresented segments of society with your degree.

The writer of this personal history statement also authored the statement of purpose. In this essay, she relates how her personal background informs her decision to pursue graduate studies in history. With permission of the author, I have reprinted her essay, parsed with my comments on why and how it works as a winning essay.

I am impressed by the anomaly I have become: a female student of Mexican descent specializing in early modern European history.¹ My undergraduate curriculum, which consisted mainly of English classes on Shakespeare or Milton and history courses on the Enlightenment and the Reformation, belied my ethnic origins.² In fact, I can recall those uncomfortable moments in class when I would pause to glance around the room, realizing that I was the only brown student in a lecture hall of sixty or eighty students.³ Despite these occasional setbacks, I continued, headstrong, to pursue my passion for all things early modern. And I credit my academic success and accomplishments to my firm resolve to study only that which interested me and not that for which I was intended.⁴

Yet there comes a time when an amateur scholar becomes a professional, at which point she must reconcile somehow her personal life and past with her new career and future. Finding myself on the verge of that transition, I feel it is an adequate time to reflect on how my scholarly interests intersect with my cultural upbringing.⁵ It is this odd but unique relationship between my identity as an historian of Renaissance Europe, my developing feminism, and my Mexican origins, that I want to discuss in this essay.⁶

For reasons beyond my immediate grasp, I have always harbored special fondness for the period roughly described as the European Renaissance. I can recall briefly studying this era during a world history class in my elementary years. But any interests that may have been ignited were soon squelched in high school by the curriculum's necessary emphasis on American history, government and politics. My interests in early modern Europe did not truly blossom until I chanced upon a Western Civilization class my first year of college. Immediately, larger-than-life characters like Henry VIII and Leonardo da Vinci, and mass movements such as the Reformation and the French Revolution, took hold of my imagination in ways not anticipated. Though I tested my enthusiasm for history by exploring other epochs and geographies--even taking a course on race in Latin America--I always returned to that period which so held me spellbound.⁷

Yet I had no one with which to discuss my newfound passion. Far too timid to talk to my professors about anything other than homework and writing assignments, I turned to my father, a history enthusiast like myself. But my father, who knew much about the Mexican history and important Latin American figures like Porfirio Diaz and Che Guevara, could hardly be expected to sustain a conversation about my growing infatuation for the likes of Catherine de Medici and Louis XIV. Sadly, I experienced difficulty relating my background and identity to the people whose history I studied. My concept of history had always entailed a special, patriotic bond between the people of the past and their descendants. And I, the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, had no immediate ties to the fathers of Western civilization. Never had I even visited London, Rome, or Paris; only Mexico City, Guadalajara, and the tiny village where my father was born, Churintzio.⁸

As my understanding the early modern period matured, however, my poetic concept of history changed dramatically. Indeed, there exists marked disparity between the history inculcated in grammar and high school which is heroic and uncritical and the analytical history university professors require students to practice. I eventually realized that I could study the early modern period from the position of a scholar interested in the ways that people of the past interacted with one another and reacted to the events that shaped their lives. In a sense, I assumed the role of an anthropologist who studies and dissects a foreign culture not only to better comprehend that culture and its symbols, but to gain unorthodox perspective on the world we inhabit today. Regardless of my ethnic background and origins, my analytical skills and flair for writing are strictly my own. However, my work ethic, I am proud to say, derives from my family, from a father who doggedly pursued the American dream, and from field-laboring grandparents.⁹

Yet every academic needs his or her own niche, and I discovered mine when I stumbled upon the nascent but promising field of women's history. Though distanced somewhat from its original political agenda, feminism in academe remains strong and vibrant, evident especially in emerging works of history that not only detail women's historical struggles and realities, but forcefully argue that such experiences demand attention and incorporation into the historical record. My first encounter with this fascinating area of scholarship occurred during my junior year of college when I enrolled in a course on early modern women writers, and was inspired by stories of feminist scholars who were devoting their time and effort to rescue the works of women authors like Christine de Pizan and Elizabeth Cary from relegated obscurity. I soon realized that I had a real and honest investment in women's history and women's issues, for I, much like the women I studied, came from a culture where traditional patriarchal values were and continue to be upheld. Indeed, there is much to be said about the similarities between early modern patriarchy and contemporary Mexican machismo. Both rely on the hierarchy of the family to achieve social

and moral stability. Both enforce the subordination of women's bodies through gendered codes of honor. ¹⁰

Perhaps the greatest testament of my promise as an historian of early modern women's history is my senior thesis, which earned me the 2003 Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research. Entitled "Chaste, Silent, and Hungry: The Problem of Female Appetite in Early Modern England, 1550-1700," this project argued for the prevalence of a cultural discourse in early modern England concerned with regulating women's bodies and sexuality through regimented diet. A slew of conduct books which aggressively cautioned women against the dangers of food indulgence and satiation served as the foundation for this thesis. Unsurprisingly, at the heart of this study of the relationship between food mores and gender ideologies, was my own conviction in the power of culture and custom to inform women's experiences and self-perceptions.¹¹

My background, I would argue, has molded me into the scholar I am and the feminist historian I am in the process of becoming. Growing up within a male-dominated culture and family has made me keenly aware and sensitive to the contextual confines that oppress women's actions and desires; it has also made me appreciative of the imaginative and courageous ways in which women have collaborated and conspired sometimes tacitly, other times quite overtly to challenge and subvert patriarchal authority. I am fortunate to have known generations of resilient Mexican women, beginning with my grandmother who told fascinating stories of her life as an impoverished immigrant mother, ending with myself who struggles to straddle the liberal world of academe and the traditional domain of home and family. I channel my respect and admiration for female forbearance into my own work, and I bring an uncommon but insightful perspective to early modern history because of my unique Mexican origins. ¹²

¹ Note how the author juxtaposes the unlikely pairing of her ethnic identity with her subject of specialty. In so doing, the reader expects a thoughtful, nuanced, and highly personal discussion about how she came to become a lover of early modern European history.

² Immediately, the second sentence elaborates on her undergraduate course work and by ending with reference to her ethnic origins she provides added emphasis and thematic continuity to her essay.

³ This sentence helps us to visualize the physical scene as well as the isolated feeling evoked in the description. Note that she does not overstate the case of her isolation.

⁴ Succinctly and beautifully rendered is her resolve. Without telling as much as showing, the reader sees that she is someone with an inordinate passion and resolve to pursue her

interests. We can also infer from this statement that she is someone who refused to be put in a box. All these are endearing traits for a prospective graduate student in the social sciences.

⁵ In a nutshell, a personal statement is supposed to do exactly this: to link one's "personal life and past" with "career and future." On another level it is also about how one's "scholarly interests" intersect with one's "cultural upbringing." She has a way of never losing sight of the main theme of her essay, yet avoiding repetition.

⁶ This final sentence in the paragraph details the seemingly disparate elements she hopes to concatenate. By now it is evident that her style of writing is to move from the general and thematic to the specific. It is a gentle unfolding of ideas that keeps the reader interested and eager to continue.

⁷ Note how the use of verbs like "ignited," "squelched," and "blossom" coupled with the naming of specific historical figures and events like Henry VIII and the French Revolution, make her writing come to life. The phrase "I tested my enthusiasm" is far more interesting than something as prosaic as "I tried taking other courses."

⁸ In this paragraph, the writer begins to paint the portrait of her family and culture. She identifies the cultural and psychic dissonance of her anomalous condition in a deeply personal narrative involving her opportunities and the lack there as well as the relationship with her father.

⁹ This is the turning point of the essay, wherein the writer argues with eloquent vehemence the relevance of her ethnic background and her academic interests. She begins by explaining the maturation of the "poetic" amateur student of history to a professional one with an "analytical" understanding of history--a process which, she contends, had little to do with her ethnic background. As well, she discusses that her penchant for the "unorthodox" reading of history as well as her "flair" for writing are entirely hers. In so doing, she is quietly debunking the notion that there is anything orthodox or predictably knowable about this Latina. What is relevant to her background is her work ethic--the one she picked up from her Mexican father who doggedly pursued the American dream.

¹⁰ The writer establishes in other respects the growing affinity between the identity of a Latina and the women of early modern Europe. In so doing, she grounds herself further in the Early Modern period and in feminist scholarship.

¹¹ Notice how succinctly she is able to sum up her research project. A less-seasoned writer would have taken three times as many words to say the same. Note also that it is perfectly fine to quote sentences from your Statement of Purpose.

¹² In this grand synthesis, the author eloquently demonstrates that indeed she is an historian in the making by artfully weaving together her own identity with her academic pursuit, thereby engaging the social and cultural dimensions of her upbringing in ways unpredictable and refreshing.