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Vandermeade Interview: Winner of the James Madison Award for Excellence in Historical Scholarship

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Interview

Samantha Vandermeade, Winner of the James Madison Award for Excellence in Historical Scholarship

1) How did you first learn of the Madison Historical Review?

I first heard about the MHR from my department's email list serve. I've been lucky to work with faculty who are not only invested in their graduate students' research but also in their professional development. NC State's history faculty is always quick to send out notices of conference calls for papers, publication opportunities, and teaching workshops.

2) What made you want to pursue a graduate degree in history?

I was an English major at my undergraduate institution, specializing in modern American literature. However, I chose history as my minor pretty late in my undergraduate career, so I spent my senior year taking mostly history courses. I fell in love with it, and I changed my plans to pursue a graduate degree in history instead of in English. History continues to fascinate me personally, but I am also passionate about utilizing historical scholarship to raise awareness and advocate for social justice.

3) Do you have a specific area of interest?

In my MA program, I have focused my research and course work around public history, gender history, and 20th century American history. I consider myself primarily a gender historian and believe historical research proves germinal to our understanding of citizenship, community, and identity.

4) Are there any specific historians who influence the way you study history?

George Chauncey's *Gay New York* transformed how I think about doing cultural history and gender history. It was one of the first history books I read that I couldn't put down. His diverse and creative use of sources is astounding, and he fundamentally changed the historiography. He set the bar high for historians. I also try to model my work after Elaine Tyler May, Michelle M. Nickerson, and David K. Johnson. They do different kinds of work, but they all successfully weave together analyses of culture, identity politics, and gender. Their scholarship also speaks eloquently to the current American sociopolitical climate. More importantly, though, my mentor, Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron profoundly influences my scholarship. She challenges me to be a better thinker, teacher, and writer.

5) Do you have a specific writing style?

I come from a background in English literature, and I'm a creative writer by both

inclination and training. I think that permeates my scholarship. I like irony, and I'm not above making a joke in my writing. I've also been lucky enough to have excellent mentors and professors who have instilled in me the value of precise language and making every word count.

6) Could you describe your writing process?

I start by highlighting and jotting thoughts in the margins of my research materials as I read them—the pages of my books are usually tattered and covered in ink by the time I'm done. I jot thoughts on post-its and stick them to the inside covers, so I remember a point I want to make that relates to that scholarship. For this project, I had printouts of the advertisements I analyzed; they were scribbled all over as well. I find this speeds up the writing process because when I go looking for something, I have a roadmap back to what I'm looking for. Once I start writing, I write very linearly, start to finish. I don't outline. I don't draft a paper in pieces. I don't collect my notes in one place before I begin. It's probably not a very good model to follow. Conceptually, usually what comes out in the first draft doesn't change much. By that point, I've already "thought it to death." After that first draft, I obsessively edit my writing for stylistic choices. I make lists of words I used more than twice and use a thesaurus to make sure the words I chose have the exact meaning I want. I copy and paste paragraphs and sections into a new document to make sure they stand alone—do they have well-written topic sentences? Do they embody what I wanted them to convey? Are they too long or did I ramble? Finally, I read the paper out loud to myself. I catch more errors that way than four or five silent read-throughs.

7) Did you face any unexpected challenges in researching this topic?

I think the hardest part of this topic was where to set methodological boundaries on the research. I began the project fascinated by advertising images and what they said about gendered relationships during World War II and the cultural power they held, and still hold today—I'm always interested in present implications. However, I didn't find my "so what" until I realized that the *images* didn't change that much when the war ended, but the *message* did change. That realization led me to wonder: "What about all the other women, the ones who weren't the 'Rosie the Riveters' and the 'June Cleavers'?" That's when I had to figure out a way to talk about the lived reality of American women during the 1940s and 1950s and the disconnect between that reality and the advertising images. Balancing that discussion with the necessary analysis of resurgent traditionalism, gendered labor, cultural semiotics, corporations and consumerism, tensions over sexuality, links between gender and race, and the sociopolitical implications of all of these things proved a really difficult task to accomplish in 30 pages.

8) What are your current career plans?

I have accepted Arizona State University's offer to join their Women and Gender Studies PhD program for the fall of 2015. I will be working at the Institute for Humanities Research on campus, and I plan to continue my research at the intersection of citizenship, political identity, and gendered cultural representation. While I consider myself a historian, I believe a gender studies program will allow me the freedom to engage in interdisciplinary research and methodology, as well as provide an avenue in which to apply my research to issues of social justice.

9) What advice do you have for other graduate students submitting work for publication?

Edit, edit, and edit some more. Use a thesaurus. Be creative; boring writing is bad writing. Don't procrastinate, because you need the distance that time provides. Sometimes the best thing you can do for a paper is to set it aside for a few days or a week. When you come back to it, you might just say, "Hey. That's not as bad as I thought." Or "Wow, I didn't even realize this section forgot to address A, B, and C." Finally, never underestimate the importance of good organization and good topic sentences. Give the reader a roadmap!