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One Black Woman's Path to Librarianship (and Some Advice)

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One Black Woman's Path to Librarianship (and Some Advice)



Many thanks to Gina Murrell for sharing her story! Photos courtesy of Gina Murrell.

I met Gina Murrell years ago when she became my co-worker in the Digital Scholarship Center at an academic library. We worked on the same grant-funded digitization project, and when the funding ended, Gina moved on to other things. We have stayed in touch and encouraged each other through more temporary jobs and job searches over the years. What inspires me the most about Gina is that she left an established career in the publishing industry as a copy editor to follow her passion for libraries, go to library school, and take a chance on a new career. At the time of this interview, Gina was working full-time in a contract position as Digital Asset Coordinator & Archivist at Gap Inc. in San Francisco. Here's what she had to say about her experience after library school, as well as some advice for current and future students:

Interview with Gina Murrell:

Question (Q): So we can get to know you a bit, what is your favorite song, book, TV show, and movie?

Answer (A):

- **Song:** “Screaming Gun,” by Black Rebel Motorcycle Club
- **Book:** *Manhattan When I Was Young*, by Mary Cantwell
- **TV show:** “Mad Men”
- **Movie:** “Miller’s Crossing”

Q: What kind of work does your role as Digital Asset Coordinator & Archivist entail?

A: I’m involved in helping to implement a digital asset management (DAM) program using ArchivesSpace; migrating data from the prior DAM, Adobe Experience Manager (AEM); adding and editing metadata in AEM; answering research questions; digitizing physical assets such as photographs, catalogs, and past examples of shopping bags, usually to fulfill a research request (for example: “When did this style of logo first appear on one of our shoppers?”) with a flatbed scanner or digital camera; performing outreach through open house events at the archive, and giving presentations about the archive.

Q: What do you like most about your job?

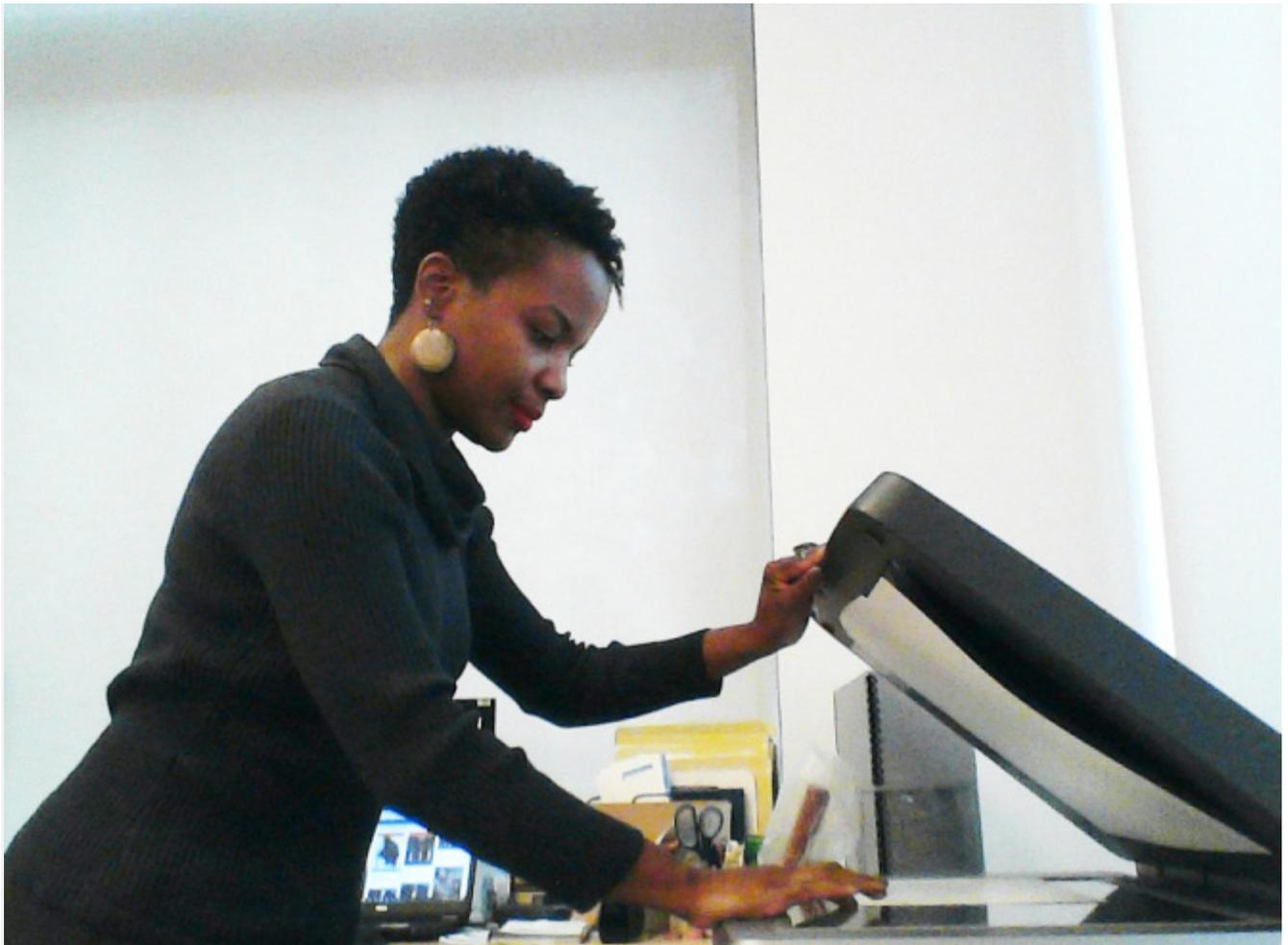
A: Every day is different. Every day there are different tasks to choose from and complete (in order of priority, of course), new research questions to answer, physical assets to digitize, and physical and digital assets to provide metadata for and otherwise organize and make searchable and accessible. Every day presents an exciting challenge, which I view as an opportunity to learn. I’ve learned so much in a short amount of time!

Q: What aspects of your work are the most challenging?

A: The contractual nature of the work. Switching careers after getting my Master of Library Science (MLS) degree, I discovered that many jobs in libraries and archives are temporary. Typically, you are hired on a contract or project basis, and once the money for that contract job or project runs out, you are let go – sometimes on short notice. The precarious aspect of the work, which they did not tell us about in library school, is a definite challenge, as are the low salaries for many library and archives jobs.

Q: How did you get to where you are today? What challenges did you face along the way, or still face?

A: Before library school, I had worked my way up in the New York publishing world, from intern to editorial assistant to assistant editor to copy editor. After 10 years in publishing, I had done everything I wanted to do in the field, and I wondered what else I wanted to do. The only other thing that interested me was working in libraries. Back in college, I worked part-time for three years in on-campus libraries and loved it. So in 2011, I started library school, taking classes two or three nights a week while working full-time in publishing during the day. In 2014, I earned my MLS. Since then, I've worked contract jobs to get my foot in the door and to gain professional experience. I've relocated for jobs. The expense of relocating for work was challenging. What continues to be a challenge is finding a permanent job, with good pay and benefits, in the field.



Gina Murrell

Q: What was your first job after graduating from library school, and how did you find it?

A: My first paying job after graduating from library school was Project Coordinator of the Oregon Digital Newspaper Program, based within the Digital Scholarship Center at the University of Oregon in Eugene. It was a full-time contract position where I got hands-on experience in a variety of applications pertaining to the management of digital assets, and I had

the opportunity to write a blog and supervise student workers. Before that, I worked on a volunteer basis at a community radio station library and at Oregon Historical Society, both in Portland. Immediately after graduation, while still in New York, I interned at Anthology Film Archives (AFA). There, I spent the summer, mostly alone in AFA's library, digitizing physical assets—print materials such as catalogs, bulletins, and photographs—and creating metadata for these assets.

Q: Describe your dream job:

A: A recent contract job brought me to the University of California, Berkeley, where I worked with digital and physical collections in a library. I enjoyed the work as well as the youthful energy on campus, where something interesting was always going on, and I was surrounded by people who were committed to learning and interested in new ideas. However, seeking job stability, I moved on to non-academic library work. Last fall, I attended a daylong symposium at another California university; while there, I visited with an academic librarian friend who gave me a tour of the campus and of her workplace. I realized I missed working in a higher-ed environment. Though I try to remain flexible in terms of the direction of my career, a permanent job where I work with digital and/or physical collections at a college or university library sounds pretty sweet.

Q: What misconceptions do you think people have about the work that you do?

A: Many people don't realize that you need a master's degree to be considered for most library jobs or to advance in the field. If the job is at an academic library, two master's degrees – the MLS and a subject area master's – are often required. Another misconception is that libraries are quiet places where a librarian will shush you if you speak above a whisper. First, I've never shushed anyone. Second, today's libraries are dynamic spaces where patrons of all ages are encouraged to engage with each other, with library staff, and with the often interactive resources within the library itself.

Q: Is there anything that you have learned in the “real world” that you wish you had learned in library school?

A: Beyond the temporary, project-based nature of many library and archives jobs, and that many people working library jobs are underpaid and often underemployed, I wish library school had better prepared me for working with born-digital collections. Everything I know about this facet of my job, I've learned on the job, whether through internships, volunteering, or contract work. I either taught myself or had supervisors who believed in my potential get me up to speed. And you never stop learning. There is always new technology and new ways of doing things. Learning helps you to grow as a professional.

Q: Do you have any advice for current and future library school students?

A: Some classmates may get jobs soon after graduation, but the job search CAN take months or even years. Also know that periods of unemployment in libraries and archives are common; it is NOT a personal failing on your part. Money runs out, budgets shift, and departmental or company priorities change. It happens! Try to have another source of revenue that will support you during tough times. (Once fully employed, hold onto this source of revenue as a side gig because you just never know.) Strive to keep supportive people around you and believe that things WILL improve. Be flexible in terms of your library career. You may end up someplace much better than you ever imagined for yourself. And good luck!

Editor's note: this article was originally published on January 10, 2019.