Research Enhancement Award Project Description -- Aftershocks: Poems
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I am applying for a research enhancement award to work on a new book of poems, a documentary project, titled Aftershocks, focused on 3/11, as it is often now termed: the earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear meltdown that occurred on 3/11/2011 in Japan.

Calling the event a “triple catastrophe,” political Scientist Richard Samuels, in his recent book 3/11: Disaster and Change in Japan, asserts that 20,000 people died after the 9.0 magnitude earthquake and then the tsunami hit northern Japan. The subsequent meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor, the world’s second worst nuclear disaster after Chernobyl, then displaced 110,000 residents (1). While the human costs of this triple disaster are staggering, so is the massive destruction of Japan’s infrastructure: NHK, Japan’s primary broadcast station, has estimated that after 3/11 more than 127,000 buildings in the country completely collapsed, more than 273,000 partially collapsed and another 762,000 were damaged. The scale of the 2011 catastrophe in Japan appears nearly unfathomable.

Yet it is crucial to try to fathom it what happened on March 11, 2011. My poetry project Aftershocks is part of this effort. I have the academic background to write this book because of the extensive research and writing I have done on another large-scale disaster, Hurricane Katrina, in 2005. I grew up in New Orleans, and my parents, who live in the city, are survivors of the storm. My fourth book of poems, Breach, explore the storm and the subsequent levee breaches. I have published numerous essays on Katrina and have guest lectured and spoken all over the country on the storm, most recently at the tenth anniversary Katrina AfterMaps Event at the CUNY Graduate Center in September 2015 and at an interview with poet Yusef Komunyakaa and actor Wendell Pierce at the 92nd Street Y in October 2015.

While I am aware of the difficulty of comparing disasters, there are nevertheless crucial parallels between 3/11 and Hurricane Katrina that will help me to research and write this new collection. Both Katrina and 3/11 began as “natural” disasters (flood, earthquake, tsunami) but quickly became “human-made” disasters as Japan’s unstable nuclear power plant and New Orleans’ weak levee system caused enormous damage. As well, both disasters illuminated major problems in city and country governance and structures.

Yet, while I will build on the work I have done with Katrina, this project will take my poetry and poetics in a new direction. Specifically, with Aftershocks I will engage with the emergent field of documentary poetics. In his essay “Documentary Poetics,” published at the Poetry Foundation, poet Mark Nowak articulates the ways in which documentary poetics, while not a coherent movement like Language Poetry, for example, distinguishes itself in several significant ways from a dominant tradition of first-person lyric poetry. Specially, it takes its cue from documentary film and visual practices, makes use of ethnographic strategies, engages with politics and the social field, uses voice in ways that depart from the traditional lyric, and is often internationally focused.

My own writing methods have always been based on research, and this new project continues that enterprise. Because I am a writer with both an M.F.A. in creative writing and a Ph.D. in literature, I have always been interested in the interplay of poetry and research. Each of the five books I have published has involved extensive research. My first book (Resurrection, winner of the 1995 Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets, chosen from more than 900 entries, published by LSU Press, 1996) contains research-based poems about women artists (Frida Kahlo, Diane Arbus), the magician Harry Houdini, and women in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge. My second, The Afflicted Girls (LSU Press, April 2004), funded in part by a creative artists’ fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society investigates the Salem witch trials of 1692. My novel Judy Garland, Ginger Love (Harper Collins, 1998) was
based on several years of research about Judy Garland. For my collection of poetry *Milk Dress* I did a great deal of work in archives about the historical construction of motherhood. Finally, my book *Breach* about Katrina relied on extensive research.

For this new project, *Aftershocks*, I will take my research skills into another arena as I make use of the strategies and techniques of documentary poetics. I will essentially engage in fieldwork—documenting the landscape of Japan, reading materials in archives and interviewing survivors, rescue workers, volunteers and officials. With the fifth anniversary of the disaster approaching—March 11, 2016—the country is still far from recovered but areas affected by the tsunami are now safe to visit and tourism, particularly in the Northwest Tohuko region, is resuming. The story of 3/11 is very complicated, in part because of the environmental consequences and also because of the government’s response. For that reason, archival research is key to the project, particularly work at The National Archives of Japan, which holds documents and photographs related to 3/11.

*Aftershocks* will be a full-length poetry collection, of approximately 48-64 pages. For this project, I request funding to make a two-week research trip to Japan in order to immerse myself in the world of post-disaster Japan. While I have begun reading about the contemporary history and culture of Japan, in order to do significant work on my book, I need to make this research trip Japan. My overall goal is to visit a number of museums and collections in Tokyo and Hiroshima and to visit the Tohuko region of the country, which is closest to the greatest damage from the nuclear meltdown.

I have several contacts in Japan (at the International Christian University outside of Tokyo) who will be able to serve as guides into areas where little English is spoken as well as help with the translation of any documents held in archives not in English. But since the majority of my work in Japan will be involved in researching visual art, photography, and translated documents held in the archives, I do not anticipate linguistic difficulties.

There are three components to my research trip. My trip will begin in Tokyo, which is the site of a number of major collections of art, history and science, as well as archives of materials specifically related to the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown which are held at these museums. There, I plan to visit: The Ikebukuro Earthquake Museum; The Tokyo National Museum; The National Archives of Japan; The Tokyo History Museum; The Metropolitan Museum of Photography; The National Museum of Emerging Science; The National Science Museum; and The National Museum of Modern Art. In addition to the museums and archives noted above, there are also a number of public safety centers in Tokyo open to the public which now contain earthquake simulations and which provide the history of Japan’s earthquakes, including the March 11 quake.

The second part of my trip involves travel (day trips) to the northwest Tohuko region of the country, easily accessible from Tokyo by the Tohoku Shinankensean train (part of Japan Rail), as this is the area most damaged by the tsunami and earthquake and is relatively near the site of the Fukushima reactor meltdown. Being immersed in the culture of Japan while researching the aftermath of the triple disaster is key to my project; I cannot write a book about the disasters in Japan without visiting the country. By visiting these devastated places and talking to people on the ground, however, I will be able to grapple with and try to bear witness to the event. The third and final part of my trip involves travel to Hiroshima, via Japan Rail, to see the Hiroshima Museum of Peace. A visit to this site will enable me to historicize the contemporary disaster in Japan by comparing it to and thinking of it in terms of the earlier catastrophe inflicted on the country. Hiroshima is a crucial precedent to Fukushima.

Given the lack of contemporary poetry in the U.S. on 3/11 and my previous work in the study of large-scale disaster, I am confident that my book *Aftershocks* will be an important contribution to both current poetry and our understanding of this devastating event.
Working Bibliography for Aftershocks: Poems


“Japan Beyond 3/11: Stories of Recovery,” (Oral histories collected) www.nhk.or.jp


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ACADEMIC POSITION

Director & Co-Founder, MFA in Creative Writing & Literary Translation, Queens College-CUNY, 2007-present
Full professor, English/Creative Writing, Queens College-CUNY, New York, 2010-present

EDUCATION

Ph.D. English and American Literature (Certificate in Women’s Studies)
Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, 1996

M.F.A. Creative Writing (Fiction), The Iowa Writers’ Workshop
The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 1990

B.A. Comparative Literature, Magna Cum Laude with Honors

BOOKS


The Afflicted Girls (poetry), Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. (Named as one of the twelve best books of poetry in 2004 by Library Journal)


Edited Volume

Women’s Studies Quarterly, a special issue titled “Mother,” co-edited with Pamela Stone, December 2010.

Mixed Media Project

Salem Lessons, (poetry and art), a mixed-media project in collaboration with visual artist Maureen Cummins, a limited-edition collector’s book sold to special collections and museums, 2010.
Books Currently Completed and Under Submission

*My Dollhouse, Myself: Miniature Histories* (non-fiction), book in progress about the role of
dollhouses and miniatures in the lives of women, part memoir and part history, and
exploration of dollhouses, mothering, girlhood and home. Funded in part by a Research
Enhancement Grant. Book ms completed and submitted to my literary agent.

*Mad Money* (poetry), poetry book in progress based on small museums across the
United States. Poems from the book have been awarded The Emily Dickinson Award
from the Poetry Society of America and the Julia Peterkin Award from Converse College
and have been published in a number of national magazines. Book ms completed and
about to be submitted to LSU Press.

**SELECTED POETRY IN JOURNALS AND MAGAZINES (2015)**


“Self-Portrait in the Backyard as Mother,” “Self-Portrait Composed of Lines from Marina
Tseavteva’s Notebook Entry 1940,” “Self-Portrait as the Playroom Toybox,” *Plume*, 2015.


“Bebe Premier Pas,” “At the Doll Hospital, La Musee de Poupee, Paris,” *The Great River

**SELECTED NON-FICTION ESSAYS IN JOURNALS (2015)**

Excerpt from *My Dollhouse, Myself: Miniature Histories, The Rumpus*, August 2015 (funded by
Research Enhancement Award, 2013)

Excerpt from *My Dollhouse, Myself: Miniature Histories, The Great River Review*, Winter
2015. (funded by Research Enhancement Award, 2013)

**SELECTED PERFORMANCES AND READINGS (2015)**

Katrina AfterMaps Conference, CUNY Graduate Center, September 2015.
Great Weather for Media Reading Series, NYC, October 2015.
PS Bookstore, Brooklyn, NY, September 2015.
The Associated Writing Programs Conference, Minneapolis, MN, April 2015.
The Golden Notebook Bookstore, Woodstock, NY Feb 2015
BUDGET: $4879 Total Request for Two-Week Trip to Japan (Summer 2016)

My budget request is for:

**TRAVEL**
Round-trip airfare on United Airlines/economy class from Newark NJ (EWR) to Tokyo Narita Airport at $191.00 as well as travel for two weeks throughout Japan $235 (Japan Rail Pass). Finally, for taxis as well as subway throughout Tokyo: $200

**LODGING**
As well I am asking for lodging for 12 days in Tokyo as per the US State Dept (and NY Comptroller) websites: $2040 Tokyo and for two days in Hiroshima $248 Hiroshima