Seed Grant Application Cover Page FY2013

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Name:	Alexandra Teague	Title:	Assistant Professor of Poetry
Department:	English	Email:	ateague@uidaho.edu

ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATORS:

Name:		Title:	
Department:		Email:	

Name:		Title:	
Department:		Email:	

Amount Requested:	$9618

Proposal Title:	*The Visible Woman*: Poems about Sarah Winchester, Victorian Heiress to the Rifle Fortune

PROPOSAL CHECKLIST:

X Abstract
X Narrative (2 single-spaced pages)
X Budget Page
X Biographical Data
X Publications/Exhibits/Performances (5 years)
X Proposals Submitted/Funded (5 years)
NA Summary of Previous Seed Grant(s)
NA Applicable animal/human requests for approval are attached

Has seed grant previously been awarded? ☐ Yes **X** No

ELIGIBILITY:

X Early career faculty establishing scholarly program (5 years or less employment at UI)
☐ Established faculty transitioning into a new scholarly area

Project Abstract

"The Visible Woman: Poems About Sarah Winchester, Victorian Heiress to the Rifle Fortune"

Alexandra Teague
Department of English

With the recent increase in academic and societal interest in poetry books that reimagine historical figures and events, my second manuscript, *The Visible Woman*, extends this trend by exploring the story of Sarah Winchester, Victorian heiress to the rifle fortune, and the bizarre and purportedly haunted 6-acre house she built in California, as well Winchester sharpshooters, ghosts, war widows, and other "visible" women. Using poetry's formal and metaphoric capacities, these poems interweave fact and legend, engaging questions of social visibility and invisibility, collective guilt, femininity, violence, and other topics.

With a first draft of approximately half the manuscript and publication of some of these poems in well-respected journals, I am seeking support for key primary research into Sarah's story, as well as dedicated writing time to integrate this research into revisions and new poems. Having spent three years working mostly from secondary sources, I have encountered a number of questions that I propose researching in the History San Jose Archives, Stanford library, and the Winchester House. I will then spend a month working from this research to revise poems and draft new ones, which I will submit to journals, in anticipation of submitting the full manuscript to presses and contests.

Project Proposal Narrative

Alexandra Teague

Description/Context/Explanation

After completing approximately half of my second manuscript of poems, *The Visible Woman,* I have reached the stage of needing to spend time in San Jose, California, to research Sarah Winchester via primary texts in the History San Jose Archives, and nearby Stanford Library, and revisit her eccentric 6-acre house ("The Winchester Mystery House"). I am also seeking seed-grant funding for a month of summary salary to delve into this research and work on new poems and revisions. This research and time are essential not only for helping me to fill in factual gaps in my understanding of Sarah's story and the attendant history, but also—importantly for poetry—for helping me to inhabit this material and imaginatively reconstruct it.

Despite (and also because of) her pop-cultural visibility as an eccentric, Sarah Winchester has received little serious creative or scholarly attention, and I see her story as fascinating in its own right and metaphorically representative of trends and themes in mid-to-late 19th-century America. According to the popular legend, deeply grieving the deaths of her infant daughter (from marasmus) and her husband (from tuberculosis), Sarah consulted a Spiritualist medium, who told her to move West to unceasingly construct a house large enough to house the spirits of the people killed by Winchesters (or in other versions, labyrinthine enough to confuse the spirits). The medium claimed these ghosts had killed Sarah's daughter and husband, and would kill her next. Although this legend is quite easy to factually discredit, it took hold during Sarah's life to explain why she built a huge house with stairways that led nowhere and other architectural oddities, and why she was reclusive, and it continues to be played up by the Winchester House and popular culture. In my manuscript, I explore these legends, as well as broader resonances—including the ways her story might speak to the "endless building" of Manifest Destiny, and to collective societal guilt about the indigenous genocide and other violence enacted with the "gun that won the West." I also explore the human desire to explain away quotidian suffering in favor of drama—which again, may reflect collective longings, such as the desire to communicate with the dead (Spiritualism, which claimed this ability, experienced a resurgence in America, for instance, after the Civil War). I am also interested in what it meant then, and now, to be a "visible woman"—how Sarah achieved visibility via her wealth, unconventional choices, and (paradoxically) reclusiveness, and how other women, in a time when women were mostly wives, rose to visibility as Winchester sharpshooters, mediums, and ghosts.

These poems have already generated interest at readings, and publications in nationally recognized journals—including *The Seattle Review,* which is publishing a twelve-poem Winchester Series this spring, *The Cimarron Review, The Cortland Review,* and *FIELD*. I am hopeful therefore that the book, when completed, will find a good publisher (perhaps Persea, which in 2010 published my first book, *Mortal Geography,* winner of the 2009 Lexi Rudnitsky Prize and the California Book Award's 2010 Gold Medal for Poetry). In my semester at UI, I have written approximately 12 new poems and continued to research in secondary sources including Mary Jo Ignoffo's biography of Sarah Winchester, *Winchester: The Gun that Won the West, American Rifle: A Biography,* and *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters,* as well as the Buffalo Bill Historical Society's online database of Winchester advertisements. These sources have been very generative, and have led to a number of questions and discrepancies that I now need to research in primary sources. For instance, I need to see Sarah's original letters to her lawyer and long-time friend Judge Lieb (who repeatedly claimed that Sarah was sane despite rumors to the contrary), as well as papers related to the running of her estates (she

actually owned several houses and ran successful orchards). To further explore the development of the legends and understand her historical context, I also need to read original newspapers and other area publications from her lifetime. Having lived in California for many years, including when I began this project in 2009, but then having been away for much of the past two years—as a Visiting Professor at University of Arkansas and now here—staying in San Jose to research and spend more time at the Winchester House would be invaluable to this project's completion, depth, and scope.

Contribution to Field and Professional Development

Books of poetry about history have become increasingly popular in the past decade as a means of imaginatively reckoning with the legacies of individual figures and collective history, and I believe that poetry's metaphoric linkages and ability to explore and enact various forms make it ideally suited for these investigations. Award-winning and critically praised books such as Tyehimba Jess's *Leadbelly,* Gabrielle Calvocoressi's *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart,* Camille Dungy's *Suck on the Marrow* (which treats slave histories), and Ellen Bryant Voigt's *Kyrie* (the 1918-19 influenza epidemic) are frequently taught at universities, and a growing number of graduate and undergraduate students are interested in this historical-creative writing. Among these books, a number deal in part with the roles of women, but *The Visible Woman* extends this poetic dialogue by focusing on women's stories and linking these to less traditionally female territories such as guns, Manifest Destiny, and Victorian architecture (the literal construction of the home in contrast to conventional home-making). As such, *The Visible Woman* also has the potential to interest readers outside of the traditional academic poetry readership and to encourage dialogue about Westward expansion and surrounding themes. Already, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Wyoming has expressed interest in my potentially coming there as a fellow to research original Winchester advertisements. Since the publication of poetry books is predicated on publishing the constituent poems in high-quality journals, new and revised poems that are strengthened by primary research in San Jose, and by a month of writing time, will contribute both to my chances of continued journal publication and to the likelihood that this full manuscript, when completed, will generate interest among publishers, and then readers.

Objectives and Methods

My objective for this summer is to spend two weeks in July researching in the History San Jose archives (the primary holdings of Sarah Winchester's papers) and Stanford Library, and then to spend a month writing from these sources. I am particularly interested, as I suggested, in increasing my understanding of perceptions of Sarah during her life—by her lawyer, her workers, San Jose society, and the press—and in being able to take notes from her own writing and papers. Being in San Jose would also allow me to return to the Winchester house to talk to staff and go on tours, as well as to spend time in the adjacent Winchester gun museum. Since my first book includes only a few historical poems, this manuscript is challenging me to find ways to personally inhabit and imagine this material, and dedicated time with the primary sources, followed by the time to write and revise, is all the more crucial.

Outcomes and Deliverables

By the end of the researching and month of writing, I would hope to have 6 to 10 new (and/or substantially revised) poems, which I would submit to nationally recognized journals (both *The Missouri Review* and *The Iowa Review,* for instance, have expressed interest in considering new poems from this manuscript). I would, in the coming years, continue to use this research to write additional poems to complete the manuscript, which I plan to submit (in revised form) to presses and contests by 2014 or 2015.

Bibliography

Calvocoressi, Gabrielle. *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart*. New York: Persea Books, 2005. Print.

Dungy, Camille. *Suck on the Marrow*. Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2010. Print.

Goldfarb, Russel M. and Clare R. *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters*. Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978. Print.

Ignoffo, Mary Jo. *Captive of the Labyrinth, Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010. Print.

Jess, Tyehimba. *Leadbelly*. (National Poetry Series). Seattle: Wave Books, 2005. Print.

Rose, Alexander. *American Rifle: A Biography*. Surrey, UK: Delta, 2009. Print.

Voigt, Ellen Bryant. *Kyrie*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996. Print.

Williamson, Harold Frances. *Winchester: The Gun that Won the West*. New York: Barnes, 1963. Print.