

Finding Language for Silence

MFA writing student travels to Japan on STAF award

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ANNA OHARA WITH HER FAMILY IN JAPAN

When most hear the word “research”, all sorts of technical fields come to mind—biology, sociology, chemistry, history, etc. The word is so often confined to labs and libraries.

But what about for creative fields? How might research play into generating original, creative work, like a poem for instance?

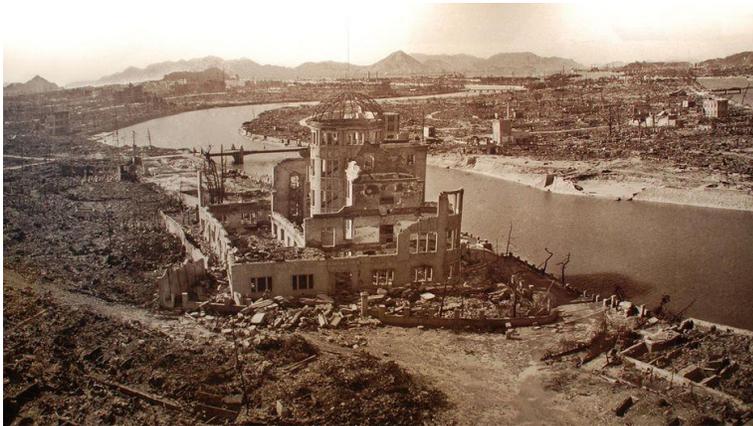
Enter Anna Ohara, a Japanese-born, American-raised poet and graduate student in UNH's [Master of Fine Arts writing program](#). Ohara was one of the 51 graduate students who received the UNH Graduate School's [Summer Teaching Assistant Fellowship](#) (STAF) award, which seeks to financially support the research of teaching assistants who have performed exceptionally well both as TA's and students.

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research According to Ohara, "Research is all over the practice of poetry. In as far as I draw on my experiences and observations of the world to write, I am always performing a style of field research."

As the granddaughter of an atomic bomb survivor, Ohara's proposed project involved traveling to Japan to explore her family's history, and to then write a sequence of poems out of these experiences.

This August, the city of Hiroshima marked the 74th anniversary of the atomic bomb—an event that remains deeply personal in Ohara's family. Her plan was to be in the city and to walk from the site of her grandmother's former high school to where her family home still stands across the bay—the very trip that Ohara's grandmother made after the detonation in 1945. She also planned to interview her grandmother's surviving siblings alongside her father.



Hiroshima 1945, CC Image

by [Xiquinho Silva](#)

Like any good researcher, Ohara began with a question: How can she, a Japanese American, give language to an inherited silence with deep cultural implications? Ohara's intention was not to record her grandmother's experience as an atomic bomb survivor, but rather to explore the aftermath, the negative space, what remains generations later.

“What I discovered as I walked along streets in the city full of car traffic and green parks filled with cicada calls, was that there was no way to understand her experience that day as anything other than the complete opposite of my own,” Ohara said. “By imagining the absence of all the features of life I was witnessing, I began to feel a shade of what she might have felt—really just a whisper. It was frankly awful to imagine, especially while pushing my body in the wild August heat, well-rested and fed and watered as I was, to imagine a girl walking through the fallout of a nuclear bomb, thirsty and blackened in her school uniform.”

In addition to this thirty-kilometer walk, Ohara conducted interviews with members of her family who still live in Hiroshima, in both her grandmother and grandfather’s ancestral homes. Unfortunately, the man she had most been hoping to interview, her grandmother’s younger brother, passed away in the late spring of this year.

“When I met him three years ago, he was the person (the first ever) who told me about my grandmother’s experience that day in ‘45 with any amount of detail; it is because of him that I know about the walk that she made that day, and the condition she returned home in,” Ohara said.



Hiroshi

ma Peace Memorial, CC Image by [Timo Volz](#)

“I had thought I would be able to talk to him again, this time prepared for the conversation. Instead, I was able to visit his grave and pay my respects, which I am grateful for. Still, his death seemed to signal the closing of any opportunity to know with any clarity the facts of my grandmother’s experience.”

So, the most significant interviews turned out to be with Ohara’s father. By asking him about his mother and witnessing his struggle to give language to his memories, the interviews illuminated Ohara’s more recent family history.

“I experienced a sort of mirroring of my own struggles, the ones that led me to this project,” Ohara said. “In our attempts to articulate ourselves, we ended up talking about our individual experiences of our family for the first time, [...] and so I’ll be writing from

that knowledge base, which is closer to my grandmother, though not as close as I thought I'd be after this summer.”

Now that Ohara has returned to UNH for her final semester in the MFA program, she is compiling poems from her summer in what will be her Masters Thesis.

“The STAF grant allowed me to go to Hiroshima, which is the only way I could have made real headway into this subject due to the sheer number of unknown elements,” Ohara said. “By having my body in Hiroshima, I was able to lean sensory experiences that my grandmother would have had in common, and speak to aging members of my family.”

The above story has been adapted from Anna Ohara's own written account of her travels.

- WRITTEN BY:
[Lily Greenberg '21G](#) | Grad School

GRADUATE SCHOOL



University of New Hampshire

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