

FPU RESEARCH FUND PROPOSAL 2016-2017

*Fifteen Years* – A Novel

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I am requesting \$4048.60 to travel to Peak's Island and Portland, Maine to do research for my current project: *Fifteen Years*, a novel about two sisters whose worlds are cracked wide open, their deeply-held secrets released into consciousness, when the sisters are "triggered" by reading the provocative works of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century bestselling writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.

My book features a younger sister who is a mental health and crisis counselor at a New England university in Portland who commutes from Peak's Island, Maine. The other is an English professor on sabbatical in England, investigating the transatlantic influence of late nineteenth century American and British New Woman writers. While I have applied for a Whiting Foundation Grant to travel to England to do research for the evolution of the latter sister's life, I am applying here for FPU Research Funding for the primary goal of fleshing out the younger sister's life. Peak's Island is the setting for the bulk of my book, and this research trip will be important in terms of allowing me to do four things (in addition to writing, of course). I plan to examine: 1) Peak's Island -- its history, its people, and quotidian life as lived by year-round residents, 2) archival materials re: Phelps in the Maine Women Writers Collection at the University of New England in Portland, 3) the inner workings of Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine, and 4) the inner workings of Planned Parenthood of Maine.

1. RESEARCH THE ISLAND ITSELF: Peak's Island has a year-round population of 864 and a summer population (mostly day-trippers) of 2000-4000. Much of the island's 762 acres is heavily forested with no real beaches. During World War II, Peak's Island Military Reservation occupied 25% of the island in the form of Battery Steele, a concrete complex 500 feet long and 300 feet wide, Casco Bay's defense against attack by German

battleships and submarines, an example of the largest battery ever built anywhere in the U.S. What peppers the island today are the crumbling remains of the immense Battery Steele complex and several observation towers along with the 5<sup>th</sup> Maine Regiment House and the 8<sup>th</sup> Maine Regiment House – comprising a veritable island museum to wartime. The history of this island is central to my story not only as setting but as metaphor: the novel explores the reasons my character lives alone on an island surrounded by very few neighbors and bulwarked by the remnants of military fortification. My methodology in investigating the island will be multi-modal. I will interview islanders, read island history, meet with the Peak’s Island Community Group and its Council, and I will explore and observe commuters and residents (how they shop, how they get around the island, how they acquire medical services, how they survive long winters, etc.).

2. MAINE WOMEN WRITERS COLLECTION: At this archive I aim to discover new information about Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (an author about whom I wrote my dissertation) and her work. The MWWC is always generous with their space and services, and I look forward to visiting and exploring in this archive again. The work of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps – two novels in particular, *Gates Ajar* and *Old Maids and Burglars in Paradise*, play a pivotal role in this novel in progress, as I mentioned earlier. My methodology here is archival research.
3. SEXUAL ASSAULT RESPONSE SERVICES: My aim is to shadow a counselor at SARS in Portland and/or do personal interviews with several counselors. My research in the area of sexual assault and rape is not new, of course, but a visit to this agency in Maine is, and I am interested in the work they do in this particular area of New England,

their clientele, their work space, and their agency's ideological outlook. Researching this kind of crisis healing work is essential to my project and its characters' development.

4. **PLANNED PARENTHOOD:** My aim with Planned Parenthood of Portland is similar to that described above with SARS. I plan to interview PP workers in order to understand in detail some of the services performed therein. Doing these personal interviews is vital to my project and to the development of the character who lives on Peak's.

The theoretical basis of my study is a treatment of what Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) calls "internally persuasive discourse" versus "authoritative discourse." Bakhtin's theory grounded my dissertation on nineteenth-century New Woman writers (Elizabeth Stuart Phelps among them), and it is his work that I find so compellingly current. Indeed, educators have recently begun to apply Bakhtin's thinking to teaching, learning, and student success. Routledge published one of its Critical Thinkers editions on Bakhtin in 2015 and maintains "Bakhtin emerges ... as a key thinker for the Humanities in the twenty-first century."

My inquiry question, as it were, is this: precisely how does one strengthen one's internally persuasive discourse while living within a culture that values and promotes authoritative discourse. Authoritative discourse, as Bakhtin explains it, considers itself above, and therefore exempt from, the need to dialogue. If authoritative discourse is universally true, as it considers itself by definition, then it need not discuss anything with anyone who might threaten its authority. New Woman writers like Phelps probe the very "authority" of authoritative discourse by asking it questions; they do not let matters lie when they are rebuffed or when their questions are answered in vexing, platitudinous ways. My two protagonists in *Fifteen Years* are, for all intents and purposes, inchoate new New Women; they learn to question from Phelps' texts,

consequently bolstering their own internally persuasive discourse. While neither Bakhtin himself nor his theory will appear directly in the novel proper, both are seminal to the project's ethos.

Why tackle such heady topics that are undergirded by a male Soviet theorist's complex ideas with a *novel*? Because I believe in the power of narrative and of fiction to engage a wide community of readers. Since the publication of *Dancing in Red Shoes Will Kill You* (Inanna Publications 2015) eight months ago, I have been invited to speak or do readings (at bookstores, conferences, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute in Montreal, libraries, on radio shows, on a video blog and even at a church) an average of three times a month, and I am receiving two awards this spring for my book's engagement with social justice issues. I add these details only to underscore my conviction that fiction can change/open the hearts and minds of readers; this is the core reason I became an English professor and why I am invested in rendering my project as a novel.

My experience has been that readers want to engage in dialogue. They are not intimidated by ideologies and concepts new to them when they are embedded, somewhat more safely perhaps, inside a story. I consider myself, I suppose, a public scholar in this respect. M. V. Lee Badgett writes in *The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World* that the public intellectual is "asked to speak up in public contexts on different issues of the day, whether directly connected to [her] own research or some larger intellectual issues" (15). *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof's 2014 plea -- "Professors, We Need You!" -- urged academics to contribute to public discussions and debates about social, cultural, and political issues. I expect I am answering Kristof's call, responding to Badgett's coaching by speaking to a reading public that expands beyond academia.

The characters in *Fifteen Years* have embraced years of authoritative discourse such that they now struggle with realities they have kept long submerged, with emotions that threaten to split them wide open, and their task is to listen to themselves (internally persuasive discourse) and to literature (Phelps' texts) with what I call fierce empathy. If they can accomplish this protean task, they can live robust lives – as can we all. This project is my best attempt to teach what I know, what I yearn to know, what I suspect is true – that humans are capable of a deep empathy and the courage it takes to listen to self and others.

It is a matter of form and an honor for me to credit Franklin Pierce University with supporting my research and writing not only within the covers of *Dancing in Red Shoes Will Kill You* but at every public engagement. I am a grateful community member, and I thank you for taking time to consider this funding request.

**BUDGET (\$4048.60 total):**

Housing (cottage rental)	\$3025.00 (two weeks)
Food	\$550.00
Transportation:	
2 Round-Trips - Ferry with auto (once over, once to get groceries after a week)	\$165.30
Round-Trip Ferry – passenger 10 trips @ 7.70)	\$70.70
Car (home to Peak's and return), 280 miles X .57	\$159.60
Cabs in Portland (to archive, PP, and SARS)	\$40.00
Peak's Island Guided Tour of Battery Steele	\$18.00
Tolls	\$10.00
Xerox at Archive	<u>\$10.00</u>
TOTAL:	\$4048.60

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

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