Elizabeth Alexander

Knox Prize Narrative

1.  What was the name of your project? What was the purpose of your research experience?

My project doesn't really have a name. I was doing research very generally on Black women, enslavement, and the 19th century, and also searching for slave narratives I'd never heard of, while trying to find background information on Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative is the focus of my thesis.

2.   Did your experience with the Knox Prize influence your thesis work, either directly or indirectly? If so, how?

Yes, I applied for the Knox Prize to do thesis research. This ended up being difficult, as Harriet Jacobs' papers have been published and aren't in one location now, so the research I did ended up being much more generally thesis related and less specific to Jacobs' narrative or life.

3.  What were the most challenging aspects of the research you conducted?

Finding material to look at that was directly important to my thesis was hard. I found a lot that was generally interesting and provided background information, but it was hard to not mind that.

4.  What were the most rewarding aspects of your research experience?

Ironically, I found materials that sparked new and tangentially related ideas or was relevant and important to research others I know are conducting. Even though I wasn't doing as much work on my own project, I had fun brainstorming based on new ideas and talking to others about their research and the things I found.

5.  What did you learn from the process (of applying for funded research, of doing the research, of figuring out what the heck to research, etc.)

I have learned that it is important to have strong questions to ask, and not be as worried during the research process about whether or not I can prove them or already have strong opinions on them. It was (and has been) stressful trying to think of arguments I can make, to the point that I disregard fleshing out the question I am interested in.

6.   What do you know now (about the Knox Prize, about your specific research, about the research process in general, etc.) that you wish you’d known before you began your Knox Prize-related research?

I wish I had known how open-ended the use of the research money could have been. I thought we had to be strictly tied to only traveling with our prize money, but even something as simple as buying books or research-related software is okay, and I think I would have been broader in what I asked for. This will be useful information to have when it comes time for writing grant proposals in the future, though.

7.  What do you know now that you’re glad you didn’t know before you began your research?

Nothing, really, but I think this is because I have done archival research before and I was kind of prepared for the process already.

8. If you could give rising seniors advice about the Knox Prize, what would it be?

Apply for it. The opportunity is rare to get free money to conduct research of one's own choosing with relatively few guidelines, and research experience looks good on a job application or a CV.