When Ruth Williams set out to study in South Korea, she wanted to learn more about the country and its history. She did not anticipate, however, just how much the experience would teach her about herself and her own country. A doctoral student in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, Ruth was awarded a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship to spend a year conducting research in Korea. Embracing the Fulbright Program’s mission to foster cultural exchange and understanding, Ruth created a project that explores the history and politics of US-Korea relations. And because Ruth’s academic focus is poetry, she chose to explore these issues through a series of poems.

While Ruth has long been interested in Korean culture, and even travelled there previously, she writes: “I didn’t examine much of my nation’s history in the country nor did I really consider what it meant to be an American in Korea.” Ruth’s Fulbright project seeks to explore these issues by situating her personal experiences in Korea within the larger framework of U.S.-Korean relations. One way she does this is by gathering information from both primary and secondary sources (using things like interviews, newspapers and critical texts) and incorporating this into her poems. By using this source material, Ruth’s poems will draw not only from her own perspective, but also those of Koreans, Americans and scholars on U.S.-Korean relations. By drawing on this source material, she hopes to highlight the subjective nature of history. “These multiple perspectives hopefully give a sense that the ‘facts’ of history and the values we append to it shift depending on the perspective adopted,” she writes.

Ruth is particularly interested in the thousands of Korean women who, during the Japanese occupation of World War II, were forced to become “comfort women” for the Japanese military. During her time in Korea, Ruth was able to meet with several of these women. She writes: “Given how hard these women worked to demand recognition of their suffering, fighting against the stigma they faced, meeting several of them in person was incredibly inspiring.” However, Ruth was struck that, while their identities as women connect them to her, her privileged status as an American also separates her from them. Because American women have generally been insulated from large-scale sexual trafficking and violence, Ruth is placing her experiences in Korea against the backdrop of such stories to highlight this disconnect.
Fulbright scholars forge relationships that enable an exchange of culture, scholarship and ideas.

A statue of a “comfort woman” at the House of Sharing — a human rights museum and a safe house for former “comfort women” — in Gwangju, South Korea.

One of the most surprising — and rewarding — aspects of Ruth’s Fulbright study was the opportunity she had to tutor a North Korean-born student. Along with research responsibilities, the Fulbright Program encourages volunteer work, and Ruth contributed by giving lessons in English conversation. While volunteering, Ruth met a student who escaped North Korea as a child, only to be sent back to live in a prison camp. Incredibly, he escaped again a few years later and made it to South Korea. Ruth’s experiences with this remarkable student taught her much about the plight of North Korean defectors. It also taught her a great deal about the power of language, a lesson that reinforced her commitment to her Fulbright project. While listening to her student tell the story of his escape, she writes, “I was struck by how hard he was trying to work. And yet, he kept trying to explain. I realized in that moment that our human urge is to share ourselves with each other, and that we mainly do this through language.” Ultimately, this has confirmed Ruth’s belief in the power of writing as a form of expression. “This experience,” she writes, “has given me more enthusiasm for attempting to speak via my poetry, to share my perspective in that way.”

UC Fulbright Recipients: 2011-2012

Fulbright scholar Ruth Williams is in good company. One doctoral student, one alumna and seven faculty members also received a Fulbright for the 2011-12 academic year.

Doctoral student Douglas Pew studied under well-known choral composer Pawel Lukaszewski in Warsaw, Poland.

Caitlin Kane, who graduated in June 2011, taught English in Haskovo, Bulgaria.

Dr. Chia-Chi Ho conducted nanotechnology research at the University of British Columbia.

Dr. Nnamdi Elleh spent eight months in South Africa teaching and studying post-revolution architecture.

Dr. Jan Marie Fritz conducted research at the Institute for Human Rights in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Dr. Christopher Gauker spent five months in Vienna, Austria, as the Fulbright-University of Vienna Visiting Professor in Humanities and Social Sciences.

Professor Julianne Lynch served as a Fulbright lecturer in Germany.

Professor Jim Ridolfo traveled to the West Bank and Israel to conduct research within the Samaritan community.

Dr. Willard Sunderland conducted research in Beijing, China, and Taipei, Taiwan, for his new book, “Continental Encounters: Eurasian Empires in the Cosmopolitan Age.”

Fulbright scholars forge relationships that enable an exchange of culture, scholarship and ideas.