In Spring, 2017, I received a faculty development grant in support of travel to complete in-progress field research for a book I am in the process of writing. The book, Journey on the Gnome Road, is about gnomes, but not really. It is really about why we behave as we do: why we collect, why we display, what symbols have meaning, and the role that whimsy, kitsch, and belief plays in our lives. I explore these issues through people’s shared cultural behaviors with gnomes in a variety of places.

My fieldwork took me to Europe – what a hardship! Germany is the birthplace of the garden gnome and in order to discuss the history, folklore and symbolism of the little fellow, I travelled to a village called Grafenroda in the Thuringian region. This is not only where I learned more about gnomes and Easter egg decorated trees but also that uber and taxi cabs don’t exist in this region and one must walk at least 5 miles from any train station to find civilization. I won’t mention my adventures with Google maps....

I spent time in Grafenroda at the first garden gnome factory in Germany – although factory is a grand word for the efficient workshop and small museum that exists. The great grandfather of Reinhard Griebel, the current owner, made gnomes there in the same manner that Reinhard does today - by hand, using molds and terra cotta, hand sponging and painting the pieces. Griebel gnomes made their way to England with a man named Sir Charles Isham in 1847, thus popularizing the figures. One, named Lampy, still remains at Isham’s estate, Lamport Hall, where it is displayed and insured for 1 million pounds. Griebel gnomes are coveted by gnome enthusiasts around the world and demonstrate the continuum of display once gnomes went from folk figures to garden critters.

Another stop on my gnome road was in Salzburg, Austria where I visited the gnomes of Mirabell palace. Salzburg, in many ways, embraces its kitsch. Chocolate Mozart balls, Mozart umbrellas, rubber Mozart duckies (called Quack me Amadeus), Sound of Music tours and occasional men in traditional, embroidered suede shorts abound. And, then there is the 18th century reconstructed ‘zwergelgarten’, or gnome garden at the palace right in the middle of town. The figures there resemble real little people in some cases and comical or deformed Commedia del Arte characters in others. They made me uncomfortable in a very 21st century, ‘don’t caricature real people’ sort of way. However, I walked through the gardens while interviewing a government civil servant/architect who urged me to see them as figures inspiring play, whimsy and joy for those able to visit. Interestingly, during the many hours I spent there, I never saw a tour enter the dwarf area – instead they visited the grander statues of Roman Gods and Greek myths and only the occasional non-guided tourist made their way to the dwarves for astonishment, selfies and giggles. The juxtaposition of these two types of traditional garden figures was quite jarring and says a lot about expectations and symbolism.
While Salzburg’s dwarves are relegated to one garden, the gnomes of Wroclaw, Poland are everywhere! Wroclaw (pronounced Vrotswauv) is a town that has branded itself with its gnomes. The city was called Breslau and was under German hands before WWII and became a Nazi stronghold. Much of it was destroyed during the war and it became a Soviet city and then finally was handed back to Poland. During the Communist era, there was an underground protest movement that called itself the Orange Alternative (the alternative to Red – the color of the Communist regime). The Alternative members peacefully protested the regime’s absurdity through events and graffiti, using the gnome, or ‘krasnale’ as their image. Gnome graffiti and slogans like ‘there is not freedom without dwarfs’ appeared. After the Soviets left in 1989, the city began to form its own identity. While most cities choose an ambitious city symbol like a Dragon or Eagle, Wroclaw chose the gnome in a nod to the protest symbol. I was able to interview Tomasz Moczek, the artist first contracted to create gnomes for the city. His foot tall bronze gnomes are found around town doing a number of things like pushing a ball or carrying a pizza box. He believes that each gnome carries a story and that the environment and context regarding where a gnome will be placed dictates what it will look like and the narrative it will tell. I spoke with him about what he created, how and why and also about how many artists are copying the gnomes around town to make money. There are now around 500 gnomes in the city – some created with the city’s permission and some by artists hired by businesses that want a gnome in front! The gnomes create a unique city character and identity for its denizens that brings attention to the town, photos for anyone and fun and whimsy for visitors with barely a nod to its political past.

My fieldwork and research trip was incredibly informative and absurdly fun – which certainly suits my subject matter. It has provided me with quite a lot to think about, research further, write about, and incorporate into class lectures. I truly appreciate this funding opportunity which allowed me to conduct much needed and valuable field research which I am currently using as I continue to write about the wee folk inhabiting our gardens, towns and minds. My research will be shared in paper form at conferences, in book form, and, of course, with my students at Otis.
Salzburg gnome at Mirabell palace. Each gnome is a symbol of some cultural activity as well as representing a month of the year.
Salzburg gnome or dwarf
Gnome at the entrance to Grafenroda, Germany – a town that celebrates its history as having had a gnome factory since the 19th century.
Reinhard Griebel, in his workshop at the Philip Griebel gnome factory and museum
One of Tomasz Moczek’s gnome artworks in the main square in Wroclaw, Poland
Pastry gnome, Wroclaw
Professor gnome outside of the University in Wroclaw. Someone furthered the folk art nature of the piece by yarnbombing it with gloves.
Gnome outside of an ATM machine