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## One Way to Light a Candle

Samantha Samson

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, [samsons2@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:samsons2@unlv.nevada.edu)

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ONE WAY TO LIGHT A CANDLE

by

Samantha Samson

Bachelor of Arts in Religion

New College of Florida

2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

May 2014

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**THE GRADUATE COLLEGE**

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Samantha Samson**

entitled

**One Way to Light a Candle**

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**Department of English**

Claudia Keelan, M.F.A., Committee Chair

Donald Revell, Ph.D., Committee Member

P. Jane Hafen, Ph.D., Committee Member

Margot Colbert, B.S., Graduate College Representative

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D., Interim Dean of the Graduate College

**May 2014**

## ABSTRACT

### **One Way to Light a Candle**

By Samantha Samson

Prof. Claudia Keelan

Professor of English

University of Nevada Las Vegas

The following collection of poems represents three years of creative work in the Masters of Fine Arts-Poetry program at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Meeting at the intersection of both Jewish and Queer identities, the manuscript is united by the recurring image of a candle. Candles are lit on a wide variety of Jewish occasions, from the Sabbath to the anniversary of a family member's death. They serve as a constant reminder of God's divine presence. In Jewish tradition, candles also represent the human soul, the flame reminding us of the beauty and frailty of life. Proverbs 20:27 states, "The soul of man is the candle of God." Like candles, these poems unite the divine presence of God with the mundane aspects of life: picking apples, shaving, waiting for the train. All of these poems together present one way to light a candle, a constant searching for God's divine presence on Earth.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
One Way to Light a Candle.....	1
Later, When We Have Dogs.....	2
A Gay Despair.....	3
The Body.....	6
The Book of Molly.....	7
Song of Longing.....	9
Redcurrants.....	10
Where Was the Synagogue.....	11
Where Light.....	12
Rebuilding Warsaw.....	13
Blessed are You, Lord.....	14
Arthur.....	15
Helicopter Circles.....	17
She Drives Me, Blindfolded, to the Dark Restaurant.....	18
I Finally Saw.....	20
How Brightly.....	22
Into the Winter.....	23
First Colder Day.....	24
The Guest Room.....	25
Valleys.....	26

Where You Go.....	27
Child at the Door, Give Me Something I Can Keep.....	29
Our Flawless Mall Pantheon.....	31
Some of Them Mine.....	33
Shiva.....	34
Tashlich.....	35
Philtrum.....	36
Light is Mostly.....	38
Black Crow.....	39
Desert Winter.....	41
Little Owl.....	43
The Way Up and the Way Down.....	44
September Notes.....	45
After Yartzeit.....	46
Curriculum Vitae.....	47

## One Way to Light a Candle

Your death shaves my legs, it whistles  
*whatever this bow shoots must fall*  
and *What does my mother see?*

We make love on the armchair, nothing  
is left the armchair but our fingers.

My neighbors saw your death  
in the backyard eating  
a sandwich, writing the Greek alphabet  
on the sandwich, on a wall.

We paint each other's toes,  
we paint faces in the dictionary.  
Your death picks out my hat, lays  
it down on the unmade bed.



## Later, When We Have Dogs

Because the world really is my grandparents' house

with walls extending out in every direction

Because we hide letters in flowerbeds

to read later, when we have dogs

Because ships can rise up out of the water

Because lovers exit the hotel through revolving doors

Because boxes belong where they are

and I wear red tonight, the blood of others

All beds are worthy of creation, all cysts worthy,

And our toys, essential satellites, their signal

once held these walls together.

A candle melts between my grandmother's fingers,

the caged parakeet dies of boredom.

My mother plays piano after a glass of wine—anything I believe

stems from this moment, with a glass

sadness and a love that makes all space communal space.

My grandparents' house burns like a candle.

Even the wallpaper drips into my hands.

How much hope there is in an alternative,

how two mice crawling over thousands

of dead mice are not two.

## **A Gay Despair**

“...I rejoice, having to construct something/upon which to rejoice.”

-TS Eliot, “Ash-Wednesday”

not transistor radio gay

power to turn the air two

white knobs bone

gay between dying and birth

white where trees flower

recovering their only place

not rotary phone gay

you are my mother                      sing to me

hurry back to the desert lights

I'll be the empty dress

the bowtie in utero

and no one to answer will these eyes

open? will these eyes open?

prayer dressed in shining

stepping into the light

my endless rebirth, my coming

to terms with an orange hinge

and who am I here

with elbows and breasts

atoning in their ace bandage

entirely different now more light

through the slatted window

this black

and brown hair nesting

and what

is a fig?

the wilderness

is wilderness our inheritance

is not turning the key

in the lock the broken wound

my blue unicorn your wet

my exit your throat

my forward motion

dressed in shining

stepping into the light

## The Body

I כבר יודעת what you're going to say

when I come to your מיטה ושמה אצבע

to your white throat

מה שאת רוצה you can call it בבוקר

but don't call it אהבה

your לשון ורוד dipped

in ice water

הגוף warmer than

what it holds

I know nothing

more than what I've

read עלייך בחלונות פתוחות

I want you להסביר לאת לאת

how you know

למצוא את כל הנקודות

without המפה

ואיך את יכולה understand half

of what I'm saying with

your mouth there

## The Book of Molly

Molly and I shave each other  
in the bathroom mirror, our bodies

accustom to shaving. She drags  
the razor across my chin  
and then my breasts.

The sun rises over us, a bird  
catching the breeze blowing  
off Lake Michigan—

Molly, my grandmother in the dark,  
dreaming perhaps of ships.

My blood on her fingers, later  
a nurse shaving Molly's beard

imagines it's her own, though she leaves  
the room swollen from mosquito bites.

My Molly, nothing left but age,

the skin's suggestion .

A second nurse wiping mayonnaise  
from the corners of Molly's mouth  
with a white paper napkin.

What am I shaving in the world  
she cannot remember,

where we are brothers  
tangled in each other's legs

and all night dreaming, the brown  
weight of her hair.

## **Song of Longing**

I want to be inside a map,  
with a red circle  
that reads “synagogue.”

Where is the synagogue?  
I want to be inside the synagogue, as  
I am inside of you, late in the afternoon  
when the sun slips behind the tallest mountain.

I want to be inside the synagogue  
as a wick is inside a candle.

I want to find inside  
I want to find her inside

My synagogue, a woman waiting  
for the train to arrive.

A woman who, for the first time all morning,  
looks down at her fingers.



## Redcurrants

If a greeting is standing frozen there, holding  
a bag of onions, kicking dirt with old shoes  
and never taking eyes  
off the open windows,  
a landscape is a moving thing against the fixed,  
rusted out bus full of Americans.

Three young girls on bicycles trail behind us. One  
nibbles at the core of a brown apple.

Where was the synagogue? Maybe just there  
behind that yellow house.

We get off the bus. I pick a redcurrant  
from a nearby bush.

A v of storks flies overhead,  
punctuating the sun's light.

I taste the first redcurrant

of my entire life. And

the second.

## **Where Was the Synagogue**

Even the oldest woman

In the village does not remember.

Her house has three bedrooms.

She sleeps on a cot in the kitchen.

This is the house of a woman

who gives apples from her tree

to American tourists:

*take only the ones with worms holes*

she says *they are the sweetest.*

## Where Light

Where there is water, where oranges, where the gold necklace hangs in knots, where dough rises out of the wooden bowl, where leaves land, where the tombstones are decorated with images of the dead, where she forages for strawberries, where sorrel, where the wheelchair opens up to the dewy morning, where carrots in a bag, where fingers, there, all window and wood, the synagogue. To find it you must find storks, pick wild redcurrant in a buckwheat field; there must be a woman sleeping in the kitchen, there must be an apple on the ground full of worms, there must be a bus churning up dust, there must be the sound of potatoes rubbing against other potatoes in a wheelbarrow, there must be lamplight reflected in the eyes. Where children spill out into the garden, where your golden hair, where tired moths pad at bedroom windows, where the old woman touches her neck, where seed weigh down the black grapes, where honey pools on tongues, where the man selling pickles skims off a thin layer of mold from the barrel, where these are, the synagogue: The wooden shull, splintered testament, Promise of Promises. The eyes of a woman who sleeps alone, ripe tubers, spider legs in the doorjamb, barley and storks, the synagogue and a pack of staff paper, the song I write her, light of a yellow candle.

## **Rebuilding Warsaw**

My Polish bubbe rebuilds Warsaw  
with the sea and the sewing machine  
at night the way bread melts in a wet  
pocket the ceiling hole the whole  
story the Vistula painted blue  
over a river of fingers.

Bell tower, castle square  
bottles of vodka and wine, Blessed  
are You Lord Our God, King of the Universe,  
coin hiding under the sofa.

## **Blessed are You, Lord**

Blessed are You, Lord our God on paper

Blessed are You, Lord our God writing a letter to Moses, your friend

Blessed are You, Lord our God who rolls cigarettes

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates then crushes a suburban rattlesnake

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates cute shoes and the Netherlands

Blessed are You, Lord our God who sells a broken TV to the poor

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates and misses the train

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates great tasting milk alternatives

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates and shortly thereafter eats all our enemies

Blessed are You, Lord our God who lights all candles

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates then fries up all the butter in America

Blessed are You, Lord our God who guarantees sleep without dreams

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates nostalgic moments in the casino

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates then forgets our cell phone numbers

Blessed are You, Lord our God who boils peanuts

Blessed are You, Lord our God who experiments in college

Blessed are You, Lord our God who performs cunnilingus for twenty minutes

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates quality movie trailers

Blessed are You, Lord our God who picks up the bar tab

Blessed are You, Lord our God who creates touch between strangers

Blessed are You, Lord our God who casts us into the sun

## Arthur

On Pushkin street, the pavers are all rising up  
out of the wet ground and the half-broken  
Teatro sign reads simply Tea.

It's finally summer, you aren't wearing  
that black coat you love  
when you pick me up in your Volga

with the zebra interior  
*beautiful car for beautiful man,*  
you say, practicing your English

You take me to the Victory Monument by the sea,  
the sculpture garden where we visit Isaac  
Babel and Rabbinovitch, our trickster uncles

You trace my thighs in Russian and I pretend  
not to understand, so we wander through  
Shevshenko park like two stray dogs.

You meet my lover, still, at synagogue I sit next to you

and uncover my shoulders. You keep  
a few chickens, offer me a basket of yellow eggs.

One day you take me to the train station,  
outside packs of wild dogs patrol the street, pissing  
on parked cars and the half-white

acacia trees lining the boulevard.

*Take care you self*, you say, lighthouse  
flickering in the Black Sea of your eyes.

This is the last time I see you.

After that I am just another passenger  
on the train, looking  
for a nice seat near the open window.

## Helicopter Circles

When the same helicopter circles  
my neighborhood for hours  
on undistinguished nights like these  
I remember her clearest,  
unraveling like a torn blouse  
in front of the bathroom mirror  
after a shower, whispering *mother*  
taking her grip off the towel  
around her waist  
letting it fall



## **She Drives me, Blindfolded, to the Dark Restaurant**

Yellow maps of indecipherable islands hang  
on the walls in dented frames, blue orchids,

gold leaf decoupage peacocks,  
a woman at the bar alone, laughing

drinking a blue cocktail, candlelight  
catching the white hair on her knees.

A postcard of Sarasota Bay:

ragged dorsal fins cutting

through the surface of the water.

I could always distinguish dolphin

or shark with confidence.

It all seems distant now,

an aftertaste of what I had considered

my own to inhabit, the Florida

sky

My once love in a blue shirt, all eyebrow

and bottom lip

and I, less

familiar, more like blossoms

than a sky, more ragged

horizon, a hunger, the oval mouth

of my faith.

## **I Finally Saw**

Apples in the car so small  
we eat them by accident.  
Though one moment is not longer  
than any other moment, who  
does not pull over to write things down?  
Who refuses the opportunity  
to open the flue when birdsong  
rings through the house?  
I got a text message at the party  
and everyone heard the phone whistle but me  
I was crushing ice for drinks  
and fishing the last maraschino cherry  
from the jar with my fingers. Moonlight so  
exact, how could the word not be a window?  
My cat's bewitched by everything  
she sees—small children with balloons, hand  
waving from a car window.  
Her fear draws my attention outward to the world.  
Potatoes on the counter are beginning to sprout,  
as are the onions. I must bake them

before they fully resurrect or bury  
them in the backyard and hope for the best.  
New clouds mean the day advances beyond  
my own bloated shadow. Eclipsed  
as I was by my misunderstanding of light,  
I finally saw my right foot  
moving through the grass as the death  
of a thousand ants. I dream their hairy mouths  
pinching everything I hold dear—my lover  
and her turned-up eyebrow, blemished roma  
tomato, faucet drip, parsnip waiting for the knife.

## **How Brightly**

If this life is brief, how brightly  
the sun can shine on one small spot on the carpet.  
The cat has found this spot, her happiness.

Some small echo of another echo,  
plane in the white sky landing. Once  
again I press my face to the nape  
of your warm neck and breathe deeply.

And I walk out onto the balcony we love  
so much, to see a little of this lit-up  
city: some small movement in the mountains,  
and in the neighbor's window and in the trees.

## **Into the Winter**

In a black pea coat my lover  
walks the aisles  
of the winter rose garden  
such prized heirloom roses:  
*Maggie and Buff Beauty*  
engineered by Brooklynites  
who love windows.

Plaques read:

*Ruby Vigorosa, Fragrant Hour*

*Folklore, Outta the Blue,*

She guesses what roses

these thorns will yield

when the snow melts:

*Golden Salmon Supérieur,*

*Pink Knock Out, Marco Polo*

Stops at *Burgundy Iceberg,*

next to *Quietness*

and steps backward

through her footprints

## First Colder Day

Fewer birds. Candy wrapper stuck to a cactus needle.

The day, almost what I imagined from bed: a colder puff  
of wind, how the sun looks through a smudged window.

Honey, there's a hangnail moon at midday and many stones.

And a few sounds. Bicycle tire meeting the asphalt.

I hear things we've heard together: Leaves,  
a neighbor's garbage disposal.

Loneliness sticks to my eyelids, it rolls down the window.

Pulling into the driveway for the second time today,

The name I call you. A mockingbird singing that name.

There's a farmers market where I buy  
apples from California.

I will buy you an avocado wrapped in paper.

I will call tomorrow and tell you: I saw balconies full of people,  
rain, a pillar in the air.

Necktie, a candle, a long piece of blue string.

## **The Guest Room**

where my mother kept the good  
linens for Aunt Eleanor's visits  
a rococo armoire's emptiness  
pleated curtains in picnic blue  
an always unlit scented candle

my mother's guestroom  
starched without movement, aching  
under the absence of waking

like our old guestroom, once love,  
where we put our one broken television

where you sleep now  
dreaming of sailboats maybe  
perched on the open water

or a forest whose canopy  
blocks out the sun's light

of finding your way



## Valleys

There are days I barely think of you,  
mountains in the south valley  
harboring big horn sheep and pigeons  
nest on my neighbor's balcony, refuse  
to nest on my balcony—  
I undress whenever I'm alone, apartment  
shifting closer to the water.  
I should have been more honest  
with the night, I should have written a better  
poem one I'd let you read someday.  
Look, I made it all the way to Spring.  
I could write a book about how trees  
bend wind and not the other way around,  
how I still let myself walk slowly home.

## Where You Go

My first love, she had the spun hair  
of our grandmothers who sang  
*Undzer Rebenu* and *Ikh Shtey Unter*  
*A Bokserboym* in blue kitchens.

We never learned these songs ourselves  
Still, when we slept we dreamed in Yiddish.  
I was thirteen then: two bare legs  
and a fumbling right hand

my hair was about this long, my eyes  
were still this color when I wore her dress  
to bed and she bled into her mother's socks.  
She had Van Gough's *Starry Night*

painted on her ceiling with a recessed light  
in place of every star. We fell asleep counting them  
woke up inside each other, kissed with too much spit.  
Outside her bedroom window, the streetlamps  
held their breath then finally died out.

We were sleepy as ships then,  
knew first sex in blue rooms  
woke under an always starry sky with every wet

to navigate that space between the sheets  
of her twin bed and her white eyes.

In no way was I Ruth and she Naomi  
we made no promise to that night.

## **Child at the Door, Give Me Something I Can Keep**

Bring me hundreds of crystals hanging  
from birch trees, mason jars, pink lanterns,  
those slippers I saw at the gas station

on busy street, the station we all know  
for its small donuts and bouquets  
of pale pink flowers. Last night a vision: The Wheel

of Fortune laid across the Hanged  
Man. Don't worry, it's just me!  
Me who? I am the sum of my stationery

folded into prayers, stuffed into a coat pocket  
Lord who watches over us, the small  
and impatient, when we grip the wheel

let the palms of our hands be pink:  
prosciutto pink, eyelid pink. Teach me  
forgetfulness, help me to become

a self-propelled wheel.

My mother is waiting at the bus station  
for my father, a dark man with small  
  
ears. The neighbors are hanging  
tea lights from birch trees, we abandoned  
the Space Station years ago. Whole sky pink  
  
with our waiting, tell me  
who made our eyes smaller  
than our hands? I hear there's equity  
  
in the innocent pink mouth. Who's there?  
Oh, child at the door, give me  
something small I can keep.

## **Our Flawless Mall Pantheon**

I hold my change purse up to the light  
and a dancing fountain appears

soapy smell of a man  
selling shoes in a glass bowl,  
making nurse shark circles  
in and out of the inventory.

The bird that flew in here this morning  
gives up in front of Baby Gap.  
A security guard covers her  
in an old, yellow towel.

In every lit display case,  
our mall pantheon, our Jeulina,  
Mannequin goddess of slouching—  
Celebrity Chef Restaurant Window Seat Reservation For Two:  
Chandelier, cruel nip slip.

Flawless teenage Destini emerges  
from H&M, legs like Kosher hotdogs,

arms full of plastic bags

full of halter dresses.

Her shirt is, at most, a pencil drawing

of a shirt floating around her body.

## **Some of Them Mine**

Night walks out with winter's broken

Foot and living means I have many

Stories, some of them mine.

Fixing dinner in the kitchen makes me

Welcome her in, dear imprecision.

Or what else? Another plane

Lands out there in the field,

Scatters a flock of white birds.



## **Shiva**

If we all huddle  
in the living room  
like ice cubes  
in a glass of water

If we cover the mirrors  
If we eat small meals  
from small plates

this can't be  
my mother's blood I'm tasting

## **Tashlich**

crumbs: if you want to keep them

put them in your mouth

## Philtrum

a glory to you dead, glory  
returns, how I peeped my neighbor's breasts  
    when her top came off  
on the waterslide, how she pushed  
    me away then kissed  
my wet neck. Please God, tonight  
    I want to rest  
    and so in sleep  
    I may find you there

in a jacket and no shirt, pant legs  
wide enough for both our legs. Glorious  
God, somewhere between death  
and the new mouth She presses a finger  
    to hush my questions,  
    waits under an awning  
    at the supermarket for the rain to  
    stop, half-gallon of milk in one  
hand.

The world, Her name scrawled on my bare

chest in lip liner.  
Maybe all I wanted to say has left the room  
or anyway  
died. Or forgot to stay,  
left me arms crossed, braless  
on the merry-go-round feeling light  
and that I am still  
light is how I see.

If you continue on like this, I'll live  
at night, God said,  
where public fear makes way  
for private love. I had my first  
drink at sea. The boat  
was white and gave off its own  
light, unlike the moon.

## **Light is Mostly**

The pants I go out in

I can't afford. A list is made

of flowers, a neon light is mostly

itchy white. Friends of my friends send

me home with leftovers in a Styrofoam

box marked *wings*.

## **Black Crow**

October, white-throated over the dark  
olive tree, a desert invasion, sand wasted  
  
blowing through the streets. Apple-tongued  
guests to the party waiting all, ballooned  
  
as a child dancing in black shoes.  
One nail painted blue, one violet, corner  
  
of the house all nails into wood, fingerless  
white. The penultimate nightbird  
  
sings devotion to the warehouse rafters,  
Double-breasted, lungless lovers  
  
made two to lurid weaving  
of the other, plate of black olives tipping  
  
to the floorboards, some touching  
on the ground and stars into the river

call out the open branches. Cats  
waiting under the car scratch tendons.

Colder doorknobs and winter  
coming quickly, the certainty

of a cyst. I was once there  
under the streetlamp, a quick step

toward the window, hand around  
my ankles, pulling me downward.

A yellow harp hits the note again  
That I am alone, winter, even now.

## Desert Winter

Saw a cloud today  
driving into the mountains  
thought, the desert is a jammed View Master  
and wrote that down

Wind soft against the red  
rocks, wind as I drive back  
through gridded streets, past window grates  
wet with paint, drying in the sun.

The cloud appears and disappears,  
the Joshua Tree arches into its own shadowform  
and the cacti leave a sexy blossom  
or two behind, out of season love.

I wrote something about this day  
on the backs of a dozen  
flightless birds.

I was taken in by dreamy brightness,  
dropped into the center



of the space leaving makes—

There my love sat at the base  
of a tree

her ankles on either side  
of my head

she said, this blue  
you only see from the tops  
of mountains

or from the road between  
this life and a candle, which  
is also a road in and out of the heart.

## Little Owl

Her wing pressed to small  
body, small because the light  
in each window glows

She turns to face the car, ignores  
or does not see the nearby  
cricket, twists her head completely around.

She is so still, open eyes  
caught in the beam  
of a passing truck. Her myth

is ageless, too, and vast.

The mountain behind us also  
still, or seems, and living.

## **The Way Up and the Way Down**

On the balcony overlooking  
the elementary school playground,  
you could call it prime real estate:

sparrows cleaning their wings in a nearby  
branch, a mocking bird mocking  
a car alarm.

There is much to believe in on Tuesdays  
in the desert:  
Clouds today, some sun.

How children swinging know  
the way up and the way down  
are the same motion.

One leaps from the swing,  
walks out into the tall grass—

you could call it  
a solo.

## September Notes

Grass is a kind  
of miracle considering the night  
  
and all the swampy loneliness  
of a man changing a porch light  
across the river. An alligator slips  
  
below the river's surface  
and the cypresses sway  
with the effortless  
of redheads in maroon dresses.  
  
Isn't it something.

## **After Yartzeit**

What makes it to a sky  
that hovers two miles above the garage?

Here you find yourself:

there is suffering yes but there  
are also small birds.

Stand for a year  
in prayer and when it's time

to stop, simply stop.

Slip off your boots.

Shave.

Cut your hair.

# Samantha Samson

(813) 240-3668 · samsons2@unlv.nevada.edu

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## Education

- May 2014: University of Nevada, Las Vegas—Master of Fine Arts Degree, Creative Writing—Las Vegas, NV
- May 2009: New College of Florida—Bachelor of Arts Degree, Religion—Sarasota, FL
- 2006 & 2008: Hebrew University of Jerusalem—Intensive Hebrew Language Program—Jerusalem, Israel

## Academic Appointments

- 2011-2014: UNLV, Graduate Teaching Assistant—Las Vegas, NV
- 2013: Institute of Reading Development, Teacher—Las Vegas, NV & Phoenix, AZ
- 2011-2012: UNLV Writing Center, Writing Consultant—Las Vegas, NV
- 2010: Lingva Language Center, English Instructor—Odessa, Ukraine

## Publications

### Poems

“Where You Go” and “Arthur”, *Sinister Wisdom*, Fall 2013, Vol. 90

### Essays

“Blackout Poetry at Community Stepping Stones” and “Interview with Austin Kleon”, *Moonshot*, 2011, Vol. 2

## Awards and Honors

- 2011-Present** UNLV Graduate Teaching Assistanship Position—Las Vegas, NV
- Spring 2013** UNLV Graduate & Professional Student Association Annual Research Forum Award—Las Vegas, NV
- Summer 2012** UNLV Graduate & Professional Student Association Travel Grant—Las Vegas, NV
- Summer 2008** Nellie Mae Foundation Thesis Research Travel Grant—Sarasota, FL
- Spring 2008** New College Research and Travel Grant--Sarasota, FL
- 2005 - 2009** New College President's Scholarship--Sarasota, FL
- 2005 - 2009** Florida Bright Futures Scholarship, New College of Florida--Sarasota,FL