Research Statement:

My research focuses on Japan’s long sixteenth century, with particular emphasis on the relationship between material culture and social and culture practices. I am also interested in the “afterlives” of things from the sixteenth century, as they were institutionalized in particularly early modern ways during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then frequently deployed as components of larger projects to build national identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This leads me, in my research and writing, to focus on Tokugawa writings about things found in gazetteers, travel guides, tea diaries, and letters; varied practices of collecting seen in tea schools, the Shogunate, and temples and shrines; Meiji and prewar attempts to link old things to narratives of Japanese national uniqueness; and postwar attempts to pacify old things and weave them into a tapestry of postwar Japan as an aesthetic and cultural powerhouse. So, although my primary research period is the two-hundred year shift between medieval and early modern, my work ends up considering not just the long sixteenth century but its reception in succeeding centuries.

My research begins with the documentary record. For my Raku project, I examined hundreds of documents, most of them unpublished and available only in private and public archives, related to the genealogy of the Raku family, the tea diaries of Raku patrons, letters written by potters and tea masters, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gazetteers, eighteenth century books and manuscripts, and then a whole range of sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One innovation of my research was to look at documents in terms of the social conditions in which they were produced. The genealogy of the Raku family written in the seventeenth century, for example, is not valuable as an accurate record of the early origins of the tradition (as had been argued in Japan for a century), but rather as a clear indication of the Raku house’s need to establish firm familial origins in terms of the household registry system and growing consciousness of the ie in the late seventeenth century. Another innovation was to look in places not previously explored by Japanese historians of tea and ceramics, who had assumed that important documents would all be in the collections of the Raku family and their tea patrons. I found dozens of previously unknown works in large regional archives, and revealed for the first time in any language that a primer of Raku technical secrets had been wood-block published in the early eighteenth century and distributed on a wide scale, transforming Raku into a national practice.

My work anchors this analysis of documents in an extensive survey of all known Raku ceramics; in the course of four years of research, I examined most Raku works in American and British Museums, as well as all major public and private collections of Raku works in Japan. I also visited dozens of archaeological sites from which Raku shards had been excavated, transforming our understanding of the origins of the technique. I trained for this research during a six-month predoctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, where I systematically studied the techniques of conducting examinations (chōsa) of Japanese ceramics according to art historical and archaeological methods. The arguments about the history of Raku that emerged in
my publications—published not just in my English-language articles and books but also in four Japanese-language articles, the first of which was recognized by a major award from the independent Santokuan tea foundation—have fundamentally changed our understanding of one of Japan’s most respected and influential artistic traditions.

My more recent research focuses on the history of the cultural practices, social networks, and daily life of the samurai in the long sixteenth century. I have almost completed an eclectic biography of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate. This project was inspired by my interest in collecting, tea culture, and falconry (takagari), all of which were extremely significant in Ieyasu’s rise to power and establishment of a new political administration. I am also interested in Ieyasu’s deification and enshrinement at the huge Toshogu temple-shrine compound at Nikko, as well as in domains across Japan throughout the seventeenth century. These ritual complexes used objects associated with Ieyasu—suits of armor, swords, ceramics, and other pieces of material culture—as relics to summon and house the spirit of Tosho Daigongen, “The Light of the East, the Ultimate Made Manifest.” My research correlates this use of objects in an early modern religious context to the modern reinvention of Ieyasu as a cultural lord, a patron of the arts who is celebrated in art exhibitions in sites such as the Tokugawa Art Museum, our modern equivalent to the Toshogu.

I have also begun preliminary research on a related project that moves in the opposite direction from my Tokugawa Ieyasu biography, which necessarily grapples with hagiography and teleology. My new study of the destroyed castle town of Ichijodani and the extinguished warrior lineage of the Asakura considers the question of what was lost in the “age of warring provinces” (Sengoku jidai), a kind of excavation of the flipside of unification. This is part of my broader interest in challenging the conventions and research agenda of much of the extant scholarship on premodern Japan, particularly the insistence on a notion of historical development that is progressive and leading inexorably toward Japan’s modernity. I have conducted archival and archaeological research for this project at Kyoto University, Fukui University, the Ichijodani Asakura Historical Research Center, and the National Museum of Japanese History.

The overwhelming goal of my research on the long sixteenth century is to revive interest among the general public, undergraduates, and graduate students in the study of premodern Japan. This will be accomplished through a more comparative and theoretically informed discussion about what is at stake in Japan before the Meiji Restoration, as well as through a less positivist engagement with the full range of primary sources available for the study of daily life, embodied experience, cultural practice, and social networks in Japan.