

Event Title:

Scholar-Artist Hybrid: What to Expect & How to Thrive in a Creative Writing PhD

Event Description:

PhD programs require artists to deftly navigate academia in ways that are distinct from MFA programs. What are the benefits and disadvantages of pursuing a doctoral degree as a creative writer? What does a Creative Writing PhD actually entail? In this panel, four candid artists—two poets and two fiction writers—will share what aspects of the PhD experience can aid the creative process and prepare candidates for post-PhD careers. Topics include how to utilize critical research—such as course work and comprehensive exams—to build a creative bank, how to establish a committee, and how to fashion an inspiring writing community while fulfilling the challenging requirements of a PhD program.

Event Category:

Artistic and Professional Development

Event Organizer & Moderator:

Sue Kim: Sue Y. Kim is a Creative Writing PhD candidate at the University of Rhode Island. She hails from Seoul, Korea, and obtained her MFA/MPW at the University of Southern California. Kim's writing and research interests include the transnational novel and narrative spatio-temporality. She is currently working on a novel while also serving as the Coordinator and writing consultant at the URI Graduate Writing Center.

Tatiana Duvanova: Tatiana Duvanova is a writer born and raised in Russia. She holds an MFA degree in creative writing from the University of New Mexico and is currently working toward her PhD in English/Creative Writing at the University of Rhode Island where she also teaches creative writing and literature courses.

Participants:

Rachel Afua Ansong: Afua Ansong is scholar and artist currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Rhode Island. Her work interrogates representations of black female subjectivities in African Diaspora Literature. She is currently working on a collection of poems about the material culture.

Jerriod Avant: A. H. Jerriod Avant is from Longtown, MS. The recipient of scholarships from Vermont Studio Center & Breadloaf Writer's Conference, Jerriod has received two Winter Fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and is currently a PhD English student at the University of Rhode Island.

Opening Remarks:

PhDs in creative writing are relatively new inventions, but more and more academic job descriptions list PhD in creative writing as the preferred qualification. There is definitely interest in creative writing PhD programs, but there is still much confusion as to what kind of degree it is exactly; it is neither an MFA, nor a traditional PhD in literature.

The four of us are PhD students at the University of Rhode Island, and this panel can be best described as “the things we wished someone had told us before we started our PhDs.” If there is one piece of advice all of us would agree on, it is that you should not apply to a PhD program in

creative writing unless you know exactly what it entails. Despite all the potential rewards, getting your PhD is an incredibly challenging and taxing process.

While all of us can talk about our PhD experiences endlessly, due to time constraints, we will limit ourselves to several key topics. Afua will begin by discussing how to navigate academia as a minority and about finding a community. Jerriod will share his thoughts and observations about the relationship between research and art, and finally Sue will outline the structure of a typical PhD program in creative writing with particular emphasis on comprehensive exams and dissertation writing. Each speaker will share for 15-20 minutes on their topic where other panel members will have the opportunity to chime in. At the end of the panel, we will conduct a 15-minute Q&A. We hope that our lively and honest discussion earned through our sweat and tears will provide a vivid and conducive understanding of the Creative Writing PhD.

Participant Initial Remarks:

Speaker: Rachel Afua Ansong

Topic 1: Navigating Academia & Finding a Community: The Realities

I believe it is essential for you to realize that you are the most important part of your community and that you're also the gatekeeper. I categorized the kind of community into three categories: academic, (people of color/ people of support), self and social. In the first group, there are people who you will need to write you letters of recommendation for jobs, people who will give you jobs, course releases etc. These people may not necessarily be people of color or professors whose course you loved but they are reliable and get the job done. Then there are professors or colleagues of color who are there to talk to. This can also be your social community but you don't always want to talk about work at dinner so these people help you release the stress of racism and bureaucracy of academia. As much as you will spend time with yourself researching, you must spend time with yourself playing, doing the silly things you love, sleeping, cooking, eating ice cream and travelling. The final community are those who you have explained countless times but have no clue why you are in school for another four years. You get to be a person again here, and you get to talk about someone's cat not liking guests or someone's neighbor being too nosy.

Speaker: Jerriod Avant

Topic 2: The Relationship Between Research and Art

For creative writers who pursue PhD work there are two muscles that must be used regularly, the research/critical writing muscle and the artistic muscle. In the best-case scenario, these two muscles will benefit each other and form a long-standing relationship as the writing progresses. Because research/critical writing can be new to creative writers pursuing PhD work, a lag or slump in the creative writing can develop if one is not careful. Of course this happens and is part of the creative process in general but setting aside time, energy and keeping certain tenets of your creative practice in place can ward off the PhD's tendency to bogart your time and energy, leaving little left for your art.

Another important factor is the work you choose to engage in your research and critical writing. Authors whose creative work you admire will often have a book of essays or other essays spilling out about their own theoretical approaches to writing that will shed light on your own and give you a start at the language necessary to contextualize your own creative writing while fueling your approach to the research/critical page that might seem a bit daunting and steep at the beginning.

Speaker: Sue Kim

Topic 3: Selecting your Committee for the Comprehensive Exams and Dissertation

PhD Programs consist of multiple phases—the first is two years of course work, followed by your comprehensive exams, and then, finally, the writing of your dissertation. You must complete these steps while holding teaching or other responsibilities on campus. This process can take anywhere between five to seven years or even longer.

Placing your art, your creative writing, at the center of your PhD process is critical in order for you to find the motivation and sense of purpose you will need while going through the arduous process of preparing for and taking your comprehensive exams as well as writing your dissertation proposal and dissertation.

Many Creative Writing PhD programs have a heavy theory component, and like it or not, this will be something you will have to embrace in each step of your PhD journey. Even if your school requires a creative thesis (i.e. your novel, essay or poetry collection), they will also require a critical introduction. This means that during your coursework, you will have to find a focus, topics in theory, that you are drawn to that overlaps with your creative work. By doing this, even if the work you are doing is critical per se, by default, your creative work will always be centered in the critical work.

It is also equally important to find supporters of your critical and creative work among faculty members, so that you can form a committee that will support you rather than hinder you. Forming a successful committee will require observation and conversations with varying people—not just with faculty but with other students in the program. Oftentimes, there are complicated department and school politics that need to be considered in selecting your committee and even in selecting your exam and dissertation topic. As an artist, it may be difficult to navigate these kinds of political terrains but doing so is critical in successfully completing your degree.

Finally, knowing your rights as a PhD student is important for you to stand your ground and thrive in precarious situations. Make sure to find and read your institution's graduate school handbook as well as being familiar with the rights of graduate teaching assistants. If your school has a GTA union, make sure to join one.