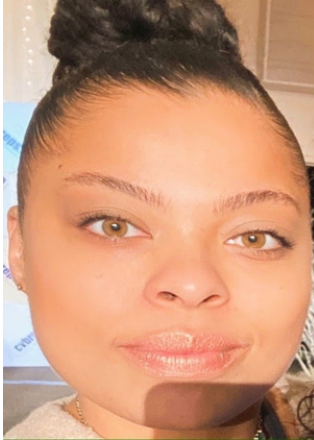


### 2020 Graduate Spotlight

This spring, our creative writing program, along with the rest of the world, withstood a drastic change of pace amidst the global events that required us to reconsider the way we teach, learn, and maintain community. We checked in with our outgoing graduates to see how they finished out their last semesters and to gather some words of wisdom.



Dr. Michelle Dominique Burk (PhD, Poetry)

#### **What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

I think I'm most looking forward to reintroducing hobbies into my life. For the last year or so I've been focused on completing exams and my dissertation so it will be nice to take up something creative that isn't tied to a degree or a job. Maybe, like, bedazzling Air Force 1's or perfecting a cookie recipe or something.

#### **In light of the quarantine, who/what got you through this final semester?**

Music, running, taking a break from reading so much dense, theoretical text.

#### **What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

I love teaching, so I'd probably say the opportunity to work closely with the undergrads at UH.

#### **What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

TRY NEW THINGS. Who you are is not set in stone. Just because you majored in Engineering doesn't mean you must continue along that path (though you absolutely can if you want!). Travel to places you've never been before, and I don't just mean internationally; travel to new places in your city! Pick up a hobby and be bad at it until you're pretty good at it and do it because it brings you joy. Try to be a good person. You won't be perfect, and you'll make mistakes, and sometimes you might be a jerk without meaning to be, and that's okay, still try. Keep in touch with your friends, be the first person to reach out, and foster your interpersonal relationships—they take work to keep up with once you're out of school. Lastly, YOU should be your #1 priority: your physical and mental health come first, and don't let any institution, company, organization, or person tell you otherwise.



Dr. Novuyo Tshuma (PhD, Fiction)

#### **What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

Transitioning into my new job as Assistant Professor of Fiction at Emerson College in Boston.

#### **What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

Workshop, particularly with Chitra Divakaruni, Alex Parsons, Peter Turchi and the wonderful visiting writer, Chinelo Okparanta.

Literature courses, particularly with Auritro Majumder, Kavita Singh, Sreya Chatterjee, and Hossam Aboulela.

#### **What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

Make time for your writing—the time goes by very quickly and there's a lot of graduate work to get through. Find one or two peers who may likely be lifelong readers of your work. In addition to Creative Writing, the Literature Department is a great and invaluable resource to your writing.



Dr. Alex McElroy (PhD, Fiction)

**What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

Reading for pleasure again!

**In light of the quarantine, who/what got you through this final semester?**

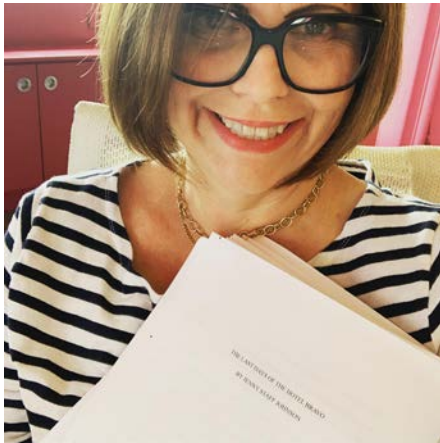
Long, aimless walks.

**What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

The Poison Pen readings were a major highlight.

**What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

Focus on your writing before your schoolwork.



Jenny Staff Johnson (MFA, Fiction)

**What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

With the extra time not spent in class, I'm returning to writing some nonfiction, in addition to finishing revisions of the novel that was my thesis.

**In light of the quarantine, who/what got you through this final semester?**

It's a cliché to say coffee—but, coffee. And my husband.

**What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

The thing I'll miss most is reading great literature together with so many gifted readers and thinkers, both students and faculty. There's not much opportunity for that in real life.

**What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

Be curious about the idiosyncrasies of the people around you.



Laura Biagi (MFA, Fiction)

**What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

I'll be going to a creative writing PhD program at Florida State University in the fall and can't wait to meet my cohort and keep pushing my writing forward there. But I'm also really excited for this summer, to work more on my novel and short stories, plus read more of the many books I've been waiting to dive into. And hopefully relax a bit in the process.

**What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

I've loved being able to get a diverse array of insights and perspectives that fuel my creativity, ideas, and writing. I've taken classes from every fiction professor and benefited so much, learning from all their different approaches. And the literature classes I've taken, too, have fed me and my takes on the themes I write about. Even if I may never explicitly write about folklore, for example, or the rhetoric of desire, these classes fuel the subconscious parts of my writing and mind. Perhaps what I've most loved is that, at a program like this, essentially everything you're doing can point back to and further your writing in some way, whether it's literature classes, reading for Gulf Coast, teaching (comp sometimes, if you theme it well), and of course workshops. It's not a situation you typically have outside of creative writing program worlds, and I feel really grateful to have been able to experience it.

**What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

One thing that another student (Charlotte Wyatt) said to me when I first visited UH has been really helpful: take only those classes that will be most helpful for your writing. My additions: be greedy and strategic about it, and don't be afraid to challenge yourself. Another suggestion that may be obvious (and that I'm directing more so to my fellow MFA-ers) is to think as early as you can about what you want to do after your MFA. Three years doesn't end up being all that long. I've known I've wanted to go into academia, and so it was really helpful to be doing things to prepare for applying to PhD programs early on. But if you're on the fence, go for experiences that will help you decide sooner. And if you don't want to be in academia, there are so many ways to get involved in Houston to either help prepare you for what else you want to do and/or to give you really useful, widely applicable skills. Use those opportunities. Also, last thing: try to figure out your best writing schedule and patterns. For me, I feel like it's a perpetual, never-ending exercise of trying to put my ideal writing schedule into practice—but that in and of itself can be useful? This is the time to do this, if ever. Because as little time as we have to write in the program, there's infinitely less time outside of the MFA.



David Nikityn (MFA, Fiction)

**What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

I'm most looking forward to reading stuff that hasn't been assigned to me and to maybe getting out of the city for a little bit!

**In light of the quarantine, who/what got you through this final semester?**

Deadlines, plain and simple. Love 'em or hate 'em, deadlines.

**What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

Working alongside and becoming friends with exceptionally talented and down-to-earth peers and faculty!

**What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

Be mindful of how much you take on! The UH CWP and Houston literary community are rife with opportunities to flex your creative muscles, from writing to reading to editing to teaching and everywhere in between. Remember why you're here and try not to lose sight of it!



Rachel Ballenger (MFA, Fiction)

**What are you most looking forward to post-graduation?**

It's hard to think of "post-graduation" now. I'm too focused on post-quarantine, on post-pandemic. I'm looking forward to hugging my friends, to holding their newborns, to seeing my mother. I was granted a Fulbright to spend 2021 in Spain, researching a novel. Spain's also been hit hard by Covid-19. So I'm looking forward to seeing my friends there, and to a global recovery from the virus and economic shock of the shutdown.

**In light of the quarantine, who/what got you through this final semester?**

I spent most the semester in Sonoma, CA, in a meadow crowded with birds. For a lesson on joyful work, watch the swallows. They wake up at the same time every morning and get to it—zipping after insects, feeding their nests, harassing one other. They are aflight, alive, at work, but really it's all play, play, play. Amidst the distraction this semester, they've managed to shame me to my desk, remind me that I'm doing what I love and to work joyfully.

**What has been your favorite part of your CWP experience?**

Alex Parsons says that what you'll learn writing on your own in six (maybe it was seven) years, an MFA will teach you in 3. I don't know the exact figure in my case, but what I enjoyed most about the last few years was the rigor. I've learned so much from my peers and from both the CWP and literature faculty, whom I deeply respect and admire. Then of course the relationships that will carry on beyond this time and outside of Houston. I'm so grateful.

**What advice do you have for our upcoming graduates?**

I'm not so comfortable giving out advice, but this was said to me once and I say it to myself whenever I need to hear it again: Commit yourself to the work of art you're creating and believe in it.

Should you have queries or wish to support the  
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