

UBC Creative Writing Information Session 2023: The Student Experience - Nisha Patel

And today we're speaking with Nisha Patel, who is a current optional residency student, about her experience as a student and in applying for the program. Welcome.

Yeah, I'm happy to be here.

So can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, like your background and your creative work?

Yeah, for sure. So I actually did my undergrad in political science and business economics.

I was really hoping to kind of enter the nonprofit and governmental worlds. I worked in a lot of politics and stuff like that. And while I was doing that work, I kind of came to creative writing on my own, especially through performance poetry. And I started working as a performance

poet on the side and eventually I kind of made it more of my full-time career along with like freelancing in a lot of arts festivals and organizational roles and like curatorial stuff and honestly the heart of it was like really performance-based but as we kind of transitioned into not just like a pandemic that was mostly indoors and online I started to really want more education, formal education around my writing like I'd been performing for so long I felt like something was really missing and that I was finally at the point where

I really just needed instruction. I didn't think I could keep going on my own or through just like community-based work. And so I ended up applying for this school of creative writing, hoping to do

an MFA in poetry. And actually, the first time I applied, I didn't get into the school. I wasn't well-versed enough. I didn't really look at other genres. And so I worked very hard for the following

year to put together a new proposal, new genres I explored and I wrote a novel and stuff like that, it was really bad. And I ended up applying again and getting into the optional residency program.

Thank you. You've answered about three of my questions all at once. Thank you so much.

What was the part of the application process that you remember working on the most? Like, what did you end up focusing on? You know, I think that if you don't usually work in a grants space

or you're not a full-time orchestra or whatever coming into the program, which most people are not, some of the more difficult parts can be really making a statement that is clear and concise but also persuasive. And even with experience in that, it was difficult to try to put what I thought was relevant into that space to leave out the stuff that maybe I could mention later or make sure that the whole of the application didn't necessarily repeat itself

unless it absolutely needed to. Obviously, as I mentioned with my first application,

I didn't keep enough time to really look at the portfolio with more intent. I ended up putting a lot of pieces that I felt were very publishing worthy or had been published rather than stuff that I was really passionate about. And when it came time to apply again after that first year, I decided to approach the portfolio by this time really centering the work that I believed was good

regardless of whether it had been accepted for publication or rejected or anything like that.

it was really like came down to like stuff that I felt most strongly about. And I think that came across a lot more in my application. I might have been more meandering I think in the first go,

but in the second time around I felt like I was really focused. I had a lot of intention

and I really thought that you know that came across in the statement that was supported by

the portfolio. Wow, thank you. What were some of your first impressions when you first arrived?

like what was your experience when you first arrived and what stood out for you about the program? Yeah, so the optional residency program is like there are other MFAs in North America, especially that do a low residency model which is that you can go in person for just a little bit of your degree and like sort of an intensive or you can do your degree in chunks. But the UBC model is really that you do the coursework all year round and you can do it part-time or full-time. And I think the biggest thing for me is that this isn't a traditional synchronous learning online model where you log into a portal and you watch a lecture with other people also logging in at the same time. In a classroom space that is live, the whole model of the optional residency is really that it is interaction based, but it's textually interaction based. So you have to log in for, you know, your 24-ish hours and you do your coursework as if you were kind of in a classroom, but you have more time to access. There's more back and forth. And I think that UBC has really tailored it to that kind of learning where you're not just sitting and watching a lecture, you're not just doing homework and handing it in, but you are very deliberately interacting with others to not just implement and display your knowledge, but to deepen it and to question it all within like, I think, a safer space. I also thought that it was incredible being in a community of people who were really dedicated to experimentation and to trying something new. You weren't getting people who were taking, you know, necessarily a course that they were totally specialized in. You know, you didn't have someone who came in having written three novels coming into a non-fiction or a fiction class who had experience. Like, instead you had people who were sometimes like trying something completely new for the first time and so you

could

see in real time as the class went on in the semester like how people were growing and what they were taking away and it was just very different. I'd done online learning before and this time it was like I really could do it honestly with a cohort which I didn't think I would have in an online space, but also that I could do it in a longer period so that I didn't just have to log in for like this three hour chunk. I could come back throughout a 24 hour period for these courses. The other thing I really noticed was that these are like small course sizes. They're small cohorts when you enter in. And so you do end up seeing a lot of the same

people in this like virtual space and your professors are taught and trained in how to do an online learning module, right? Like these are people who have looked at best practices and implemented them in ways that I don't think a lot of other universities are really offering, having gone to a few different institutions now and done online learning.

Thank you. Were there any big surprises that you wish you'd been prepared for more that we could

have set up more easily for you? Yeah, I think for the optional residency you end up just doing like a lot of overlapping deadlines sometimes along with if you're you know getting some part-time

work as a teaching assistant in which you're looking after undergrads and giving them feedback as well. I think there is like just a big shock having come from you know like as a professional artist to go into this space where, you know, the production of material is more important than the

perfection of it. And so I wasn't used to the volume of material that I needed to produce at the pace that I needed to produce it. And of course, like, you know, you have professors that

are more or less flexible, but you also do have accountability with other people in your cohort, right? So like, if you do want to get the most out of it, sometimes you need to have stuff ready for

other people to look at and to comment on whether you like that commentary or not. And

it was just like, it was a real, real rude awakening, I think, at first to go back to

school in that way. But also because you're doing creative work, like you're not being

judged on whether a math equation is right or wrong, or an economics formula checks out

or whatever, you're just being judged on like your creativity and your imagination. And

like, on the one hand, you might be like, Oh, like, that's wrong. Like, you know, art

shouldn't be judged that way. But on the other hand, I was like, no, these are technical skills

that go into artistic production and imagination, and they refine your ability to execute an idea.

And that really only happens through the consistent practice that the degree requires.

So could you describe for me the course load that you took? Like,

how did you arrange your courses just as kind of an example for people?

you know, I think it's, I don't know if I would do it the same way again, but I'm really trying to

finish my coursework as quickly as possible so that I can move on to kind of taking time off

from freelancing and working on fleshing out a lot of these starts of manuscripts that

the courses have produced. And so I ended up taking, you know, a full course load, two courses,

three courses and then courses over the summer straight into the fall now as I'm starting my

thesis and like having the full course load has allowed me to again like really develop that

pacing you know like treating the semesters and the MFA as like a marathon and continually

producing work it also allowed me to really shed I think like that aspect of ego like trying to

to make things that are always good

instead of just always like working towards,
you know, your intentions.

But I will say that when I took three online courses
and I TA'd and I freelanced from my home city of Edmonton,
it was like a very, almost like punishing,
I would say schedule.

And the beauty of the optional residency is that
you can take less.

And I think now going into my second year,
having taken lots of courses in the first year,

I'm going to take a little bit easier in order to just make sure that I'm getting the most
out of these courses, make sure that I can do all the reading and still have time for
kind of my everyday life here in Edmonton. Because again, a lot of the optional residency
students are coming from places where they have other obligations. Many of the students
in my cohort were my age, around 30 or older. They had kids, they had other jobs and stuff

like that. And some of them were doing it part-time, which you can do up to, I think, five years,
right? And so there's no rush to finish, but I'm hoping to finish just so that I can really move into
a more intentional kind of phase after the MFA. And yeah, I think like, obviously, if that pacing
doesn't work, I can always just like, take a little bit easier and see see what I need, right? Check
in with myself.

So what genres have you been studying and are there any new genres that you kind of discovered
through your experience in the program? You know it's such a funny question. I fully intended
to come into the MFA and write a poetry manuscript because I worked as a poet. As mentioned I
had

like written a novel to help prepare for my application to UBC and I had not enjoyed the process. Like I thought a fictional young adult novel ended up being like much more difficult, despite the fact that I read so much young adult fiction, I thought it must be like easy if you read a lot. And that's only like a small part, I think the equation and so I was like, I'm going to fall back to poetry. And I ended up taking a speculative fiction course and I took a graphic forms course, as well as children's literature. And these were all like, big, kind of like transformative things for me. I actually switched into a graphic forms thesis despite not really having drawn comics before because I thought to myself, "Oh, I don't have a publisher for this work at the end. I don't have some report to a grant organization or someone I have to prove that this manuscript is good to." So I really want to experiment with something I've never done before and hopefully it goes well and if it doesn't go well I can just do it again. And so I took up graphic forms and right now I'm working on a graphic novel for my thesis and I'm hoping that it does still incorporate like kind of the type of lyrical language that poetry has but obviously I'm also learning how to create an art style, how to create you know drawings that look like the things I want them to, not just like abstract shapes and stuff like that. And really, it's like, it's just been, it's been so incredible to work with the graphic forms, folks at UBC, like there's very few universities that will offer this at the MFA level. I've also been, I don't know, kind of like what came over me, but I took a children's literature course, and I started writing picture books. And I really felt like I had this, you know, like this epiphany kind of moment. It was like, of course, like very, it sounds like very corny, almost, but I took this course, and it was like a part of my myself like opened up in a new way. And honestly, if I could, I would try to do my thesis in both, but I can't. And so like,

I'm hoping, I'm really hoping that in the future that I can like, write more picture books that I can find a space to publish them.

It's something that I'm really, really passionate about now.

And all the poetic work that I've done before the MFA

obviously has intention behind it,

and it comes across in the short forms of graphic forms

and children's books.

But it was freeing to do things and know that I could do them,

or at least I could try them, and that there

would be the reward of having learned something.

Thank you. So, what have you mentioned you worked as a TA, could you describe that and the other

work opportunities you might have pursued in the program?

Yeah, so when you come to graduate school, if you're, you know, someone who wasn't in graduate

school before or has never been to graduate school, in some ways like that can be like kind of a

surprise that you're asked to come into creative writing courses. Sometimes the subjects you're

or not super well versed in and help grade assignments,

mark assignments, do like one-on-one meetings with students,

answer questions, even like, you know,

give some lectures and stuff like that.

And so TAing is like such a big part of

when you're working as a graduate student,

it's one of the key ways that you can get funding
while you're working as there aren't a lot
of other opportunities sometimes,
especially in an online learning space
where you get to stay within the creative writing field
or stay within the teaching field in such a consistent way.

And so for me, I took on TAing.

I was very nervous.

Some of these classes can be really daunting, really big.

Also like almost everyone I know remembers

their like first year English

or their first creative writing course in university

kind of for the rest of their life.

And so I was like, this is a big responsibility

to take on trying to mentor and grade and teach students.

And it was, there were parts that I think

were really enlightening.

I'm learning that there's a lot of students out here

who have really unique, sometimes painful,

sometimes really joyous stories,

and they're struggling to try to tell them

in a way that is healing for them and safe for them,

but also like transformative and meaningful for others.

And there's also students who, you know,

they're trying creative writing

and they might not stick with it in the future.

So really in that case, what you're trying to do

is give them value in like the present,

not just the long-term.

So balancing your responsibilities to students

along with your own coursework can sometimes be like a big

kind of puzzle that you're putting together.

And it can be intimidating thinking like,

oh, I'm gonna give feedback to someone

and hopefully it doesn't turn them off writing forever.

And so there's a lot of kindness,

there's a lot of patience you have to have with students,

but also recognizing that like these are sometimes

like just like, you know, a student doesn't have time

to give everything to one course when they're taking four others.

And so you have to keep that in mind when you're going through

and looking for areas that a student can improve in

in a somewhat short period of time.

TAing is also a great way to work with other people

in your ear in terms of the MFA, other folks who are going to go into teaching.

And for me, like I have been a community educator for a very long time,

as well as like a lecturer in university and stuff like that.

But TAing was so specific in that it is like the most direct way that you work with students, sometimes even more than a professor does.

And so you become a point of contact and a trust and an advocate for students as well as for yourself in that situation.

And it's both like very enjoyable. Some of it is very exhausting.

But it's also, I think, something that I wish that I could, you know, do more of without kind of like being able to take away from all of the time I need for my degree.

So it sounds to me like you already have a professional network as a writer, but could you comment a little bit about that network and maybe if the UBC experience has helped you expand your network?

Yeah, you know, it's so funny. If you work in only one genre, like we don't even call it a genre.

When you work as like kind of a professional artist that's taught themselves for so many years, you know, you're just kind of known for that thing.

You know, I'm known as a spoken word poet in a lot of local circles, as well as like some of the national communities that do spoken word.

But coming to UBC, there was actually no one else

in my cohort who came from a spoken word background.

And so I found that that whole network that I had previously

didn't translate into the UBC network,

which also meant that I had opportunities

to meet new people.

And I learned a lot about all the different kinds of writers

especially the writers who are extremely,
extremely introverted and write big expansive worlds
that they want to invite everyone into.

You know, there's so many different personalities
for writers.

You know, I think some of the stereotypes are true
that writers can be like very different, very strange,
but also like UBC writers are coming from all over the place
and you really don't know when someone's gonna end up
being a connection that can really, you know,
enter into a relationship that is reciprocal, right?

You don't just want someone to help you,
you wanna be able to help others.

And I'm finding that like having a professional network
that's in kind of like a writing field,
but not directly in a literary field,
similar to what UBC graduates are looking at,
allows you to offer your skills
and your network to others as well.

But at the same time, I also think that
when you are in an online program,
sometimes it can feel like you're not creating connections

or meaningful kind of ways to connect with others.

And so I think it becomes really important
to ensure that you have access to online spaces
where you can chat with people.

You can be online with them if you want to.

If you're comfortable, you can make like social connections
and stuff like that later.

As I've learned from being in a gig economy
and like gigging as an artist for most of my income,
before I came to UBC, the most important opportunities
are not gonna come from external funders or organizations.

They're gonna come from other writers and other artists
who are trying to bring everyone up together.

And so it's really important to maintain
kind of that kind of social aspect of it.

But also if you don't like the social aspect of it,
to at least like, you know,
find public platforms that you can follow someone on
or keep up to date with or get newsletters for.

There's a lot of different like levels
of how much you have to invest in that.

But I do think that as well, the UBC community

is a time where you might be able to meet someone
where like, you know, you're not trying to make friends
because you think someone is going to, you know, shoot to the stars or something like
that. You're really trying to create relationships that are based on like, you know, that element
of trust, just because if you don't have that, you don't have someone advocating for your
line of work or for you in the future, then I think like writing networks can really fall
apart.

That's great. So thank you. Did you take advantage of the summer residency program? And if so,
you describe a little bit about it and your experience there?

So I get access to the summer residency as an optional residency student the first year
that I enter the program as well as the second summer. And so because I'm only doing a two-year
program I ended up coming just in my second summer and it was incredible. I wish I could
have come every summer for the rest of my life.

Like I just think it's really great to be in that environment
because personally, I really like the pacing
of a summer residency course.

So you get your eight days or your 10 days
or two weeks on campus, and it is just kind of brutal.

Like you're doing so much work every day.

Mornings are all talks and seminars and open lectures
and other opportunities to meet other folks
or hear from industry or hear from other writers

who have left the program and moved on into literary and non-literary careers.

And then the afternoons are like long lectures within your class and your cohort in just one genre.

And it was so moving to kind of be in a space where like these were people who really wanted to work in that format.

And it doesn't work for everyone.

Like it's a really tough pace, but also like I felt like having that kind of scrutiny and pressure allowed me to produce some of my best work

of the last, I would say like five years.

And that's exactly what I had wanted

coming into the program.

The two week option is also really incredible

because Vancouver is just so beautiful at that time.

It is very hot as it is everywhere,

but it's really nice being in a city that is

open to a lot of different types of, you know,

folks to engage with different things.

Like there's a little bit of everything

depending on what you like.

If you like shopping, if you like museums,

if you like books, if you like travel,

there's a lot to do. And so being in a beautiful place I think is also like very motivating to

write, although not everyone obviously needs it. It's just like a nice kind of perk to have.

Obviously I also think that like it can also be kind of tough. You have to make sure you're

safeguarding your own time. Like if you spend eight hours of the day with the same, you know, literary folks, like sometimes it can be really important to take some time for yourself. and I just really enjoyed it. I enjoyed both the solitary evenings as well as like the busy, intentional kind of spaces that were created during the day. I liked meeting folks who were coming in from the optional residency in all sorts of places, people who came in from other parts of Canada and the U.S., and how much of their life comes into their work. You really get to see it visualized in that way and I think although I do love the online learning model, it was nice to have the variation and the opportunity to do a little bit of the in-person as well.

So what do you wish you had known when you began the program?

Yeah. Is there anything?

Yeah, I think that when I started the MFA, I really wish that I had known like just how different, your cohort is going to be when you literally have people who have not only self-selected to commit to like their writing practice, but have then also had to pass through the same hurdles as you to get into the program. And that opportunity to connect with peers in that way without kind of the pressures of like trying to get grant funding for a project or trying to find ways to sell a book or something like that.

That environment is very specific, and it's very hard to recreate in a long-term format.

People have reading and writing circles in their professional lives working as a professional artist, and people don't always

have the ability to commit to them.

And so I just was really surprised

at how intentional the other writers in my cohort were.

I was really surprised at how much I learned from genres

that I was not comfortable with,

and then didn't have all the skills for.

And I was also really, I think humbled

by being able to be in a space

where sometimes the feedback was so specific

that I can like, again, it was like this complete,

you know, breaking down of being very self-conscious

and trying to just write for the sake of it.

All of that was so mentally freeing for me.

And I just, I didn't know that like being in a program

could do that to that extent,

because I'd only ever really been in like

community learning spaces,

as well as like teaching a lot of these types of short term,

sometimes one-off workshops.

- So if you could go back and give yourself advice,

going through the application and applying to the program

and so on, what kind of advice would you give yourself?

- Yeah, I would say like the first time

where I did not get into UCC, I would go back

and I would like really try to focus

on strengthening the portfolio.

Like it was very key for me in my second application

that was successful to ensure that my portfolio

had not just a breadth of ideas,

but showed the depth of my ability in that.

And so even though I had, let's say creative nonfiction

that was very lyrical in nature because of my work

as a nonfiction poet, it was still a distinct

kind of attempted that genre to show that I could experiment in these spaces. I also

took the best of my very terrible young adult novel, and there are parts that were, I guess,

hopefully very persuasive, and I put just the best of it into it, you know, and I wasn't

trying to overly explain who I was as a poet, I wasn't trying to overly explain my intentions

as a fiction writer. Instead, I was like, you know what, I think these are the best

writing samples of all these genres, and I'm going to put them in one place. And then everything

else came with the statements. I got to position them, I got to talk about my own kind of background,

the place that I come to and from, the perspectives that I write from, but also why I write from them.

In worlds where maybe circumstances are different, where I don't deal with racism or sexism or

queerphobia or something like that, then maybe I would write something different. But in this

world,

I do write about that for very specific reasons and communicating that was super important, I think in that in that new application. I also did apply to the in person program as well as the program in UBCO in Kelowna. And the first year, I didn't get into those programs. In the second year, I did get into all three of the programs. And so suddenly, I had a little bit more options on how I wanted to complete this degree. And ultimately, I chose the optional residency program as the program I wanted to get into the most, because it was important for me to maintain my care networks here in Edmonton and do the degree kind of in a more flexible format. However, like, you can't, you can't really stop being a writer, unless you just stop writing. And so like, it was like really important for me in that time after I had been rejected to very deliberately work towards the goal of creating a new application.

And I was prepared to do that every year for the next however many years because in the end it was a program that I really did feel that I wanted to be in but that also I really needed at this stage in my career.

And I would just say like if it ends up that you don't get in the first time it's okay to apply again because these are not based on a judgment of merit of who you are as a person, but how much potential that you can show and then also still have and communicate to the committee.

Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add or say in?

Yeah, I guess like, you know, as a person now who is still rooted in a lot of poetry, but trying out like these other forms and

these other genres, I think, I think the scariest part for me is kind of like thinking about what's going to happen once I graduate. And part of me wishes that maybe I had just taken it a little bit slower, like, you know, done a less punishing sort of pace, you know, taken fewer courses per semester, or at least just like kind of maintained that other part of my life a little bit better and had more balance. Like, if I don't really live a life outside of my degree, I don't have anything to write about, you know, which is something that I've seen as well with people in my cohorts and in my classes, like people who just come straight sometimes from constantly just producing and producing and producing, forget that part of the writing is also like living your life and taking care of yourself and tending to your needs. And in some cases, like maybe taking a little bit of time away from the program, you know, and the folks whose work I was most touched by were the individuals who could really speak to what they had experienced or at least communicate really unique, let's say, say even fictional ideas in ways that showed personal voice and conviction. And like, again, that can't happen if you're in a space where they're trying to get everything right and that eventually, like you do run out sometimes, I think of the external stimulation you need to create meaningful work if writing and your work is only just producing writing, you know. So it's really important to make sure you still have that life outside of what you do do in a classroom to make the most of the program. That's an incredibly important point. Thank you for making that.

It's just beautifully put.

I really appreciate it.

I think we're done then, unless you have something else you'd like to add.

Is there another?

No, I just wish everyone good luck.

I know what it's like to be rejected from programs.

So if you get to that phase, it's OK.

You just keep going.

part of being an artist is dealing with a lot of rejection.

Because eventually, like if you if you, I think if you put enough intention into what you actually want to not just what you're afraid you have to try to get then then you do reach the place you want to be in the end, right. And I think like, being rejected was really important for me to refine my voice. And so like, I also wish luck to all the people who are going to get into the program and start their first year and maybe I'll see them around in the community, hopefully.

But yeah, definitely it was harder to get reduction the first time and then come back and really like forgive myself for doing that and understand that things change every year.

[Silence]