

[FRESH ARTS PODCAST] EPISODE 3: SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I GET AN MFA?

This is transcript of Episode 3: "Should I or Shouldn't I get an MFA" from the Fresh Arts Podcast Should I or Shouldn't I, hosted by Reyes Ramirez, which was published on October 29, 2020 featuring Deborah DEEP Mouton and Grace Zuñiga.

Reyes:

Hello and welcome to "Should I or Shouldn't I," a Fresh Arts Podcast hosted by me, Reyes Ramirez, where we explore the decisions artists make every day to succeed in their creative practice. Today, we're asking, should I or shouldn't I get an MFA? We have former Houston Poet Laureate, Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton, and artist and creative director for Sawyer Yards, Grace Zuniga, to discuss. So welcome you two.

Deborah:

Hello.

Grace:

Hello.

Reyes:

Hey, so if you could just kind of quickly introduce yourselves however you wish to define yourselves for the sake of the conversation or whatever you, what have you, so Deborah, please.

Deborah:

Yes, I'm Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton. I am a writer, educator, and activist here in Houston, Texas. I did serve as the Poet Laureate and the first black Poet Laureate of the city. I've done everything from write a libretto for an opera to write a soon-to-be fiction book, I guess is what you wanna call it. And I do not have an MFA.

Reyes:

Grace.

Deborah:

I'm Grace Zuniga, and I am an artist and arts administrator here in Houston, Texas. I currently am a Creative Director at Sawyer Yards. I've been involved with the arts here in Houston for many years. I moved back to Texas in 2012 after I received my MFA from the University of Georgia, from the Lamar Dodd School of Art. And I've held a artist residency here at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, and have shown my work throughout Houston, and Texas, and nationally.

Reyes:

Great, yeah, and that's kind of, you know, in curating this episode in particular in discussing with my producer, Angela, we were thinking of names of people who are really influential in the community and who have done a lot of amazing things, but in the question of getting an MFA or not, I think you two are prime examples of those two things, of like, you can be successful, but not need certain things that we usually associate with

success. And then I think that's kind of one of the great things of this city is that you'll find people from all different walks of life who have achieved their own things and with or without certain things. But one disclaimer I wanna kind of get before we get into this discussion is, this question is not really meant to be in terms of whether you should continue your education or not, or seek higher studies or education or learning, but rather the MFA, a Master of Fine Arts, which carries its own connotations and ideas. And so my first question, and if Deborah, you wanna get into this first, what do you think people mean when they mention those three letters, the MFA? What do you think people mean and connote with that?

Deborah:

Yeah, I think there's a connotation that you suddenly have some extra elitist understanding of your craft. I hate to say that it's elitist, but that's the connotation that goes with it. I don't necessarily know that that's the truth or not, but I think that there's this time that you've spent honing your craft in ways that maybe other people haven't, that you have some knowledge that other people may not have when it comes to working in your craft. And that, because of that knowledge, you're more seasoned and more professional in some way, shape or form.

Reyes:

Yeah, and Grace, what do you think? What do you think people mean when they say, "I have an MFA or the MFA?"

Grace:

So this is one of the questions I was thinking a lot about because I didn't have an immediate answer for it with the questions that you sent over to me. And so I really think when you are considering the title of a Master of Fine Arts or the MFA, it's really this timeframe, this more dedicated timeframe to your thoughts and practices. And so that's really how I see it. It's this continuation of a very narrowed idea of what you want to push forward, whether that's a technique or a skill. And then, you know, once you're kind of in the program, you can grow or decide what direction you wanted to take based on your initial experiences going into getting an MFA. So that's kind of how I view it. It's really this guided, and dedicated time toward an idea.

Reyes:

Yeah, and so for full disclosure on my end, I have an MFA. I kinda maybe, in a very silly way I did, right out of high school I did my bachelor's, and right out of my bachelor's I did my MFA because I kind of had that understanding that I wanted, or at least all the people that I looked up to had MFA's, right? And then like, to be taken seriously you have to have this kind of thing. But it's also like deep down I wanted to get better at my craft. I wanted to dedicate years to bettering and improving my craft. And so there are kind of some pros and cons to any decision we make really, as creatives, as artists, in a very large world and a very large scope of what does that mean to be

a writer, to be an artist? And so Deborah, without the MFA, you've managed to, again, accomplish so many amazing things. And again, kind of proving that, one, you don't really need an MFA to kind of quote unquote, "make it" or anything like that. But what do you think are particularly the benefits of the route you've taken of kind of not getting an MFA?

Deborah:

Honestly, the biggest defining factor for me whether I was gonna get my MFA or not, I have a Master's in Education, it was debt. I just couldn't co-sign to accumulate any more debt for the knowledge that I thought that if I just make time for with fellowships and with other ways to go about gaining the information, it just didn't seem like an equal trade-off for me. I think one of the benefits of not taking the MFA route is that you're able to curate a little bit more of the experiences that help you hone your craft. So I was able to seek out safe spaces. As a person of color, the MFA has been kind of tossed around the community as not necessarily the safest place for your work, depending on which MFA you're in. And it definitely is program by program. There's gonna be some exceptions to that, so I'm not in any way trying to bash the MFA. But I have heard from quite a few writers that they found that their voices as people of color in rooms and spaces that are, at times, very racially segregated in who they admit, that it is harder to refine your voice and really find what you wanna say instead of just sounding like a mimic of other people. And so I think the benefit of not having an MFA is I was able to look at fellowships that were hosted by

various different writers and spend a little bit of time over the years, every year, kind of gaining and gleaning from all sorts of people, instead of like a dedicated faculty. I would say some of the negatives are that I don't have a dedicated faculty, right? Like people that I could go to and know that they've seen me and watched my growth the entire time and kind of know where I'm aimed at. And so, it worked better for me to not have it. I've thought about going back and getting it, but every time it's kind of been like the things that I've accomplished now were the things that I would want an MFA to accomplish. So it doesn't seem proactive to go back and get that step in between if I'm already accomplishing the things that I would get from getting them an MFA.

Reyes:

Yeah, absolutely. Grace, I mean, what do you feel are the benefits of getting that MFA?

Grace:

So for me, I thought about school and continuing my education because I really didn't know how else to get out of Corpus, which sounds bad, because Corpus isn't a bad place, but it was something that I really wanted to do. I wanted to have other experiences, and I wanted to be able to leave. And so for me, I did that, that was education for me. And one of the printmaking professors at Texas A&M, he was getting students out all over the country on free rides. And so that was something that I just really gravitated towards. I got my BFA and worked post-

baccalaureate on my portfolio and applied to schools throughout the nation, and inevitably chose the school that had the best program that I wanted, but also gave me a full scholarship. So for me, the benefit of getting an MFA was being able to kind of propel myself further through my education. But then within that structure of school, I was able to really, like I said earlier, concentrate and grow as an artist, and really nail down what it was I wanted to be making, and what it was I wanted to put out in the world. And so I've been able to take the skills that I've learned and utilize them into my practice, whether it's my own artistic practice, and even in like into my professional career, if you will, even though I don't wanna separate those two things. But I guess it's more in an administrative role, I've been able to take some of those skills and apply them. And so I think that for me was the biggest thing and the most beneficial. Also just kind of the network I think. I met some really great friends and people at the University of Georgia, and kind of seeing them, and seeing all of the different career paths that we've taken has been really enlightening. And so just having that kind of network of people to either continue speaking with or just kind of their careers and see how other people are doing things, I think has been a really good benefit for me getting my MFA.

Reyes:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think there is kind of like this commonality that I've seen you two have, where Deborah, you are the, correct me if I'm wrong, you are the Director of VIP Arts,

and you also host something called the Colony Summit which you can describe in your own words as we get there. And Grace, I've seen your curatorial work at MECA, Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts, and at Sawyer Yards. And I think that's an interesting aspect of when someone says, like a degree, right? Or like the expertise of having those letters and what that affords you, that you both found ways, again, to still be leaders in your community, and just through different routes and different ways. I guess my question is like kind of talking through, does this conversation kind of factor into that? 'Cause Deborah, again, I know through your work through VIP Arts and the Colony Summit, you have kind of discussed those professional development for creatives in Houston.

Deborah:

Yeah, I think it depends on a lot of things. One of the things that Grace said was kind of that time to focus. I think for me, I still built in that time, but just in a different way. And so I think that, had I had the schedule focused time where I had to clear deadlines from someone else, I may have arrived at other things at a different and faster time. But the Colony for us really, we wanted to create a place for writers of color to come and to connect and to say, if we're choosing to not go to a more traditional route, where have stones already been laid that could we walk on and find some insight to, without feeling like we have to redesign the entire map? And I think it's just really important that a lot of that networking still has to happen. A lot of education and higher ed, it really is making connections

with people. And so the more that we can find a way to do that in community, I think the way that we can help supplement people who don't wanna take those more traditional routes.

Reyes:

Yeah, no, I agree with you in terms of, there's kind of like what connotes with the MFA is in the camaraderie, that cohort, and I think kind of like, how do you develop that? And I think kind of that encased within an institution. We can kind of talk about that in a little bit, but Grace, can you also kind of talk to, again, you being an administrator, being kind of the curator, that administrative role, and whether or not let's say something like the context of this conversation, MFA, affected that decision or the decisions you make in that role?

Grace:

I feel like it kind of happens-- serendipitously, you know? I never thought... First of all, when I was in an MFA program I realized quickly that I didn't necessarily really wanna teach after getting my MFA. And that was kind of the only solution that was posed to us was that you go to get your MFA to then become a professor. And I'm not saying that that's never going to happen for me, but I knew that it was something that I didn't wanna do immediately. And so, getting into these roles where art was very much the focus of what I was doing then I'm able to kind of learn on the job all of these other skillsets. Being administrator, that has really kind of helped and propelled me into my career in that sense. I do think there are aspects of

maybe being in a program that makes you concentrate and makes you learn those skills. I mean, even like I don't like applying to MFA programs and making yourself write artist statements and making yourself like constantly be critiquing your work or the way that you're putting your work out there in a written form. I think that really helped me in the roles that I'm in now. And so while it doesn't have a, you know, there wasn't a class on becoming an arts administrator that I necessarily took, all the other things that I did while in the program has helped me continue to grow professionally.

Reyes:

Yeah, I will say that in my MFA journey in getting that, I think the way that it affected me was kind of like seeing that, and we can kind of get into this as maybe part of the limitations question. So I do have a question about like what are the limitations of the route you've taken, but I think this is a good way to segue into that where, MFA, yeah. Like I did have time to dedicate time towards my practice and get experience teaching in a formal university institutional setting. But one thing I did see where I was kind of like how then that could silo arts communities and kind of like, it creates comradery and like a community in one way, but it also creates a siloed another. And I think there is kind of like a give and take with that. And again, it varies from different program to program. I think some programs do have kind of that communal aspect outside of the institution-- And there are some that don't, it's purely within that context of that institution that the learning and

the craft happened. And so Deborah, can you talk a little bit about like, what do you feel are the limitations of, let's say, like not getting an MFA, but like again, also things maybe you've learned from other people that you've seen who did get MFA's and what you've learned from that as well?

Deborah:

I think some of the biggest limitations came with me trying to get a job at a university, right? Like, you know, trying to head more in that professional role, it's pretty impossible in my experience unless you're an artist in residence, to have a career path in that way. And a lot of artists and residents still wants you to have the MFA. And so it doesn't matter, you know, I could publish a million books and I could, you know, do all kinds of things. Unless someone gives me an honorary MFA, I'm kind of limited a little bit in that career path. I'll also say, you know, when it comes to some of the higher grants and awards, it just becomes a little harder to prove yourself. And you know, those three letters do a lot for a lot of people in their minds about your worthiness in ways that a lot of work ethics sometimes doesn't convey as easily. And so I think for me, you know, I was fine with the trade-off of knowing that I was gonna have to really grind and hustle, and really put my foot to the pedal, and find new ways to create myself, and new routes for myself constantly. And to know that there may not be a lot of examples of what that looks like, but that I might have to be the first one weaving together a series of things into a career path. And so I think not having that clear path ahead of

you, if you're not a person that's easy to trailblazing, you know, and easy to try to find your way through things when there's no one to help you, I think then maybe going a more traditional route is a little bit better or a little bit more helpful in that way.

Reyes:

Yeah, Grace, yeah like, I mean, what do you feel are kind of the limitations of let's say the route you've taken in regards to getting an MFA?

Grace:

Well, I think, well, Deborah said this earlier about debt, so there's always that to consider when, you know, I mean, even though I was lucky and fortunate enough to get a full ride, I still had to live and live out of state. So, you know, you do incur, you do incur debt when thinking about that. But one of the other, the things that I was thinking about with this question was, you know, you are in a institution, and you do have all of these studios, and tools, and workshops at your access. And once you get out of that, you really have to think about how your work, how you're gonna maintain the work that you were maybe creating or wanting to create in graduate school, outside of you know, maybe in a studio apartment or you don't have access to some of these, some of these things that you feel like you need to make work. And so that, I feel like that has been an interesting, you know I've been out of graduate school for eight years now. And so that was one of the things just kind

of continuing my practice really thinking about what was accessible to me and how do I shift so that my work, so I can put out the work that I wanna put out without necessarily having, you know, a paper beater or these like amazing studios to work in. So that's been a really, like, that's been a really interesting way to think about work and continue with my practice.

Deborah:

I had one other thing too, before you go on. I think another thing that for me really stood out is that I find myself in rooms with people with MFA's and feeling like there's something I missed. And I say that because I think there's a lot of people who have this feeling of because we didn't get an MFA that there was like some goals in class that taught you how to be a writer in ways that we could never accomplish. And so we kind of carry this burden of feeling like we always have to kind of go 12 steps ahead to try to just keep even-paced. And the more that I've talked to my friends with MFA's, they've felt like they're the same way, that there's still something they're missing. Like, I don't know that it's true, but I think that just the feeling of, you know, knowing that the literary world around you has a standard that somehow you haven't stepped up to, makes you at times a little bit more self-conscious about the work that you're putting in out into the world.

Reyes:

Yeah, and I think, yeah, I think that's such, such, yeah a

deeper point about like, and we, I think we both kind of touched upon this was whether the resources afforded to, you know, who or what, and I think in my particular journey, there are some things where, when I was in, like I'd say like a workshop or getting critiqued, there are just some things that the benefit of yeah, like an MFA program is that you get people from all walks of life. You might get someone from Tennessee, and you might get someone from Washington or you might get someone from Arizona in that room and they're all like kind of reading your work and critiquing it and you get those different viewpoints. But the converse of that is that they may also not understand where you're, like the basis of what you're coming from. And so I think kind of like in a more communal aspect, I did find when I sought my community and when I sought a workshop where I sought people to share my work with, that was when I got some really good points. But then it's also like on the converse, like, yeah, like how do you talk or write or make art for people who are like, don't share that with you. And so I think there is kind of like an interesting mix of those facets of being a creative, of being an artist, of who are you making for, to what end, for what purpose, and I think there's this kind of like interesting dynamic with the institution of whether or not it cares for that, whether or not it does or what have you. And so I guess my next question is like maybe kind of off the, off the questions, like not part of the questions that I sent y'all, but like how do you think your art was affected? Like your actual creative practice was affected by the decision you made? Grace, if you wanna touch upon that first?

Grace:

Well, I think, I think I definitely grew as an artist. I think given those three years 'cause I was in a three-year program, it was beneficial for my practice and the things that I kind of honed in on in graduate school that the themes and the overarching thesis of my work has continued and has grown. And so I think without that, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to really kind of hone in on that and what I was trying to say with my work. You know, on the flip side of that, you are constantly getting questioned. You are constantly getting critiqued. And I think coming out of an MFA program, it's something that I had to kind of unlearn where then when I was on my own making my own work, you know, I still had the chatter in the background of like, why am I even doing this really? Why is this, why is this important? And not necessarily that, those questions aren't necessarily bad as a maker to be asking yourself, but I think sometimes they can be stifling where you get to a point where you maybe stop in a direction because you can't necessarily find the answer to why. And so unlearning that was a process for me. And I finally feel like I can't, I don't necessarily hear the critiques in the background anymore. It's just kinda, it's the positive, the positive things about what those critiques do for your work has stayed, and everything else, the vulnerability has kind of left if you will, in creating.

Reyes:

Yeah, I empathize with that where, you know, there were some

stuff that I had, and I think you've used this word before in this conversation is unlearned some things. And I think that was also kind of my journey of like, there were things that, I think the things that I heard or people recommended or the way they critiqued me, half of more, maybe more than half the time I was like, well, I definitely don't wanna do what you said. So I think that was just as helpful as like someone telling me what I should do or it's like things that I learned. I was like, oh, well, I definitely don't wanna do that. And so I think that was just as helpful in a funny way, but Deborah, can you speak to that kind of like, how do you think your decision to not get MFA affected your work or like I guess the way you, yeah, you approach your work?

Deborah:

Yeah, I think, you know, it's driven a hunger in me for a couple of things. The hunger for knowledge, you know, I'm pretty insatiable on reading things and trying to look at new ways that people do things. And I find inspiration in weird and creative in different ways because I don't think I have the structure to know exactly where to go all the time. That also means I do things wrong, if there's a wrong way to do things in writing. I find myself in conversations where people were like, "Well, that's not the way that goes." And I'm like, "Well, why not?" No one ever taught me that it's not. So it is for me, you know? And so I think kind of the chatter that Grace hears, I hear on the other side of not knowing and feeling like because I don't know the right answer all the time and write in quotation marks,

right, that somehow I can never live up to that standard. And so I think there's always a self-doubt that kind of echoes in my work of, you know, I stopped and stood in midpoint now because I can't answer the questions, but because I can answer the questions, but I don't know if anyone else will get it, you know? And so I'm always wondering like, will this work resonate? Will this work go beyond me? Am I just being crazy in my little silo box of creation? So I think that's probably where I see the decision hitting me more that, you know, I definitely have sought out people who have MFAs to read my work and said, you know, is there something that you can bring to the work that is insightful for me? And so I think it's just about being able to patchwork together the people and the support that you need, the ones that say things that are helpful and not are just like, "I ain't taking that, "because I agree with you on that completely." But being able to find sound ears I think is important.

Reyes:

Yeah, and kind of going into that, like, I suppose, like another kind of thing that I was mindful of in curating this conversation in particular was choosing people of color in regards to like the MFA experience. And I will say that I think it was in my particular journey, that's absolutely affected me. And the way that I write and engage with my work, there'd be times in my MFA where I met other people like me, other like Latinx writers and we would meet up, and again, like discuss the advancement of what does that mean to be Latinx writer? But on

the converse, there'd also be people when I worked who would tell me, "Yo, I don't get this Spanish. "I don't get like this code switching stuff you're doing. "I don't, I don't like it. "I don't know what it means." And so it's kind of like, that was not helpful. In a way it was kind of being in that silo was both helpful and not helpful. And so I suppose, Grace, do you kind of wanna talk about the kind of like that, that kind of both sides of that, right, where it's like, it is helpful in some ways, but in some ways it's really not?

Grace:

Well, I feel like, I don't know, I kind of feel like because I was, yeah, I was a person of color in my program, I felt like there was this sense that I was having to always prove myself in a weird way, whether that was academically or, you know, with the work that I was making. And, and so in that sense, it did push me to kind of narrow in and figure out what I wanted the content of my work to be. Coming from, you know, being from Corpus Christi, I'd never really had the thought that I was the only person of color in a room. And moving to Georgia, you know, that was something that I experienced kind of on a personal level all the time. And it was never, it was never like, in my, nobody ever really pushed it on me. It was something that I kind of put on myself and was very aware of. And so, but to that, I was able to really think about who I was and where I came from. And that inevitably led me to the content and the themes within my artwork that I've continued it on.

Reyes:

Yeah, and kind of keeping in line with this or not, you know, depending on however either of you wanna answer this question. So you're both, you've both been, either are in or have been educators in your careers, in your creative practices and careers, and kind of going into the idea of what a mentor versus what a teacher is. And I think that's another reason why people wanna go to MFA's or be part of communities is to kind of have that mentorship. But there is, I guess, if you want to differentiate between like a mentor and a teacher, because in the art world or rather quote/unquote, "the art world," a mentorship maybe is like a, like a a prolonged relationship with someone of your craft. Whereas a teacher is maybe like a one-off, like a workshop or a craft talk or something like that. But in regards to, you know, how you interact with it, Deborah, do you wanna talk a bit about like, how you kind of get that experience of a mentorship or being a teacher or being taught?

Deborah:

So more of how I get it or how I give it, or kind of both?

Reyes:

Both.

Deborah:

I would say, as a creative, I've struggled really hard to find a mentor. I've had people who can mentor me in portions of what I do, but because I'm a multi-genre artist, I kind of have to have

four mentors. I have to have that one that talks specifically about performance, and one that talks specifically about on the page, and one that talks about a hybrid work too. And so it's been a lot harder. I think, as a mentor, I offer that ability to say, you know, let's take an idea and do it 700 different ways to find the one that works. I think for me, I find myself more in the lane of a mentor just because I'm an introvert, and I like really long-lasting relationships. I like to build meaningful relationships. I have a really hard time with like, chit-chat kind of things. Doesn't mean that I can't do the job of a teacher. It just means that those, that's usually for me, more like community workshops that I do, where I'm coming into a community and I'm teaching about something and I'm leaving, and I'm not staying in the community. Most of the stuff I stay in the community, I start to build kind of those relationships. And I hope to be able to kind of handhold a little bit more so the students I work with every single day, you know, I know their crafts and I know their interests, and I know the way they're building. And I can celebrate the small wins and them accomplishing, sounding more like what they want their voice to sound like. Which I think is kind of like the penultimate understanding of what success is, is not that you sound like something, but you found a way to sound like yourself. And I think that that's a hard enough journey in and of itself. And so I think, you know, in seeking mentorship, I've gone to fellowships and I've applied for fellowships and grants and things like that that'll put me in places with people who know more than me, that may even have some of the trajectory that I

have, but it's been really hard to find a mentor. It's been a lot easier to be one, to be real honest with you.

Reyes:

Yeah, yeah, and I think that's kind of, I think just kind of an interesting aspect of the art. Any creative practice, I mean, I'm not gonna say for like visual arts, which, you know, your experience is in Grace, but I will say that in my experience in the institution in the MFA is that when I tried to be multidisciplinary, it was very shot down in my context where I was like, you know, I was in fiction. I got my MFA in fiction writing. But when I tried to take a poetry workshop, they were like, "No, what are you doing? "Get out of here." And so I guess in your experience, did it, did you encounter that or was it much more welcoming to that kind of different playfulness?

Grace:

My program was very, they welcomed interdisciplinary studies which was really nice. So I mean, I, you know, I went for... I got my MFA in printmaking in book arts and a lot of programs here in this country are very traditional. Like if you apply for printmaking and you are, you know, you're working in lithography, you go and that's all you study. You don't cross over to other mediums, and you don't, definitely don't take other classes in sculpture or painting, you know? And so I was really lucky in the sense that the University of Georgia really pushed that, they welcomed it. So I was able to take classes, you know, I was able to take jewelry classes, and I was able to

take sculpture classes that would, it would inform the decisions that I was making in the print making studio. And in that I found, you know, a mentorship in these other disciplines, and still like, create. I feel like, you know, these, a lot of these really great women that teach at the University of Georgia there, they're now friends of mine, you know, and I still reach out to them and I still, you know, pay attention to what they're doing in their careers and kind of strive to be that. And so, so yeah, I was really lucky in that sense that I was able to play in graduate school.

Reyes:

Yeah, and I, and I think this kind of segues perfectly to one of the, I guess, one of the last questions that we can delve into, deeper into is and people making, who are wanting to make this decision whether or not should they or shouldn't they get an MFA. Deborah, could you kind of talk about like, what is something that a creative should consider in regards to the decision you've made to not get an MFA, but still being amazing. And, and again, people don't have to get MFA's, period. That's just kind of like a thing of the art does not require the MFA, you know? It's the other way around, but I suppose in kind of in your expertise and in your experience, what is something that someone should consider when they say, "You know what? "I'm not getting the MFA, that stuff is not for me." What is something that they should think about when they then move on from that decision?

Deborah:

Yeah, I think that one of the biggest things is how you define success and what your long-term goals are. You know, if you are someone who was like, "I'm gonna write the great American novel," okay, and that's great. Do you need the MFA to do that? And I think that that's gonna be a one-on-one decision. If you feel like you're a person who needs to kind of have that built in community that's gonna keep you to a deadline, that's gonna hold your hand, that's gonna maybe provide some of the mentorship that Grace sought out, right? Like in that maybe has those things built in, maybe going the MFA route is for you. I think if you're a person that's like, "I can do this, I can figure it out. "I can pull together resources. "I can seek things out online "researching a million fellowships "and finding the right one for me "and building it for myself," then maybe you can do it without the MFA. You know, I think it's about your network. I think it's about your resources and your village and what your village offers. You know, one of the things that we didn't really talk about as being creators in the South, and especially as writers that our community, you know, what's seen as our level of success of in the literary world is very much Northeastern, right? And so for us to be writers in the South, that is a thing that we're taking on another burden that says to be distance, you know, demographically removed from a lot of the resources, what are you willing to do in order to be able to fill those gaps? And for a lot of people the MFA does that, right? It gives you the access to people that are outside of your regional, you know, your region. And so you have to just

be really specific and be really tailored in details and in knowing exactly what you want, and being able to lay yourself a path to it.

Reyes:

You know, I think that's actually like a really beautiful point to bring up. And I think you're right, like kind of like there's even more nuances to this conversation, absolutely. In regards to, let's say being so like, Writing in the South or even Texas is in that funky kind of like space of maybe other deep Southerners, no, that's not the South and, you know being in the Southwest even, right? What does that even mean? And so right in the concepts of what is success? It's like, oh well you publish, you're a "New York Times" bestselling author. But even then that's like a very Northern, like you said, Northeast conception of what is success, and I think that's a really great thing to bring up. And so Grace, if you wanna respond to any of that or if you wanna kind of go to the question at hand of like what someone should consider before venturing into an MFA program.

Grace:

Well, Deborah mentioned really thinking about what your long-term goals are. I think that's a really important thing. You know, like you mentioned, you kind of jumped straight to get your MFA, I did too. I kind of wish I would have had the opportunity to step back a little bit and really think about, you know, why am I doing this? What do I want my outcome to be after three years? So I'm not, you know, kind of in the same

position I was prior to going in, that I had a clear path afterwards. And then kind of thinking about putting yourself when you're looking at programs in the proximity of opportunity. I think that's really important. And maybe it's something because we live in Houston and there are so many opportunities surrounding all of the art forms. It's something that if you're looking at MFA program outside of here, you might take for granted that it's not, the opportunities that are here aren't necessarily everywhere. And so I think thinking about those things, and the length I was, you know, the length of a program I think is really important. Three years is a great, it's a great time, but also depending on where you are, it can get really, the place can get really small. Like Athens is a great little town, you know, Northeast Georgia, but it gets small. And so you have to think about like, if you, if you've thought about those long-term goals, maybe a three-year program isn't necessary and you go in and you focus for two years, and you figure out how you wanna come out the other side. And then really thinking about cost and scholarships, like what is available for you so that you can get out and not be in a lot of debt and you can continue to move forward? You know, another thing I think that, it's unfortunate because I don't think higher education does this very well, but we don't talk about taxes and we don't talk about the cost of being an artist and supply costs, and what it actually means to have student debt, to try to buy a house, to, you know, all of the, like business, the business side of art really isn't taught in any kind of MFA program. And I think that's something that I would have educated

myself even more on and maybe not look for a program in that sense that had those things, but just self-educated my, educated myself as to what that meant for me moving forward.

Reyes:

Yeah, yeah, and I guess kind of like to walk, maybe walk a little bit back the conversation to hit something that you both brought up is like, what does, what exactly do you want from your career like from your path or from your creative practice? I think for me when I was going I have my undergrad education, I think the reason why I jumped so quickly into getting an MFA was because I wanted, I think I was so involved in my craft that I'm like, I have to keep going. I have to continue this surge of creativity and love that I have for my work. And then when I go in there, you know, I hit these different apexes of like, I'm gonna write this, I'm gonna write that. I'm going to write this. And then, and then you have a kind of a workshop or somebody that says, "Ah, that's not really working. "This is not working. "It's not, this isn't good," or, "This part isn't great." And especially in the context of the conventions of what the professors were teaching, and again, each program is totally different. Each program has its own unique character and personality. But I think one thing that, one thing that an MFA taught me was conventions of certain writing aspects or writing techniques that I think helped expedite a lot of ways that a master let's say like, how do you write a short story? But the converse is also true where I was finding myself like, oh, now I'm just hitting these usual points. How do I shake those up?

And when I compare my writing before my MFA, then after I'm like, Oh, I used to be so adventurous. I used to write like, oh, I wrote a short story where it's a flash fiction in a larger short story, blah, blah, blah. And, but then now I'm like, no, that's too weird. Or like, blah, so having to unlearn some things, but it also sped up certain aspects of my writing career, of my own craft and voice. And so Deborah, if you first want to talk about, like in finding your voice without that institution, without that kind of institutional voice or conceptions of writing, how has that journey been for you in finding your own voice and your own kind of aesthetic?

Deborah:

Yeah, you know, I think things were a little different for me because I came from slam poet, you know, poetry slam. And I came from its own underground community that had its own rules, its own sounds, its own things. And I remember, you know, being a young writer, like let's say 16 and doing workshops in community workshops and people saying, "You sound like everybody else," and it broke my heart, right? And I was completely devastated. I was like, "No, no, it's only me." And it's like I didn't, right? Because the reality is we're mimicking until we figure it out. And that's part of it too, that I wish someone had given me credit, not credit, but giving me grace to understand that, you know, for me, I had to mimic in order to be able to create because there wasn't someone who was necessarily teaching me. And so all I could do was assess, mimic, fine tune, right? I think I've done that my whole career. It's like being able to

assess what you do really well, being able to mimic it and then being able to pull way back and saying, "I don't need as much of that, "but at least I know how to use it." And so I think like that's kind of where I've landed in the craft of being able to read or hear a work. Being able to, you know, I remember in slam kind of coming up and saying like, I wanted to put targets on people's backs. And by that I meant like, I want to figure out what you do. I want to do it better than you. And then I wanna beat you with your own thing, right? And then I wanna move on to the next person. And I think coming out of that world now, because I'm not really in slam anymore, right? And being able to look at other things, I still dissect work that way. So when I read a book, I wonder what it does well. I wonder what's relatable about it. I wonder what portions of it I can take and where I can use it in my own work. You know, and then those things become almost like spices in my cabinet, right? It's like, I might not douse everything in paprika, but I know how to use paprika. Like I might not put personification in everything, but I know when to use it. And so I think that that's kind of what it has built in me.

Reyes:

Yeah, and Grace, do you wanna kinda talk about that, is like, what ultimately you took away from that experience of like, okay, this is what I had to unlearn or this is what I definitely didn't want to do, but this is stuff that absolutely helped me?

Grace:

My mind, I'm sorry, my mind just went blank. I do, I do wanna comment to what Deborah said though, because I feel like kind of stepping back outside of being in school and seeing so many people who necessarily haven't gone through this MFA path, but have been so dedicated to their craft, whatever that is. And I think however, you said that so eloquently, like you are a prime example of the dedication to your work and you don't necessarily, I feel like all of those things of breaking down, questioning, looking, revising, all of those things are happening in a graduate program, but it's maybe somebody else pushing you to do that or to look at that and to have the, to have that in you to do it for yourself, I think says a lot. And I think that says that you don't necessarily need to go to an MFA program to get that. For me, I, you know, I needed that. I think I needed that to, to look and to constantly question. And then ultimately being able, like I said, to take those things and bring them out of the context of the institution and continue to ask myself those questions as I make. And, and so, I feel like if you are someone who is creative in whichever media you choose, and you are like constantly looking at other people in your field and how they're moving forward or how they're getting these opportunities, and if it's inherent in you to make, then you're going to be questioning yourself, and you're going to be constantly pushing yourself to the next thing. And you're gonna continue to push your work to that next point.

Reyes:

Yeah, and so I think we'll kind of end that form of this formal

conversation in here, because again, there's only just so much to chew on. I'm just gonna ask some quick questions. First thing that comes to mind, just some fun questions before we say our goodbyes. Deborah, favorite takeout in Houston?

Deborah:

Ooh, you know, I'm not a big takeout person, I'm a huge cook-at-home person. Oh, favorite take, I don't even have one. I cook a lot, like I cook like six or seven times a week, like meals, so I love the kitchen. I'm sorry if that's not the answer you wanted.

Reyes:

No, you know what, again, different perspectives. I think I wish I was more like that. Save my money. Grace?

Grace:

I would, so I do cook a lot as well, but we also eat out a lot. I'm the person that's annoyingly buys groceries and then is like too tired to cook dinner. So there's a great little, I live off like 45 and 610, and there's a great little Thai restaurant up the road by the Almeda Mall. And I think it's called Thai Jasmine, but they have really great Thai tea and they have, their Thai food is amazing. And then I love Govinda's for Indian takeout.

Reyes:

Nice, favorite Houston artist, Deborah?

Deborah:

By artists, what do you mean?

Reyes:

Any of it, favorite Houston creative, rather.

Deborah:

Oh, that's so really broad. I'll just go with GONZO247 because I just love Gonzo. I love his work. I think it's just brilliant. He's a graffiti artist for those who don't know. And he's just, I dunno, he's genius. I'll use him for today. But I could answer that 700 different ways depending on 700 different--

Reyes:

Absolutely, absolutely, Grace?

Grace:

That is a really hard question to answer.

Deborah:

I feel like I'm gonna get in trouble for my answer, Grace. I'll be honest with you.

Grace:

Well, not even that, there's just, there's so many great, great artists. I don't know if I can answer that to be honest with you.

Reyes:

That's fair, that's fair. All right, finally, upcoming projects. Deborah, anything you wanna, so this will air in October. Whatcha got?

Deborah:

Yeah. So I'm currently shopping hopefully by the time this lands, I've already sold my next main script to my next book, my next collection that's not poetry, and it's not fiction and it's not memoir, I've been told. So what genre is it? Magic agents have to figure it out. So that's definitely coming up next year in October. I'm actually releasing the German translation of my book "Newsworthy." So I'm excited about that. And then "Marian's Song," the opera for which I wrote the libretto with Damien Sneed, the composer, is scheduled to be on tour very soon. So those are kind of the things that I'm looking forward to in the future.

Reyes:

Absolutely, congratulations on the translation.

Deborah:

Thank you.

Reyes:

Good stuff, good stuff. Grace, upcoming stuff?

Grace:

So I am eight months out of just having a baby and I am starting to get back in the studio. And so my goals in this, kind of by the end of the year, I'm working on a new piece, not really for anything specifically, just to kind of get back into the studio and start making again. And then, you know, work has me, my job has me pretty busy. We are always coordinating something on campus and for the community. And so we're opening up shows in most of our buildings in October, November, working with an artist to potentially bring him into SITE Gallery for a sound installation and just continuing to program out the space, it's where we are. And so I kind of have those two things that, and balancing as far as my career's concerned.

Reyes:

Absolutely, and congratulations again, in regards to getting back into that groove, that takes a lot of work.

Grace:

Yeah.

Deborah:

Congratulations on being sane and awake as a mom. I'm gonna, but can I clap it up for the moms in the room that are balancing children?

Grace:

I felt like when I was like and my brain stopped, like that's

pretty normal.

Reyes:

All the applause, all of the applause. So again, thank you Deborah, thank you Grace so much. Good luck with everything and I'll see you next time.

Grace:

Thank you.

Deborah:

Thank you.

Spokesperson:

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