

Sample Statement of Purpose: Ph. D. in English Literature

I came to college an autodidact. Though elementary and secondary school records reflect my enrollment and (sporadic) attendance at nine schools in three North American states, a close audit reveals that I stopped attending school regularly after seventh grade. I played truant for most of the eighth and ninth grades, and my father's AIDS diagnosis and treatment disrupted my sophomore and junior years—my father and I were unstable, and our respective inpatient psychiatric evaluations and care further necessitated my intermittent school absences. I was never a high school senior. After my father died, I obtained a high school equivalency diploma, and, thankfully, several years later, a small, liberal arts college admitted me as a transfer student on the basis of my performance in community college coursework.

Because of my erratic, pre-college education, I am rather innumerate, a fact that my GRE quantitative score betrays, but my ability to read and write well sustained me through undergraduate and graduate study. Still, I am self-conscious about my scholarship; my educational gaps vex me and have motivated me to work harder than I might have done had I more conventional preparation. Despite having earned a bachelor's and a master's degree, I fear I will remain only a studious eccentric, that academia will not accommodate my idiosyncratic experience and perspective, and I will be situated always outside: a perpetual tyro or itinerant learner, stumbling independently. Nevertheless, textual study also has taught me how to negotiate margins, and one benefit of my extrinsic position and self-doubt has been my cultivated interest in literature that addresses marginalized subjects and liminality. Though I won't recount my transcripts here, many of the seminars recorded therein fed my preoccupation with feminist theory, queer theory, post-structuralism, and racist and imperialist discourse.

My most recent work at Loyola Marymount University attempted to synthesize several theoretical approaches in essays I wrote on the following: D. H. Lawrence's dependence on imitative and iterative rhetoric when representing Native Americans, the Amerindian resistance to his apprehension, and Lawrence's insistence on extrapolating meaning from dark skin in his

Mornings in Mexico; passive and active role-play in what Gilles Deleuze suggests is a “nearly acknowledged homosexual relationship” between narrator and eponymous subject in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and Deleuze’s identification and ‘ciphering’ of Bartleby’s ‘formula’ (a formula that my argument multiplies to illustrate the narrator’s refusal to occupy the discrete character-type that Deleuze assigns him); and, from the writing sample enclosed, an essay on Harryette Mullen’s ‘linguistic miscegenation’—a poetics defined after her mastery of the ‘master’s’ tongue.

In deciding upon an area of specialization, I have found that 19th century literature offers me the most rewarding material with which I may develop my interests. I am particularly attracted to the Victorian novel. I want to continue to explore Anglophone literature from both sides of the Atlantic, and I have a doctoral thesis topic in mind, even as I admit that the focus of my final dissertation might differ considerably from what I now envision.

Taking a transatlantic approach, I want to write about blackness in the white imagination: how white authors, specifically Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, William Makepeace Thackeray, Joseph Conrad and H. Rider Haggard, articulate black characters in their fiction. I’ve taken a cue from the bell hooks essay, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination.” Here, hooks describes the objectification of “[b]lack slaves, and later manumitted servants” whereby “whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible.” For hooks, inconspicuous blackness is simply a white construction, a rubric by which whites “can live as though black people are invisible.” I would argue that black invisibility is a conceit that the white imagination cannot sustain, and yet the process of Othering inhibits direct survey; consequently, the white gaze, as delineated by the above authors, accommodates blacks only obliquely. My dissertation would expand recent scholarship that includes Patrick Brantlinger’s chapter on “Race and the Victorian Novel” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*; Jennifer DeVere Brody’s juxtaposition of nationalism, racism, and gender performance in *Impossible Purities*:

Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture; and the genre correspondence that Julia Sun-Joo Lee elaborates in *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel*.

I am applying to Ph.D. programs because the study of literature gives me great pleasure, my ultimate goal is to teach, and I believe that with the mentorship of superior teachers, I will develop my writing to the level of publishable work.