

PHutures PhD Spotlight

- **Networking for academic job search**
- **Using passion for Japanese literature at Hopkins**
- **Tips: what to pursue in graduate school**



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FROM ENGLISH TO ACADEMIA AND BEYOND

Thanks for sharing your story, Alexandra. Can you tell us a little about yourself?

I was born in Los Angeles. I'm half-Colombian and half-Nicaraguan. My household and surroundings exposed me to many cultures, languages, and perspectives from a young age. In fact, my favorite literature textbook in elementary school was one on multiculturalism. Eventually, I also became aware of the history of segregation and the increasingly unattainable standard of living, among other issues, that plague Los Angeles and other parts of Southern California. I think about how all of these things intersect on a daily basis, especially because the pandemic led me back here.

You got your bachelors degree in English from the University of California, Irvine in 2013. How was your experience there?

Initially, I was shocked by the overwhelming size of UCI's campus and the large student population. However, later on I came across programs, professors, graduate students, and peers that allowed me to find my niche within the university and create my own ideal environment where I could thrive.

In particular, UCI was significant in that it had the right resources for me to pursue my interest in teaching and research. I'll never forget when I was able to teach from my honors thesis in a course of my own design to other undergraduates! My years at UCI taught me how to be resilient and proactive.

How did you spend your time after graduating from UCI and before starting the PhD program at Hopkins?

In between undergraduate and graduate schools, I spent three years teaching on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in Saga Prefecture. I worked at four different schools during the week and with many different teachers. This experience challenged me to become flexible in tailoring lessons to each teacher's expectations and style. I had a lot of time to read while I was in Japan and became immersed in Japanese literature, especially contemporary writers. Living in Japan enabled me to see both the good and bad aspects of the country and understand my own position in learning how to navigate these points—overall, I highly recommend living in a different country, if possible!

What have you been interested in studying during your PhD program in English?

At Hopkins, I initially intended to continue the research that I had begun in UCI. I was very interested in American Southern literature but came across some books in seminars that completely changed my direction; they made me want to pursue ethnic American literature. Furthermore, the fact that so many of these works deal with linguisticism felt urgent to me since I have family members who have experienced this kind of discrimination. From there, I became interested in issues of immigration, especially what feels like the recent prominence of the detention center.

You are currently in the final stages of your PhD. What is the topic of your dissertation? How does it reflect your PhD interests?

My dissertation hones in on interpreters in contemporary American ethnic literature who, beyond just using their oral translation skills, mediate the history and experiences of the criminalization of migrants to readers. Interpreters do not usually come up in relation to "crimmigration" discourse--that is, the criminalization of immigration law--but they always appear to be present in the growing body of literary works that deal with the consequences of such laws, especially immigrant detention.



In the Arts District of Los Angeles

In my view, these literary interpreters show us things that we might not otherwise see in statistics or laws, such as how inhabiting different subject-positions can affect how one experiences crimmigration. Their experimentation with the interpretive act also indicates new ways of imagining social justice. I'm hoping to wrap up my dissertation soon.

What or who inspires you everyday?

This is going to sound unabashedly English major-y of me, but I am inspired by the stories that people tell me about themselves or those in books and films. I have a sharp memory when it comes to stories that resonate with me, especially the ones that have directly influenced my own life, and I learn a lot from them.



I love that apart from putting out literary works into the world, these authors wear multiple hats as activists, speakers, artists—and the list goes on. These other commitments not only add nuance to their life stories, but also encourage me to be more than just a graduate student.

Importantly, the authors who are in my dissertation have been providing me with inspiration for the past two years—I don't think that I'd be able to write if I didn't feel this way!

I love that apart from putting out literary works into the world, these authors wear multiple hats as activists, speakers, artists—and the list goes on. These other commitments not only add nuance to their life stories, but also encourage me to be more than just a graduate student. Interestingly enough, I also find myself inspired by ice skaters and dancers of all kinds—people who combine artistry and precision with great physical stamina and discipline. (I could watch performances and routines on YouTube endlessly.) I like to think that these same qualities can actually inform my own approach to writing!

What brings you enjoyment and fulfillment daily?

First, I love everything about drinking tea: researching which tea helps with which ailment, preparing tea, finding new teas to try, and pairing teas with snacks and desserts. Recently, I love having green tea with dried persimmons purchased from H Mart. Second, I enjoy exercising every day—I never used to feel that way about it until I entered graduate school. During my first year, I was frequently pulling muscles because I was pretty sedentary, so I began exercising and stretching more out of necessity, but there's something satisfying about growing physically stronger. My favorite activity is running, but I also do yoga and pilates. Finally, I cherish the fact that I can easily converse with my family. It used to be difficult to find the right timing to talk to my family members on the phone when I was living in Baltimore, but now I just have to leave my room to talk to someone.





In Washington, D.C.

What extra curricular activities are you involved in at Hopkins and beyond?

I have been involved with a few student groups at Hopkins over the years, such as the PhD Advisory Council and International Students @ Hopkins (ISAH). I have also served in various capacities within my department—for example, I was the coordinator of my department's talk series during my third year and thus got to interact with scholars and poets who came to visit Hopkins.

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I taught a course called Haruki Murakami's Tokyo twice and this past year debuted a new course called Contemporary Women Writers in Japan. The students who have joined these courses are always such a passionate bunch.

What would you like to do after your PhD? What active steps are you taking towards that goal?

I still would like to pursue a career as a professor, so I am on the academic job market. I challenged myself to become better at networking this year and reached out to professors at different institutions (both through cold emails and at academic conferences) to make connections. I have been pleasantly surprised by how willing people are to share experiences about going onto the academic job market and to look over my job application materials. I also prepared my first version of my job talk and tried it out on my department. However, I want to begin exploring careers in government, particularly in relation to immigration issues. Another part of me wants to look into working for a publishing company that specializes in Japanese literature and/or comics. LinkedIn has been helping me to see what's available in these areas, and I'll be consulting PHutures about next steps after my first go on the job market. No reason why I can't be on two different kinds of job markets at once!

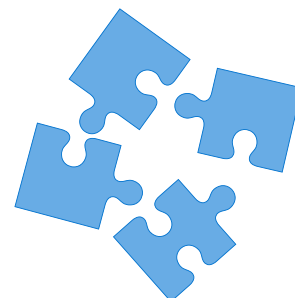
What resources, if any, has Hopkins provided to you to help enhance your career and professional development?

PHutures has become a key resource for me these days—for example, I had the opportunity to become a Maryland group delegate for National Humanities Advocacy Day.



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Although PHutures was not around when I first started at Hopkins, I was surprised when, at some panels during the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) Annual Meeting, others responded to certain ideas—like life design, internships, and rethinking what one can do with a PhD—as if these were novel, but for me they felt totally normal! I realized that even over the course of one year of having attended PHutures programming, my mindset had already shifted to think about the PhD in a broader way. Finding fulfillment and happiness is not contingent on getting the academic job, but rather a job that allows me to put into practice all of the skills that I have developed these past five years.



“Whenever opportunities arise in my inbox or through acquaintances, my first reaction is always most telling. If I’m immediately excited, then I know that I’m going to apply or say yes, and I’ll find a way to make it work within my schedule and other commitments. If I do not feel that way, then I let it go.

This next point is particular to my department: I work as an associate editor for our academic journal ELH. This role involves a two-year internship in publishing. I had no prior experience in publishing, so I started the work with some trepidation. But once I went through an entire issue, I better understood my duties, and now I find the work rewarding. As an academic, I have been exposed to so many different ways of framing and unfolding an argument within the article format. As an associate editor, I have learned how to work with the deadlines put forth by the press and communicate with authors about their work as we put it in final form for publication. I like the fact that I have this background because I feel like it opens up career options for me.

If you have one piece of advice for your fellow graduate students navigating a PhD program, what would it be and why?

Pursue whatever speaks to you on a personal and intellectual level and commit to it after considering your time and energy level. In grad school, one might feel tempted to apply to and do anything and everything in order to accumulate lines on their CV. That approach may help to tell a story about oneself, but I know that this is not effective for the story that I want to tell about myself—especially because I don’t want to get burned out. Whenever opportunities arise in my inbox or through acquaintances, my first reaction is always most telling. If I’m immediately excited, then I know that I’m going to apply or say yes, and I’ll find a way to make it work within my schedule and other commitments. If I do not feel that way, then I let it go. Sometimes opportunities look good, but I don’t have the right qualifications to apply for them at that moment. In this case, I add them to a rolling list that I keep handy so that I can remember to pursue them when I am ready.



ELH Journal,
JHU Press

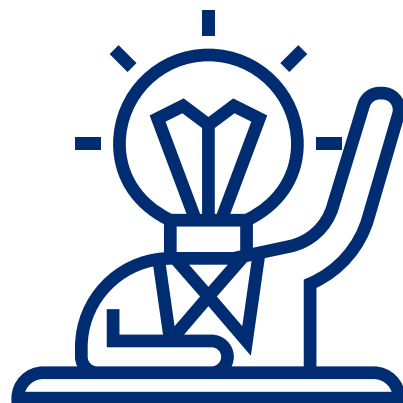
If you have one piece of advice for students navigating their next step careers, what would that piece of advice be?

It's never too early to become informed about careers. Talk to the faculty and graduate students in your department about their trajectories and learn about the resources that they offer to help you navigate the academic job market and other career paths.

Talk to other faculty and graduate students in different institutions to see how these conversations differ (or not) from your department's. If you're in your first year at Hopkins and are 100% certain that you are going to pursue an academic job, you should still attend PHutures programming because your mindset can change—and that's okay! Take advantage of our growing alumni network and definitely talk to Roshni Rao. (And if you don't have a LinkedIn yet, check out Roshni's videos on that topic.) Once you have a fuller picture of the situation around you, don't be afraid to ask for speakers to come or even take the initiative to plan your own events in response to information gaps. Your proactiveness will benefit you and others!

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ALEXANDRA LOSSADA

