**MFA IN WRITING AND/OR THE M.A. IN JOURNALISM**

A specific note on MFA programs in Writing or Creative Writing, and MA programs in Journalism and related fields, for Macalester College International Studies majors, I.S. graduates, and others

Prof. David Chioni Moore, August 2010

The MFA in Writing (or creative writing) and master's degrees in Journalism are often considered by Macalester alumni. In former times, creative writers simply wrote. Almost no professional writer of any fame or reputation had a degree in writing before about 1985. Hemingway, Faulkner, Hughes, Woolf, Achebe, Rushdie, Atwood, and lord knows Shakespeare never even thought about pursuing such a degree, which until recently did not exist.

As for journalism, historically most journalist were trained in the school of hard knocks, though serious journalism graduate programs have been around, and have produced important figures in the field, for a half century.

Today, the MFA in Writing has exploded as a degree form: countless programs offer it, and an increasingly high fraction of elite writers have been produced by it. What's more, it's become the nearly obligatory credential for teaching writing too. The journalism MA has fallen on hard times as the print newspaper and magazine business have gone into Internet-induced freefall. Thanks to the Internet, more people make a living writing than ever before in history, but the *paths* to making that money are rapidly changing and are increasingly unconnected to what graduate journalism programs used to teach. So journalism MA programs are very rapidly re-inventing themselves too – in ways analogous to how the long-reliable MLS (Master's of Library Science) has transformed into the MLIS (Master's of Library and Information Science).

My advice?

If you want to pursue a graduate journalism degree, pay ultra-keen attention to how your target schools are responding to the information age, and get real, hard information – not vague brochure-talk – on what their very most recent graduates now do.

If you are considering the MFA in Writing, do the same thing. Don't just focus on the few stars they might have produced. Instead, get hard information on what their very most recent graduates now do. How do their recent graduates – all of them – make a living today? Know also that the MFA in what is often called Creative Nonfiction (think Michael Pollan, Barbara Ehrenreich) has gained much recent strength, and taps an important sector of professional writing that used to sit unloved between MFA-Creative and MA-Journalism programs.

How to identify target schools? Make a list of the dozen professional writers under 40 you like best – you most want to eventually resemble. Where did they go? And: for schools you investigate, what have their faculty written that you like and want similarly to produce?

Lastly: for both types of degree, costs can be high, and post-degree payback uncertain. So financial support and overall cost (including cost of living) will be critical to your ultimate decision.