like many graduate students in creative writing, Carleena Angwin entered her MFA program at Goucher College with dreams that the manuscript she planned to write for her thesis would someday become a published memoir. But during her last semester, in 2017, she discovered the university’s thesis submission policy had changed: In order to graduate, she would be required to submit her work into the library’s digital repository, where it would be available online.

“I spent two years of my life creating this thesis,” Angwin says. “I didn’t want it out there before it was ready to be published.”

To see how accessible the theses actually were, she Googled the names of graduates from a prior cohort. For many, the full text of their thesis was among the top search results.

Angwin could request an embargo, which would make her work unavailable to the public for up to five years. But after that, the raw material of her memoir could be read, downloaded and shared by anyone with an internet connection. She worried that publishers wouldn’t want to buy a book similar to one that was freely available online.

As universities around the world have transitioned to electronic theses, many MFA students today face a dilemma: If they want the degree, they have to submit their work to a digital thesis repository.

And though many top MFA programs offer exemptions—University of Iowa and New York University allow paperbound theses, while Boston University and University of Texas offer a permanent embargo— not all MFA programs have such protections for creative work. Over the past decade, the academic trend has been toward open access.

“That’s just the way it works in academia,” says Jeb Livingood, associate director of the creative writing program at the University of Virginia. He explains, “When MFA programs are folded into major research universities, it doesn’t come without strings attached.”

Open access makes sense in fields such as science, where graduate research is meant to build on an already-existing body of work. Academic journals regularly accept work derived from theses and universities can play a useful role in disseminating knowledge. But creative writing is different. In research papers, value is derived from novel analysis or replicable results. In writing, the value is in the thing itself: the words on the page.

Thus the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) has taken a position against open access electronic theses, stating, “Just as it is important for graduate students in the sciences to protect the patent potential of their work, graduate students in creative writing need to protect the copyright potential—and specifically, first serial and book rights.”

“There’s no rational argument to say that works of fiction, poetry or memoir should be made publicly available [in a digital thesis repository],” says Mary Rasenberger, executive director of the Author’s Guild. “Putting something online is publishing it.”

Ironically, there are many university-sponsored literary journals that
will not publish work if it is already available in their own library’s digital repository. “We won't accept anything that's been previously published online—that would include a university website,” says David Leavitt, editor of the University of Florida literary journal, *Subtropics*.

In a 2013 survey conducted by East Carolina University, 63 percent of literary journal editors reported they would not accept work from a freely available digital thesis, even if the work had been revised. Because literary journals can serve as venues for up-and-coming writers to gain attention for their work, open-access digital repositories potentially act as roadblocks for writers freshly out of MFA programs.

Elise Capron, a literary agent at Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency, has worked with many writers whose initial projects were derived from their theses. Although she hasn’t yet worked on a book that grew out of a digital thesis, she says she would be happy to consider such a project. Whether it could limit her ability to sell it, however, would depend on factors such as how easily it can be found online, how different the edited version is from the original, and what type of licensing limits the university has on its future use of the thesis archive.

“If I really fell in love with a project but knew it had been published digitally within a university system, it wouldn't stop me,” Capron says. “I would still go on sale with it and be transparent with a publisher—it’s just this question of what does this repository really mean.”

Likewise, Ethan Nosowsky, editorial director of Graywolf Press, says that if he really liked a book, the existence of a manuscript in a digital repository wouldn't keep him from acquiring it. “But, in the end, if something became very successful, I guess I would be nervous,” he says. “I would not be delighted at having alternate editions or unedited editions of the same book super easily accessible.”

While many universities do offer embargo periods for MFA candidates, allowing them a window of time (often one to five years) before the thesis is released, this option has limited usefulness because it’s difficult to predict how long it will take students to revise their manuscript, find an agent, sell their book and so on. In some cases students can renew their embargo, but this situation is burdensome. “It puts the onus on the student,” says Jennifer Sinor, creative writing chair at Utah State University (USU). “Why should they have to keep filing with the university to keep their work protected?”

Author Leah Carroll didn't realize that the embargo had expired on her MFA thesis housed in the University of Florida's (UF) repository until just before she sent the final manuscript of her memoir, *Down City*, to the publisher in 2016. The thesis manuscript was an early, partially fictionalized draft of the same story—but very different from the carefully researched and polished work of nonfiction that was about to be released. The publisher was less than thrilled. It was only after the directors of the MFA program went through negotiations on her behalf that the university agreed to give her a two-year “private” embargo, after which time the thesis would be available only within the UF community.

Some universities see “campus-only” access as a solution to the problem, viewing this as akin to a paperbound thesis stored in the library. That analogy is flawed. A person doesn’t have to actually be on campus to access digital library resources; all they need is a university ID and an internet connection. Therefore in large public universities, more than 50,000 students (plus faculty and staff) could download any thesis with the click of a button.

Though access restrictions short of permanent embargo aren’t perfect, Nosowsky says that from a publisher’s point of view, *any* kind of restriction would help. And if no such options exist at your university, he says, “Advocate for them.”

Andrew Berthrong, a writer and adjunct professor of English at Texas Tech University, knows the importance of advocacy all too well. A year after he’d graduated with an MA, he was horrified to discover that the novella he’d written for his thesis was for sale on Amazon for $50.

“It was a stressor for sure,” he says. “I’m a pretty private person. Suddenly I didn’t have control of my story.”

When Berthrong uploaded his thesis to the repository in 2010, he had inadvertently checked a box that gave ProQuest—the company that facilitated electronic thesis submission—permission to sell his thesis to third-party retailers. (ProQuest discontinued this practice in 2014.)

“I think theses are treated like an endpoint,” he says. “But really they’re not. They indicate the culmination of study perhaps—but, for the author, it’s the beginning of their work.”

It was only through the advocacy of Sinor, his thesis advisor at USU, that Berthrong was able to get his thesis removed from Amazon nine months later. After that incident, Sinor convinced the graduate school to allow creative writing students to submit paperbound copies of their theses.
Years later, Angwin, the MFA student from Goucher, read about the Amazon debacle and contacted Sinor for resources when she realized that her university’s new electronic submission policy would result in her thesis being freely available online. After organizing with students in her cohort, Angwin brought their case to the administration. The school showed no sign of budging, so on the day Angwin and her classmates were scheduled to submit their theses to the digital repository, they declined.

“At that point I was just willing to walk away and not get my diploma,” Angwin says. “This was a program I invested two years of my life and $40,000 in—and it was my life story on the line.”

Later that day, the students in the cohort received an email from the university granting them permission to submit paperbound theses. Soon after, Goucher changed its policy to allow MFA students a 10-year embargo, after which access to their digital theses would be restricted to the campus community. Angwin now advises others considering MFAs to research what the program’s submission policy is before even applying.

For those already in an MFA program that requires electronic submission (without a permanent embargo option), she says, “Reach out to all your peers who have the same concerns, because there is power in numbers.”

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