

Hajrije Kolimja
Professor Morano
Professor Rooney
Senior Thesis Reflection
June 9th, 2017

Composing "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams"

At the beginning of my senior year at DePaul, I knew that I wanted to produce a creative project that was longer than any I had taken on before. I had grown weary and tired of one academic paper after another. Once autumn quarter ended, I missed the feeling of writing a story or a poem. Originally, I planned to resolve this pain by creating a series of short stories or a collection of about thirty or more poems for this Honors Senior Thesis. Even though these works would culminate into a quantity of work I had never done before, I did not feel like these kinds of forms would be the best use of my time at this point in my career. I had already written many poems and short stories / flash fiction pieces. What I hadn't done was write a longer short story to learn more about structure and outlining of characters and plot. In proposing and writing "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams," I sought to set aside a time for myself that allowed me to practice with the longer narrative form, as well as to think about this narrative within the larger context of a novel. I consulted a plethora of resources that were academic, experiential, and personal in order to come to the story that I have created.

Before writing the story, I knew I wished to create more representation of the Albanian-American experience, particularly within the context of Muslim women. Sure, these motivations sound selfish, considering that I am a Muslim Albanian-American woman myself, but selfishness is not always bad. It's a necessary component when one is trying to understand one's own experience. During the revision for my final draft of this story, I turned to YouTube to

look up authors to whom I could turn. I came across Téa Obreht, whose name I had seen but whose work I still had not read. She mentioned in her interview a piece of advice that a friend once told her. They had said that every author's first major work is autobiographical in some way. Only after they regurgitate all of their personal history can they mend and heal to take on different performances and perspectives in later works. This advice reassured me because I became concerned about how too-close-to-home some of my narrative felt. Hearing Obreht speak aided me in realizing that I was on the right track and that I needed to write about what I knew best and was most personal.

For much of my life, I had been very confused by American body politics—particularly as a child when I tried to fast for Ramadan while my parents thought I was silly and my classmates terrorized me over the practice. Looking back, I don't know if the fasting made me sick or if it was the words everyone threw at me. The American ideologies of “white is not an immigrant” and “white is not Muslim” impact me to this day. In “I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams,” I attempt to divulge the ways in which Albanian and American cultural expectations clash with one another. American body politics tend to overwhelm lived cultural experiences and values of people who have grown up in different, not typically Anglo-originated households. The divides that result from American discourse with regards to black and white, Christian and Muslim, man and woman, and so forth, are sometimes not translatable into the struggles of other cultures, similarly to how some languages have words and expressions that many others don't. For example, genocide was not justified in the Balkans due to race the way that Native American genocide and the slave trade were in the Americas. The people massacred in the Kosovan war, the genocide of Chameria in south Albania, or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, became victims out of

territorial, linguistic, cultural, and nationalistic differences. Of course, racial differences exist there, but race has not cultivated their histories in the same way as American history. These divisions in history and culture between the Balkan stories and the American-imposed body politics can be dangerous and harmful for those who have certain traumas they need to share but don't have a dialogue through which to share it. This discourse needs to be created, and "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams" is a first of many future creative works that will try to produce new meanings and vocabulary associated with typically silenced experiences.

Since January, much of the research I have performed has dealt heavily with Albanian history and culture. In Winter Quarter, I took my Honors Junior Multiculturalism Seminar on identity politics and was given the freedom to perform a genre analysis on my topic of choice. After visiting Albania this past December and discovering the awful ways in which the women in my family were treated by their husband's families, I became more concerned about this perpetual abuse and silencing of women in Albanian culture. I began to see this kind of silent, solely-sexualized, representation of women in all Albanian media—particularly in a gameshow called *Telebingo*, which can be found on YouTube. In my final paper, "Westernization as Self-Annihilation in Albania's *Telebingo*," I discovered the ways in which an Americanized model for women's bodies convinces Albanians that they are modernized—not oppressed under a kleptocracy—and no longer threatened under totalitarian regime, whether it be through empire or communism, now that they emulate a country that has not been subject to that kind of oppression. At the same time as I was writing for this class, I was also studying at the Newberry Library through the partnered undergraduate seminar with DePaul. In my time there, I read three plays from the 1700's on the Albanian war hero Skënderbeg. I produced an almost thirty-page

literary analysis on the Christian and masculine projections that the playwrights performed on Albanian culture and its women. The playwrights constantly depicted the women as the “weak sex” who required the love of a Christian man in order to survive in nature, which the playwrights also depicted as inherently Christian. If a woman chose to love a Muslim man, a person of “weak faith,” she would meet her demise. I presented on this analysis and argument at the Honors Student Conference, where I spent a few minutes discussing my findings and their poster-board components; I ended the presentation with a four or five-minute reading of the first few pages of my first draft of “I Sleep in the Devil’s Dreams.” Since then, the work has undergone hefty revisions as a result of feedback from Professor Morano, Professor Rooney, and others.

The first process of writing out the draft proved a very slow, probably due to the fact that I had been so immersed and involved with research that I had trouble turning on the creative switch in my brain. Additionally, I was unsure of how exactly to write a longer short story. I had created an outline of how I imagined my story would play out, yet I also knew that I would be following the narrative differently from the outline as I got to better know my characters. I had taken my first draft to a Writer’s Guild meeting a week prior to my first submission to Professor Morano and Professor Rooney. At the meeting, Professor Jennifer Finstrom of the WRD Department as well as Brendan Pedersen, who helps run the meetings, workshopped with me. They both provided me interesting interpretations that I had not all the way realized were present in my work, which helped to guide the rest of my narrative. Additionally, I made an appointment with a peer writing tutor, Lexi B., at the Writing Center. She read through the first twelve or so pages of that first draft and offered me the advice to supply Silvana with a stronger, more active

voice. Lexi's comments helped me to realize that Silvana needed and wanted to be more bold in the narrative—more so than I was letting her be. When I received Professor Rooney's comments and feedback, my suspicions about Silvana's bold character were confirmed. Professor Rooney reminded me to more overtly complicate and involve Silvana's desires. I felt that Silvana's wants and desires were present within the story, but I came to the conclusion that I did not supply Silvana a strong enough voice or bold enough actions that displayed what she truly wanted—her father to acknowledge and accept that she is a woman. When I sat down with Professor Morano a couple of days later, she advised me to put my story more in its present action rather than in flashback. Writing those past events was a necessary meditation in composing the story, however, I needed to bring to light more of Silvana's current preoccupations to make a more successful and active narrative. I do hope to continue revising this piece for submissions to literary journals, but I also am keeping in mind that I plan to turn this work into a larger novel, so I have kept all my previous drafts with their comments so that I have something to refer to when I am trying to cover a longer period of time in the novel. I am grateful to have had so many resources available to me throughout this revision process. Professor Morano's and Professor Rooney's notes were helpful in guiding my revisions toward Silvana's wants and the narrative's urgency; additionally, the advice I received from the Writer's Guild and from Lexi helped me to better interpret the narrative and how to give Silvana's voice more agency. With future revisions of all my work, I hope to seek out just as many if not more resources to sharpen the content of my stories and my style.

While all the resources I had available to me were helpful in guiding my revision, I also hadn't previously practiced revision the way I ended up revising "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams."

When I read through the story a couple of times, I realized I had to rewrite the entire story. I went into revision expecting to keep some parts I had already written, but I did not anticipate that I would be writing a whole other story. I'd always wanted to perform this kind of revision in previous workshop classes, but time never permit me the opportunity, and I had so much fear attached to starting a whole work over again. The revision of "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams" for the final submission was a liberating process. I had a better idea of what my characters were like and what they wanted, so I could add whatever details I knew of them throughout a more immediate and present storyline. However, I still have to work on these wants and desires in future drafts. For example, the "want" that comes through more prominently in this new draft is that of Silvana's desire to have her father ask her about her life while also maintaining a relationship with a man and the guilt associated with that relation. However, I'd like to expand on her career goals, and the wants and desires of her brother and her parents. That might be easier to accomplish in a novel, but I will be practicing more at a sentence-level how to reveal wants and desires of other characters without breaking the close third-person perspective, or other narrative point of view.

One of the most difficult elements to tame in this story turned out to be the perspective in which I told the story. Although narrative point of view sounds like a simple part for a writer to manage, I frequently had trouble (and *have* trouble) keeping the thoughts of my characters in one mind; in other words, I tend to jump between character points of views. As I revised for my final draft, I would ask myself the question of "is this from Silvana's perspective?" whenever I added details that signalled to me a potential perspective jump. I'm not sure what triggers prompted the question every time I had a perspective problem, but I feel that they had something to do with

instances in which I began to write “he thought” or “he liked,” when I wrote about Silvana’s father and Fati, or times where I thought to write “she wondered” or “she wanted,” when detailing Silvana’s mother. Even though I strove to mend these inconsistent character perspectives, I still have trouble differentiating sentences told from shifting points of view; for example, can I speak to a thought Silvana’s mother had if Silvana possesses the knowledge that her mother has this specific thought? Or would it make sense to bring up a thought or feeling Silvana’s mother has if Silvana does not know about it? I frequently tend to think of thoughts and feelings as characteristics very similar to those of a physical trait. As a result, I tend to employ these thoughts and feelings for particular characters where the narrative perspective should not (and cannot) allow for it. Additionally, I am working on not compromising physical descriptions with thoughts and action. For most of my life, I would add too much physical description to my narratives. After I arrived at the idea that I needed to pare down my writing a few years prior, I began practicing narratives dictated mostly by character actions. However, this practice came at the expense of valuable physical traits of my characters. Upon further revising this narrative and writing many others in my future, I hope to turn physical descriptions into a writing habit.

Another habit I hope to develop in my work is more diverse representation. In writing, “I Sleep in the Devil’s Dreams,” I set out on a mission to integrate Albanian American experience into a creative narrative so that I could offer more of a voice for Albanian people inside and outside of America. Because not very many people know about Balkan diaspora, tragedies, and cultures, I feel compelled to have my first work speak to some elements of that experience. I wanted my work to speak to important political themes, but I also wanted to integrate this more

consciously political drive with my magical realist style as well as humor. This endeavor, I believe, proved the most challenging in composing my story. It felt incredibly difficult to talk about real experiences and problems with some element of fantastical reality. After speaking with Professor Morano, she helped me with the idea that Silvana's lips could blossom into their plump, red state immediately after the kiss she shared with Jorge. Integrating this action and characteristic, I believe, helped me to create a more immediate magically realist world that was more seamlessly integrated into the plot. Additionally, I tried to create realistic, non-cheesy humor when involving scenes with Silvana and Jorge as well as with Silvana's Devil dreams. Upon rewriting this final draft for submission, I felt that I more successfully integrated humor and magical realist style into my narrative. I'm not sure I can concretely point to how I know it is more successful; after rereading this new version, I have an intuition that the story has improved and will continue to improve if I rewrite it once or twice more. Moving forward, I look not only to expand the story into a novel, but also to rewrite this version of the story to make it tighter and get a better rhythm for how I can intertwine magical realism, humor, and politics more naturally into a single narrative. I wish to create a meaningful story without seeking out to prove a certain "point" or convey one, undynamic message.

Throughout the process of writing this story, I tried to digest the magnitude and length of the narrative by writing in a form that I had been more familiar with. This practice would help me to divert from becoming too logical in my writing of "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams," and it would also allow me to perform different meditations on representation. I requested a special typewritten book, *31 Mornings*, from my friend Eric Plattner who I know through Poems While You Wait. After reading and rereading his poems, I became enamored not only with his writing,

but also the intimacy with which Eric composed (and composes) his poems. I wanted to create something as personal and meaningful for myself that I could share with others. I wrote a few poems to start a book, *Ruminations on the Home I Couldn't Grow Up in*, which would be poems also about Albania. However, I am beginning to wonder how I might branch out of my desire for Albanian representation and try to create a multiplicity of representations. I hope to produce a sense of community with this eventual chapbook, but I appreciate the way in which it helped me to get into my rhythm for writing the longest story I have written. The poems that I have created so far have allowed me to participate in more local readings around Chicago, such as through Shredded Mag and the Writer's Guild event with 14 East. Performing my work has become a helpful tool in cultivating my own writing, especially in "I Sleep in the Devil's Dreams" because it has caused me to be more aware of my audience. Sometimes, audience awareness can be nerve-wracking and terrifying, but the knowledge that writing is a performative act on many levels helps with creating a more dynamic narrative in a form with which one is mostly unfamiliar. I look forward to the challenge of writing in the form of a novel and creating longer chapters. I am interested to see how my characters will develop within the context of their own story and through an understanding of Albanian culture.

This desire to help form a voice for the Albanian community has, I believe, helped bolster up my willingness to search for community or to speak up in communities when it is necessary. I had become hopeful on Memorial Day weekend when I came across a piece titled, "My Albania" on the Paris Review's blog, the Daily. I saw the name of the author, Brian Cullman, and wondered what connection he could possibly have with *my* Albania. Turns out, he had no connections. He was just a man looking for Albanian music in the 1980s and wrote this

piece at around the same time, originally for *Spin* magazine, about different Albanian sayings and cultural practices that were grossly stereotypical and hurtful. The piece made me so upset and angry that I shook while writing a very long email to both Brian Cullman and Dan Piepenbring, the web editor for the Paris Review. I cancelled my subscription to the service. Brian had sent me an apology email that ended with “Sent from my iPhone.” I still fumed and lamented that this work was available to the world to read, and I was angrier that Dan hadn’t messaged me back. A week later, I received an email from Brian and Dan asking me to write a piece for the Paris Review’s the Daily about Albanian literature. Even though I was and am still deeply hurt by Brian’s piece that Dan recirculated, I was glad that the two reached out to create a more positive change in representation. Even more, I was proud that I had the guts to speak for my country and not internalize this inferiority or “other” complex that has been bubbling within me the moment I started school amongst kids who didn’t speak my language, couldn’t say my name, and always had grandparents and relatives to talk about and hug. I have a strong sense that my writing of “I Sleep in the Devil’s Dreams” allowed me to become more bold and confident in my feelings and thoughts. Now, I am grateful that my writing of this story and my mindfulness of my experiences—and my family’s experiences—have encouraged me to reach out to others when I believe whatever they’re doing is not right. I am excited to be able to see immediate change this summer or fall when Dan publishes my piece about Albania on the Paris Review’s website. Even if not too many people read that work, I’ll be happy that it exists as a testimony and that I’ll have formed some mentorship with and accept reparations from Brian and Dan as they provide me feedback on the piece while I write and rewrite it.

In composing “I Sleep in the Devil’s Dreams,” I have come to realize that the time I spend on a large creative project translates into outlets outside of the project itself. In order to write my narrative, I had to perform the research that culminated in my academic projects, “Westernization as Self-Annihilation in Albania’s Telebingo” as well as “Barbarian Love in the Skënderbeg Narrative of Eighteenth Century Britain.” The research I came to in these works helped me to obtain more conviction and confidence to tell an Albanian story—to validate myself as one authority of many in this particular experience. Additionally, I came to better value writing as a performative act that is informed by many different genres of writing. An awareness of my audience helps me to create a more dynamic and involved narrative than I would have otherwise. I also feel grateful to have received helpful and insightful feedback from both Professor Morano and Professor Rooney, whose words are going to be floating around in my subconscious every time I go to write a new chapter of this story or other work of fiction. Sharing my work with Writer’s Guild and the Writing Center helped me to better interpret what I was writing, but Professor Morano and Professor Rooney pointed to the elements of my narrative that I did not know were the direct sources of my anxieties. I look forward to rewriting this story and hopefully producing it into a narrative on a Fulbright grant that I will be applying to come autumn.