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Breann “Ellen” Watterson

Honors Capstone Reflection

7 May 2018

For my honors capstone project, I produced an original, fictional work of creative writing. Ultimately, I finished the semester with over one chapter of new material in this story, and gained a wealth of historical knowledge through various avenues that the project requires. This project, *Silvie Danger*, is in some regards a continuation of several pieces of creative fiction I have produced in my four years as a UM student and DHC scholar, and its influence on my future creative pursuits will stretch far beyond the five months I have been working on it this semester. In working on this capstone project, I experienced the DHC’s core values of community, experiential learning, initiative, and communication.

First, working with my mentor, Erin Saldin, and other faculty and peers in and beyond the DHC allowed me to form an intellectual and creative community for my creative work of historical fiction. The insight Erin Saldin provided in reading and editing my work formed a foundation for the independent work I did for my capstone. She shared her expertise in creating fictional works with me, and has always enthusiastically supported my ideas and my work. She contributed the kind of support necessary in completing a creative work: she allowed my ideas and my work to be what they were, while also suggesting ways I could edit the story to become the best version of itself without changing its core essence. Additionally, Erin Saldin helped foster a sense of community in the process of my honors project in the Senior Arts Showcase she organized and hosted in the DHC. This showcase brought together other creative writers and musicians in the DHC to publicly present our works. It proved to be a great

opportunity for me and my peers within the DHC to meet and enjoy one another's writings and musical compositions, which I greatly appreciated, since much of creative writing is a solitary pursuit.

Because many of the experiences which fulfilled my DHC requirements were outside of the honors college, much of my time in the DHC was made up of experiential learning. One experience in particular greatly informed my honors capstone even before I began working on it. The ten months I spent living and studying in Cork, Ireland, shaped my creative approach to my honors capstone. My two semesters in Ireland counted toward my DHC honors requirements for graduation. However, the value of that experience stretches far beyond simply fulfilling college requirements. The experience of leaving my Colorado home and my college home in Missoula for Ireland caused me to rethink my relationships with my home culture, country, and landscape. I did not know anyone in Ireland when I arrived, and the process of building a life and community of friends taught me much about my own relationships and community back home.

While learning and experiencing so much of Ireland's history firsthand, I found it hard to feel connected to a place and a culture I did not grow up in, and I felt like I could not seriously analyze or question a place I did not come from. This experience drew my interest back to my own country, as I wanted to engage in difficult cultural and historical debates that impact the world into the present moment. I felt, however, that focusing on my own country's history was how I wanted to engage in these historical and cultural questions. This experience I had in Ireland found its way into my creative writing capstone, as the narrator herself, although living in a different time and place (1840s New England), grapples internally with issues like slavery, women's roles, and working

conditions in early New England textile factories. My experiential learning in Ireland greatly impacted my way of thinking, which in turn impacted the way I constructed my narrator in my capstone project.

Third, my experience in a museum internship in the Old Sturbridge Village (OSV) allowed me to take creative risks in my honors capstone and, more generally, in my approach to daily life. I worked last summer as a historical interpreter in OSV, a living history museum in central Massachusetts, which meant that my work days consisted of demonstrating to the public what daily life was like in 1830s New England. I milked cows, sewed, knitted, cooked over a hearth, made butter and cheese, gardened, dyed yarn, and kept a nineteenth-century school, all while wearing 1830s clothing every day and working in a “village” made up of antique houses and structures. In composing my creative writing capstone, I took these experiences of mine and began to build a narrator based on the knowledge of early nineteenth-century life I gained. Where there were gaps in my historical knowledge, I took creative risks and filled in the blanks based on my experiences as a historical interpreter.

Additionally, representing an older way of life in OSV caused me to question my own lifestyle in ways I had not before. Seeing how average people functioned before electricity, refrigeration, cars, instant communication across long distances, and a host of other inventions, put my own life in perspective for me. It caused me to wonder about my relationship with such commonplace things like my phone, computer, car, or the electric lights I turn on and off every morning and night. It also caused me to wonder about our modern networks and systems and how inseparable they are from modern technology. I have not come to any great conclusions about life in nineteenth-century North America or my daily life in the twenty-first century, but I have been intellectually

inspired to pursue ideas of how the past might inform our modern approach to dealing with problems such as climate change, or how it could inform relationships between cultures in the present day. My college experience in a museum internship sparked these creative and intellectual thoughts which have shaped my capstone project and my view of my own twenty-first-century world.

These thoughts of how historical ways of life could address modern scientific and cultural problems like climate change relate to my last point: this creative writing capstone involved multiple disciplines and experiences in its formation. I produced a work of fiction, which required I draw on my experiences as a creative writing major at UM. The literature I encountered in English courses I took inspired the creative side of the project, while my history major and experiences at OSV formed the historical foundation on which I could build my story. One class required in my history program, for instance, did much to shape how I read and edit my creative writing. The course was purely intended to teach academic historical writing, but the skills of constructing a historical argument I gained in this advanced writing class allowed me to become a more analytical thinker towards my creative writing. The analytical side of studying history taught me to pay more attention to how I construct narratives in writing fictional stories.

My capstone project, *Silvie Danger*, as well as the array of experiences I had in my time at UM both in and beyond the DHC, have allowed me to experience the DHC's core values. My mentor, Erin Saldin, connected me to a community of writers and creative artist within the honors college. The firsthand experiences I had encountering Irish history while living and studying for a year in Cork, Ireland, caused me to question my own country's history and culture. Furthermore, the summer museum internship I

took part in during my college experience led me to think boldly in both creative and intellectual ways. Finally, my creative writing capstone project required communication between my multiple experiences and disciplines of study—mainly in this case, between my history and English majors. While my honors capstone can only officially be recognized as a creative writing project, it has in fact been influenced and informed by a host of other experiences in my time at UM.