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Geography 431
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For my creative piece, I created a “flipbook” demonstrating the transition Albanian women undergo when they become Albanian Sworn Virgins. Sworn Virgins are women who are primarily from Northern Albania and who, at a young age, take an oath of celibacy, and in doing so, societally transformed themselves into men. By taking this oath in front of twelve men, their celibacy allows them to avoid an arranged marriage (or the possibility of one), which transfers societal meaning onto them and they become men (Littlewood 45). As recognized males in their community, they are able to participate in the codified law as powerful beings with agency as opposed to powerless women lacking choices. This law that strongly influences their society is known as the Code of Lekë Dukagjini, or the Kanun, and it generates a highly patriarchal environment, “Patriarchy is assumed... marriage is ‘for the purpose of adding to the work force and increasing the number of children’... women are not involved in blood feuds... because a woman’s blood is not equal to a man’s... ‘A woman is a sack, made to endure’” (Post 53-54). With the Kanun’s lack of religious backing and affiliation, the choice to become a Sworn Virgin is then deeply rooted in Northern Albanian societal standards (Štulhofer and Sandfort 80). If a family lacks sons, if a familial male leader dies, or if a young girl wants a life of mobility, she may choose to take the oath as an act of self-empowerment and as a means to better her and/or her family’s position in society (Bilefsky). The only way to change her life is to change her gender.

Within the flipbook, by using dual male and female characters with opposite opacities, I am attempting to show how the mental and societal perceptions of the Sworn Virgins change with time. At a young age, a girl is societally and visibly only a woman. The only part of her that is a man now is her want of his power, agency, and mobility; he is only a silhouette in her mind. Therefore, in the opening pages of the flipbook, the female character is significantly more pronounced than that of her male counterpart. Conversely, by the time the Sworn Virgin is an old woman, she is societally and visibly a man as these women dress like men do and cut their hair short. Likewise, at the end of the flipbook, the

man is the one with the opaque body. Here, the only parts of the Sworn Virgin that are female are her unchangeable reproductive system and the memory, the silhouette, of her female past. She is able to do this, to become a man in the eyes of society, because as anthropologist Predrag Šarčević explains, “a person wearing a mask during a ceremony takes on the identity represented by the mask” (Šarčević 141). In other words, her promise to remain celibate in exchange for manhood is the key that allows her, and society, to accept her masculine mask.

Although my piece does not overtly relate to age specifically, the transitions between the pages are meant to illustrate how the initial strength of the female identity fades away and is then replaced by a stronger male identity. On the third page, after the peachy, skin-toned color is removed and only the high- and lowlights remain, the woman’s reproductive system emerges because even after these women’s outer bodies become masculine via societal acceptance and perception, their inner bodies betray them. I specifically chose to include the female reproductive system because in documentary, *Sworn Virgins* by Elvira Dones, two Sworn Virgins independently explained how much they loathed menstruating. When Dones asked Lil Gjeluçi, one of the Sworn Virgins, “Have you had your periods, like all woman?”, Gjeluçi responded, “Yes, but not anymore, thank goodness. They drove me crazy. They drove me crazy. I really hated them, but I couldn't become a man physically, could I? I tried very hard, though!” Throughout the documentary, Dones interviewed many Northern Albanian townspeople, and they all referred to the Sworn Virgins, including Gjeluçi, with female gendered pronouns even though they considered them men. In this regard, Gjeluçi’s reproductive system did more than betray her biologically; it betrayed her societally because no matter what oath she took, she would still be called “woman”, “her”, and “she”. Although she is equal to men, she is still different from men.

In addition to changing the opacity of the man and woman in the flipbook, I also altered the background of the flipbook to represent the aged component of this tradition, the complexities of Albanian society that would cause a woman to become a Sworn Virgin, and the emotional aftermath of the choice to become a Sworn Virgin. I specifically aged the paper from which the book was made with tea and soy sauce to demonstrate how becoming a Sworn Virgin is an older tradition that is thought to be

less prevalent now (Dones), especially as Southern Albanian society is more egalitarian gender-wise (Vullnetari 170), representing a spatial divide in national patriarchal power and its degradation. To further emphasize the spatial location of the patriarchal society that generates the need for Sworn Virgins, the image behind the figures on each page is an image of Northern Albania.

With each page, I also added another element to the background both in terms of additional charcoal around the central image and additional watercolor around the flipbook's edges. In doing so, there is a contrast between the minimal treatment in the beginning and the overworked treatment at the end. This is meant to be analogous to the massive synthesis of factors that accumulated over history to create the environment that fosters patriarchy and of factors that accumulate over a young woman's life to make her want to become a Sworn Virgin. In terms of the historical factors, the Kanun cannot be overlooked. Although it is true that the Southern Albania is more egalitarian than the North, the Kanun's influence has increased since the 1990s, in the North particularly, "The *kanun* structured social and familial relations before the Communists took power; the Communists repressed the *kanun*; after Communism [in the 1990s], the *kanun* has been revived and is contributing to the subordination of women... in contemporary society" (Nixon 110). Here, the suppression of the Kanun and then resurgence of it has contributed to a society that promotes patriarchy, which influences these women, adding to the reasons why they may consider becoming Sworn Virgins. As for personal factors that accumulate causing a girl to become a Sworn Virgin, they include many of the effects of having a highly patriarchal society where woman cannot vote, hold a gun, participate in blood feuds, or inherit land and where they are expected to run households, to reproduce, and to be property.

In regards to the emotional impact of becoming a Sworn Virgin, I chose to represent its dualistic nature using the increasing number of tears in the pages. In Dones' interviews, two Sworn Virgins stood out to me: Sanie Vatoci and Lul Ivanaj. Vatoci discusses how she regrets her choice, commenting on her want for a partner and the loneliness she now endures do to her vow of celibacy, "I realized I had made a mistake. When you get older, you understand more, and you change your mind... I began to wonder: why don't I have a partner? Why am I acting like a man?" Yet, Ivanaji felt as though she had to become a

Sworn Virgin to gain agency and mobility, but it cost her companionship, a loss that appears to eat away at her. Here, the torn pages represent the wear, the hardship, and the degradation that come, at times, from choices that seem necessary at the time when they are made. Conversely, Ivanji did not regret her decision. Proud of her choice and with no regret, the sequential increase in the torn paper represents the honored ware of a cherished book. When pages age and become marked with use, it is a sign of their constant importance and influence. Likewise, for Ivanji whenever her life is marked by her choice, those impressions are viewed as positive reminders of what she did for herself.

The idea behind the Sworn Virgins, women becoming men, speaks to two course topics: Gaga Feminism and the public vs. private divide. In regards to Gaga Feminims, Halberstam preaches a more dynamic understanding to looking at the homo-hetero binary and expanding our minds past its restrictive, two category maximum. Specifically, Halberstam claims, “We are too confident about the operationally of the homo-hetero binary and the male/female divide, and because we are sure about that these realms are separate, we do not think about how the changes in one sphere create changes in other spheres,” (Halberstam 81). In the case of the Sworn Virgins, although they clearly break the homo-hetero binary with their societal switching of gendered roles and their mandated nonsexual behavior, it is not as much a case of changing of spheres but rather, a channel allowing the fusion of spheres. These Sworn Virgins leave their lives of women to become men. Although the option of becoming a Sworn Virgin provides women with the opportunity for self-empowerment, which represents a change in the female sphere, it is done so at the expense of placing the male sphere on a pedestal. In this regard, the change in spheres is not what is to be celebrated but rather it is the connection between the two. Now, women have the opportunity to get to that raised pedestal.

The private vs. public sphere contrast is also relevant to the Sworn Virgins. As described by sociologist Lekë Sokoli in Dones’ documentary, “The woman used to take the oath of virginity in front of twelve men of their clan, who would make sure the promise was kept. The oath of virginity was a very serious matter, and as soon as it was solemnly taken in front of the clan, it was no longer a private matter, but became a public affair.” Rather than solely becoming a public affair because the

woman's transition is only valid through outward social acceptance, the public oath of virginity represents another way in which the status of a Sworn Virgin is belongs to the public sphere. As described in *Forced to Care*, the public sphere is defined as male and the private sphere is defined as female. Here, the woman are changing not only gender spheres as Halberstam would have it, they are also changing social spheres.

In regards to the politics of representation, I had not given the concept much thought until reading this prompt and I was not sure how it related to my project until I actually began to work on it. One of the first thoughts that came to mind was the idea of gendered body ideals. As I was removing the paper from my gel transfer to transfer it to the aged, treated paper, I realized the stock images I used for the anatomical bodies were very clearly linked to representation. When searching for those images, I used key words such as "anatomical", "male", "female", and "body". I did not type words like "idealized", "muscular", or "thin", yet those words are the ones that can be used to describe the images I found. Because those were the words that were found, they become synonymous with, if not dominant over, the words I intended to use. Although this form of representation does not relate to my project's final product, it is an undeniable component of its creation. Likewise, as I was differentiating the female images on pages two and three to make the one on page three less saturated, I realized how I articulate my art process in this project is entwined with the politics of representation. To build up the man and woman's complexions, I used four pencils: a white (highlight), two medium tones, and a brown (dark) one. For the woman, I used all four pencils with lots of shading on page one to develop her the most, while I used minimal shading on page two even though I used all four pencils. For the third page, I only used the highlight and the dark pencil. The two medium pencils were peachy in tone, so symbolically, the removal of these colors and the addition of the female reproductive organs is meant to be analogous to removing skin and only seeing the body's interior. As I was trying to think about how I would explain this, I realized I was describing the medium toned pencils as "skin colored". Although light peach does describe my skin color, it does not describe all skin colors, and it dawned on me that the politics of representation has as much to do with the process of a piece as it does with the actual end product.

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