

Excerpt from the Dakopeta Project

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Abstract

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The following *Excerpt from the Dakopeta Project* is a purely auditory experience for reasons that are further gone into in the project's *Statement of Work* on the following pages. What the whole project attempts to achieve, through the usage of fantasy and travel writing tropes, is to create an unreal place that lays over the one we inhabit, a place that shares the geography of this real place, shares names of it, shares languages and customs and histories with reality, but that is also, necessarily, alien. Because of this, the project is, in many ways, about a real place, about Western Washington State and parts of Southern British Columbia, everything north and west of the Columbia River and south and east of the Fraser River, but, while it is a more or less reliable sonic atlas of the places that exist between those rivers and the Pacific Ocean, it is an unreliable sonic guide to the customs, people, animals, and stories that do not really exist there.

The excerpt which makes up this thesis, attached as a supplementary file, covers two folktales – a story about a woman who falls in love with a ghost and a story about the natural disasters that separate the nation of Dakopeta from the real places that exist within it – the description of a city of South Vancouver, an interview taken from a Nevadan who claims that there is civil unrest in the western states, one song – *When the Mountains Speak* – descriptions of travel, and a description of the place of telling, of a castle in the barony of Defiance.

Statement of Work on the Following Excerpt from the Dakopeta Project

I don't remember exactly where I read it, but I know roughly when I read it. It was before I took my first trip to New York City. I read that the human conception of "now" was roughly 33 seconds around the actual present moment, 16ish seconds before a moment and 16ish seconds after it. It was in relation to music, I think, something about how most songs traditionally took at least sixteen seconds (eight bars in a 4/4 time-signature at 120 beats per minute to eight bars of a 6/8 time-signature at roughly the same speed) to immerse a listener in the song before the singing began. These at least sixteen second introductions in traditional songs were meant to build, essentially, a sonic place a listener could temporarily occupy, making their "now" completely within the music before the song's story (lyrics) started.

Sonic places, I remember thinking, there's a concept.

My understanding of this theory, even if my understanding of this theory became more fantastic than real as I thought around it, inspired a project I would undertake while I was in New York City called *This Turns Into an Arbor*. This project, or, at least the act of working on *This Turns Into an Arbor*, would, in some ways begin my inspiration for *Dakopeta*.

Here is what I imagined *This Turns Into an Arbor* was supposed to be:

I recorded several clips of things in New York City – street performances, lectures, or even just the acoustics of people talking in a space – and, from these, tried to make a sonic atlas of New York. I knew I wanted to work with the idea that since there was nothing to see, I could cast New York City as metaphorically anything, and since, to me, exploring New York City for the first time felt like exploring some massive, confusing, urban wilderness, I wanted to work with the metaphor of the city being somehow synonymous with a forest. In brief, the project of *This*

Turns Into an Arbor was originally meant to be a sort of audio journal where both the journalist and the listener are never quite sure if they're in a forest or a city.

Of course, like most initial conceptions of things, this isn't what *This Turned Into an Arbor* turned into. I remember the exact moment that I began to feel guilty for covertly recording things. I was sitting in a room with some friends, just recording the acoustics of the place, when one of them asked me how my project was going. And I remember feeling ashamed that he had no idea that I had been working on it at that very moment and that he'd just made his innocent question a part of the project. It was like an uncomfortable breaking of the fourth wall – not a person asking, from a journal entry, how the journaling was going, but the journal itself asking, totally unaware of its role in the project.

So, the project of *This Turned Into an Arbor* changed, but, while what it turned into is irrelevant to the actual poetics of *Dakopeta*, I bring up its original tune because it kept ringing in my ears. I thought about a character who would feel guiltless where I had felt guilty – a character that could record people without their consent and use his recordings for his own end. At first, I thought of this character as a kind of one dimensional villain. Eventually, when my own shame died off a little more and I stopped being so hard on myself, this character became Anthony Mellivores.

In the meantime, I read. A book which I had brought on the plane with me *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* by Italo Calvino, led me to *Invisible Cities* by the same, which lead me to *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Something must have clicked in my brain at that point, and I began to form a rough reading diet that would help me think about how I would write *Dakopeta*. I read a lot of Washington State's history, *Puget's Sound* by Murray Morgan, the relevant articles from *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* and *The Journals of George Vancouver*, and a whole lot of

Pacific Northwest Native American legends about the mountains jumping around and marrying one another. I then thought, well, if I'm writing a travelogue about Washington, it can't be the Washington I know, I'm too familiar with that Washington. So, I began to read travelogues that took place in fantasy worlds. I re-read *The Fellowship of the Ring* by Tolkien and *The Earthsea Trilogy* by Le Guin as well as her complete *Orsinia* when that came out. I read a wonderful book which I had bought in New York City called *Kalpa Imperial* by Angélica Gorodischer several times. And I read volumes and volumes of folk and faerie tales.

Then, I was in Tennessee for a family reunion. The only book I'd brought with me was a copy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I didn't read it immediately as one of my habits is to buy books from all the places I travel. There were two bookstores in the town where we were staying in Tennessee, but neither of them had more than ten fantasy books put together – *The Lord of the Rings*, *Twilight*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Outlander* were pretty much all I could find. A sort of best hits of fantasy. My inability to connect with any of these books, not only the genre fiction, but every other book as well, made me feel exceptionally alienated from the place I was staying.

Then, it was like there was this familiarity of the bookstore, but, upon closer examination, I couldn't find any of the familiar names or faces that I was used to seeing, and those names and faces that were recognizable felt oddly changed by their alien climate. The bookstores were selling "redneck" memorabilia: weird T-shirts that seemed vaguely racist or sexist to me, confederate flags, moonshine flavored breath mints, and hip flasks with purposely misspelled one liners. And these knick-knacks clashed with my conception of what a bookstore was. And it wasn't really the merchandise that alienated me; I'd seen it in places all over Tennessee and was able to shrug it off then, not dismissing it, but accepting that it wasn't for me. Others, even folk

in my family, were able to engage with these knick-knacks and even laugh with all of them. But... it was like.... when there was moonshine sold next to books, even though I had no dislike for moonshine, I felt discordant, like only two of the three of us, books, me, and moonshine, could exist in a place at once. And since the books and the moonshine had already existed in that bookstore perfectly well without me, I must've been the part of the equation that didn't work. I couldn't even connect with *Twilight*, a vampire story set in Washington that everyone from Washington has a familiarity with, ashamed, beloved, or otherwise.

Do you know how sometimes you can have new ideas that seem so obvious when you try to put them into words? I had an idea like that in the middle of the romance section of a bookstore in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. It was an idea about how alienated familiar things can be when they are put next to un-familiar things.

I decided to just read *The Left Hand of Darkness* then and was already thinking about alienation via familiarity, not hating Tennessee, but being so effected by my own inability to access its culture and frustrated by my own resistance against accessing it that I had to develop complicated feelings about it as a place, and already thought of myself in it "now," already hopelessly immersed in it, with my ticket out of it being so future that I couldn't even consider it.

Then *The Left Hand of Darkness* was kind of about that.

In a way, *The Left Hand of Darkness* was a perfect template for me of what a speculative fiction travelogue should look like, and I would cite it and *Invisible Cities* as two of the three fictions that are the most predominant influences on the creation of *Dakopeta*.

At this point, I had done a little writing on *Dakopeta*. I'd made some maps of the world as well, where the Western Nations' borders were on the sinking North American continent. I'd

written some folk stories and songs that I didn't think would really be used in the text, but more as errata about the world that I could refer to. I'd even figured out the structure – one man, who recorded things, telling another man his record of his travels within this alienly familiar nation.

After returning from Tennessee, I began revamping the writing I'd done, upping the feelings of alienation in my character, but also, seeing as I had two timelines to play with, contrasting that with the familiarity he seems to have with the geography, the economy, the ecology and territorial elements of every alien place he has visited. This Anthony character then started to become more sympathetic. Before Tennessee, he'd still been a villain, holding his listener imprisoned, I thought (at that time I liked the idea of a story capturing the people in its telling), but after Tennessee I realized that it was Anthony who was imprisoned, not in a room like his listener, but in a place that seems foreign and familiar to him at the same time.

When the project finally clicked for me – clicked for me in a way beyond, fantasy travelogue set in a fantasized Washington state – I was touring the United Kingdom and Iceland over the course of nearly two months.

I'd been to Europe on a long trip once before. On that trip, I'd brought a lot of books and then bought a lot of books and came back with a suitcase I'd had to belt together because of all the books it contained. To mitigate the overstuffing of my luggage, I tried to bring as few books with me this time. So, in theory, I could buy the same number of books as last time without breaking any suitcases (in practice this only made me think "I could probably fit another book in with my socks" and I still did break a suitcase). I invested in audiobooks instead. One of these was a fantasy called *The Wise Man's Fear* by Patrick Rothfuss. This audiobook infuriated me.

At first, I was just annoyed because *The Wise Man's Fear* is so much about music, but whenever a song came up in my listening, the lyrics to that song were just read off in a tone like someone reading a passage from the bible. While I was listening to it, it felt to me that this writer knew so much about music that he should have just actually written the songs and, if it was awkward to transition into music, I felt, it wouldn't be more awkward than the way that it was done now – from prose straight into lyrics – only newer and without listeners used to it yet.

Then, I became a little let down because the audiobook just wasn't very “produced” in general. The plot of the book is reminiscent of *The Voyages of Marco Polo* or the way I'm setting up *Dakopeta* – most of the action takes place in the past and is told by a character telling his story. I thought, I remember, for a book that is thinking so much about how stories are told, instead of written down and read later (there is even a scene of the character narrator looking through pages of a book that tells the story of his life that he'd tried and failed to write before he began the telling), it seems that so little production is put into the actual telling of the story (I mean here, there is only one voice, no matter how many levels of narration there are. The protagonist, who is telling the story, is voiced by the same actor as the narrator narrating his telling of the story and the other characters listening to his story. Despite all of these “voices” having totally different, written voices, they all have the same spoken voice).

Finally, I noticed something that must've been irking me the whole time – the spaces between each line that the voice actor reading *The Wise Man's Fear* inserted into the story. They take up eight seconds in places! That's half of my conception of now in a constructed silence!

Flying back from the Europe I finished listening to *The Wise Man's Fear*. I was exhausted. I was getting sick. I'd been away from home for nearly two months and the weight of all the other places I'd visited was over-stimulating my imagination, and I finished it and I realized that,

while I was criticizing *The Wise Man's Fear* for all those things, I could be criticizing my own *Dakopeta* project for them in the same breath. On a plane, after being awake for nearly a full day, landing in LAX to go through their god-awful customs I realized I was going to remain frustrated by this unless I did something. Then I resolved to write *Dakopeta* as an audiobook.

If I started out hesitating at this prospect (I think the way I framed my epiphany to everyone I told was “I think that I might want to write *Dakopeta* as an audiobook... maybe.”) I very quickly began to fall in love with the idea, because it fits me. There are things that I am besides a writer – a musician, a film maker, a sound recordist and engineer – and in working on *Dakopeta* I've been able to stretch all of those muscles and build on some others that I'm excited to keep using.

After I decided that this was definitely the form that *Dakopeta* was going to take, I began to do more research, not just reading books, but listening to more of them with as well (Neil Gaiman's fully voice acted *American Gods*, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* cycle, Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* cycle, M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*, etcetera). I also listened to some radio play adaptations of books (a BBC production of *The Left Hand of Darkness* was particularly helpful), and some folk music concept albums (*The Hazards of Love* by The Decemberists, *Hadestown* and *The Child Ballads* by Anais Mitchell, *The Queen of Hearts* by Offa Rex). I even listened to an audiobook that was, like *Dakopeta* is, written to be an audiobook (*Forest of Memory* by Mary Robinette Kowal).

Next, I began to put together a team. First, I talked to Ryan Beard and Paul Richter about being my Anthony and Primary Narrator and, because I was unsure how able I would be to take on a project as big as writing and producing an audiobook, I recorded a test chapter with them. It was a simple set-up. I wasn't too worried about sound bleeding or anything like that. I just had a

shotgun microphone (the kind of microphone usually used for recording on film sets – very directional, not good at getting a space but good at getting voice), a living room, and a stack of papers for my actors to read. I spent a night with each of them, had each of them read both parts, telling them that I would decide later who would be who. Then I edited it, borrowing the permissions of my partner's business's Adobe Premiere (a program typically used for editing movies, but one that I'd become comfortable editing all sorts of things in), and spent a total of about 6 hours cutting and trying different edits.

There's something very satisfying about editing recorded clips. It becomes so much more puzzling than editing a word document. There is a limit to everything one can use. All I could use was in front of me and I just had to make it work. It's harder than just writing but making a rough cut or a final cut is so much more satisfying because you've experienced that struggle. You know how many things didn't work before you found the one that did.

After I put together this first recording, I began assembling my music team. This, I'm sure, sounds a lot more interesting than it actually was. I started playing with a percussionist named Nathan Blanchard, and I believe the only instruction I gave him was to try and make his drum set sound like several different people playing drums at once – the crier's band, who my music team and I portray in the audiobook, I conceived of as consisting of at least ten people and with an open invitation for others to come in, bang on drums, and strum on harps. I then involved Riley Davidson – who mainly plays a twelve-string guitar, but who occasionally will take my baritone guitar from me (the strings tuned to BEADF#B instead of EADGBE) and play on that instrument better than I can – Kelly Marsh –viola, violin, cello, and sometimes a second viola, violin and cello if the songs call for it – and Maxwell Turner who plays a beautiful acoustic bass and probably writes my favorite harmonies in each song.

My goal with the music was to make it feel as un-composed as possible – which is much harder than it seems. Writing the lyrics, I looked at Rudyard Kipling poems from his books *Rewards and Faeries* and *Puck of Pook's Hill* and borrowed from them meter, rhyme structure and, occasionally, in the cases of the songs *When the Mountains Speak* and *The Blue Wood Way* a line or the subject matter of the original poem (from *An Astrologer's Song* and *The Brookland Road* respectively). Then, in rehearsals (which were weekly affairs in which, at most, only four of the five of us were able to attend) we practiced these songs with an ear to make their melodies, harmonies and rhythms as accessible as possible while still being catchy and interesting to listen to. Most of them rely heavily on chromatic melodies (where the chord progressions used either take half steps up a chromatic scale or down it, even playing the notes that wouldn't exist naturally in a scale) and use traditional structures – either: verse-verse-chorus-verse-chorus, verse-chorus-verse-chorus, or a sequence of verses without a refrain.

Once music had begun being worked on, I began to cast my female characters – Elena Salish and Coda Defiance are voiced now by Sarahann Rickner and Amber Celletti respectively – and, after filling my cast, I made a decision about which excerpt from *Dakopeta* would make a good example of the work that all of us are doing on this project.

Recording this second rough was very different from the first. I had moved and had to find a new space to record – I have a relatively quiet basement now, but it's also where the cats who came with the house live and they are relatively anti-quiet – I upgraded my mic to something that would be better to capture the sound of a space as well – I use an omnidirectional mic now, it sounds better, but picks up more, such as the aforementioned cats – and I needed to have much more directed sessions with my actors – Paul, voicing Anthony, and Amber, voicing Coda, both have multiple characters that they must do voices for, there are accents to consider and breaths

and emotional responses that I've tried to write into their lines. Some changes to the story was made organically and off of a written page of text. I was open to my actors telling me that they didn't think that their character would say a line as I had written it or that a paragraph didn't fit the cadence in the way they had conceived of it being spoken. These dialogues, which I mention having with my voice actors, but I, of course, had with my music team as well, are ultimately what made me want to hide the scripts in this selection and make it be purely an auditory experience.

In the excerpt from *Dakopeta* that you will listen to now, two folktales are told – a story about a woman who falls in love with a ghost and a story about the natural disasters that made the nation of Dakopeta – a city, the city of South Vancouver, is described, an interview is taken from a Nevadan who claims that there is civil unrest in the western states, one song is sung – *When the Mountains Speak* – travel is described, and a description of the place of telling, of a castle in the barony of Defiance, is given. I believe, all in all, these three chapters have probably taken me at least one hundred hours of work to produce up to the state they are in now, but, rather than being exhausted by that number, I'm ready to work through the next nine hundred hours, the next eight songs, twenty-one folk tales, and however many cities and interviews and descriptions I've written to be read aloud. I am confident that I will keep feeling this optimism until the book is recorded, until the next book is recorded, until the series is finished, until I've explored this medium of telling as far as its conclusion and I can finally enjoy silence again.

Here is a link to where the thesis is currently being hosted on Soundcloud.com:

<https://soundcloud.com/tomm-mccarthy/excerpt-from-the-dakopeta-project/s-QvcXI>

The audio for this thesis project can also be accessed as a supplementary file submitted with the document.