

Adam Venrick

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Senior Research Reflection

Swimming in the Shallows: Reflecting on a Podcast Called *Dry Land*

Going into my time at Denison, I knew that it was more than likely (almost completely likely) that my senior research project would inevitably be done in the department of theatre. What I never expected was that at the time of my graduation, I would no longer be working under the Theatre/Cinema double major, under which I had begun my college career. At the end of my sophomore year, I dropped the second major and replaced it with a minor in Anthropology/Sociology. And though I knew that I would not be doing senior research explicitly in this subject, I was determined to find some way to cross comedic performance with some of the topics discussed in classes regarding Anthropology and Sociology. As a result, we now have this work, which comprises the first season of a possible four-season long podcast called *Dry Land*.

Making *Dry Land* was a complete accident. It began its life as a forty-page one man show called *Confessions of a Former Sea Monster*, which I wrote in February of my Junior year, thinking that it could serve as a play for the next year's possible fringe festival. After the pandemic came and in person performance became a question and not a stated fact, I knew that I would have to rethink how performance could work in my senior project. I already had an interest in podcasting and audio content, having worked for seven of my eight semesters as a DJ on the campus radio station (The Doobie). Ultimately, the idea that became *Dry Land* was a spur of the moment suggestion I made to Dr. Mark Evans Bryan, my advisor, during our first meeting of the year. I

pitched it as a “podcast about a person who started life as a sea monster and now lives among humans.” And then I added: “It might also be a musical. We’ll have to see.”

Dry Land was not the only idea I had intended to pitch to Dr. Bryan that day, but it was the only one we talked about and by the end of our meeting, I knew it was the project I could devote my senior year to. And so I began work.

Dry Land as it is today is a twice-monthly podcast (every other Saturday) which began with a double-episode season premiere on October 17, 2020. It is narrated by and follows the life of one Will Hughes, a young man who, as a baby, was turned into an amphibious fish monster due to reckless cosmetic experimentation, and who is turned back into a human as an adult. Will is enrolled in a college and has his life financed by the company responsible for all this as a form of silencing and is forced to begin to connect with the outside world. He is guided on this journey by his two friends Jess and Noah (who are guest-voiced by two Denison students/alums Ariel Russell and Ethan McAtee) and his therapist, Dr. Ballard (guest voiced by Vail Artist in Residence Michelle Schroeder-Lowery).

In creating *Dry Land*, I wanted to focus on topics relating to Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy and Religion (in keeping with the liberal arts), all while creating an absurdist college comedy, and blending these topics with genres including sci-fi, horror, romance and magical realism. There is original music in several of the episodes, as I felt that this would be a useful alienation effect, and there are episodes involving a cult of personality forming around an R.A., a search for God in a hospital staffed entirely by incompetent doctors, the existence of a secret government agency comprised of librarians, and the pressures of belonging to a “typical American family” all while staying true to themes of guilt, trauma, institutional abuses, coming of age, the burden of leadership and the all important question of what it is that makes us human. It

was refreshing too, to look at this from Will's perspective as it allowed me a chance to look at contemporary life from a more objective, outsider's lens.

And while I don't think that a definitive answer is ever offered to that question, I do know that the show would not exist as it does had I not taken an ANSO class taught by Dr. John Soderberg called: "Human Origins and Prehistory" which examines the many neuroses and quirks that define humans and our surprising need for community with each other. In the end, there was something incredibly valuable about making this project during a pandemic as it allowed me to keep going, to consider how much my life has been shaped by other people, even while working alone, and to creature a unique and valuable challenge for myself as a performer.