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Proposal for Honors Thesis (Creative Work)

Generation Liminal:

Stories from the Cusp

The tradition of writing the stories of a generation took off in the early 20th century, as rapid progress began dividing age groups faster and faster. From Ernest Hemingway's depictions of the experiences of the shell-shocked Lost Generation to Jack Kerouac's semi-fictional interactions with the wandering souls of the Beat Generation, generational writing has long been uniquely tied to Western--especially American--experience. The generation, then, acts as a socially constructed, catch-all identifier, arbitrarily defining the attributes and experiences of various age groups. Through a form-defying collection of poetry, vignettes, lyrics essays, and short stories, I intend to contribute to the tradition of generational writing while also critiquing it. In this paper, I examine generations as constructed, the outliers of this construct, and methods in which writing can capture existence in the in-between.

Over the course of the past decade, the media has become hyper-focused on Millennials and, more recently, Generation Z, though there has been some dispute over where the generational barrier is. While some agree that it is generally somewhere between 1995 and 2000 (Bromwich; Kane; Tolentino), others propose that this age group is actually their own "cusp" generation, formed by unique historical and technological circumstances (Hertz). These "cuspers" are not only a liminal micro-generation—all at once both and neither Millennial and Gen Z, caught in generational and social limbo—but they are also at a liminal period in their

lives, their transitional years from adolescence into adulthood, in which they must make important decisions that will shape of the rest of their lives.

As mentioned, this micro-generation is often completely disregarded by media platforms, resulting in a widely underrepresented and unheard group of young adults who are unique from the larger generations into which they are usually absorbed (i.e. Millennials and Gen Z). This project aims to give voice to this group by the simple act of listening. While I am part of this generation, I only have my own experiences and my own city to write for right now. Through this project, I do not aim to become the voice of my generation, a title that implies that my experiences can “sum up” the experiences of my generation at large. Rather, I would like to showcase the voices of my generation. Following in the footsteps of Jack Kerouac—a “cusper” from an earlier generation—I am planning to take my own time “on the road” to observe and inhabit the spaces that this micro-generation function in across the United States in order to further understand them. Through my writing, I hope to promote the same kind of understanding that I am seeking (via travel) within the general population of Baby Boomers, Millennials, Gen Z-ers, and any other person, independent of their generational ties, who is willing to listen as I will. Moreover, I hope that fellow cuspers will see this as an invitation to rethink the forms that the narratives of our lives assume. I will be challenging my generation to raise their voices and to push past the boundaries of expectation, of definition.

Ultimately, this project is not restricted by the present moment of generational understanding (and misunderstanding). It seeks to move past this cusp generation in order to expose generational categories as arbitrary and exclusionary. Generations act as stabilizing entities, almost necessarily connected to imperialism and capitalism. This can be seen most clearly in the titles of articles on Millennials, which reveal the economic lens through which generations are often viewed: “Why Millennials Aren’t Saving Enough Money to Retire”, “Who

Are the Millennial Shoppers? And What Do They *Really* Want?”, and “Millennials Have Starved Off Another Old-School Industry” (Kachroo-Levine; Donnelly, Scaff; Settembre). The cusp generation, however, functions outside of the generational construct and proves that identity cannot be completely defined by age group, time period, and society at large.

The material of this compendium will be based upon my travel across the United States, where I will explore how this micro-generation functions within the spaces they inhabit with the help of a cusper “guide” in each city. I will accompany these “guides” to school/work, meet those in their social circles (effectively introducing me to more cuspers of the city), travel through the city as a cusper, and even stay with them for the period of time that I will be there. These guides will be from historically silenced populations (whether that be females, racial minorities, those in the LGBTQ+ community, etc.) in order to veer from the heteronormative, masculine, white narrative that has been the loudest voice—within the Western world, as well as within literature (especially generational literature)—for many years. This will also call attention to the groups that generational assumptions tend to exclude.

Before delving into the worlds of these cuspers, it is important to have a foundational, practical, and theoretical background. As this work draws from a large variety of works and theories in the body of literature, a comprehensive reading list is necessary before breaking ground on this project. Over the course of this past semester, I have explored many realms of my discipline and feel well prepared to initiate the project.

It was first important to gain a working understanding of the texts that have come before mine. As previously mentioned, *On the Road* is a seminal work of generational literature from which I drew inspiration for the writing process (though my work will veer further into the world of

fiction than Kerouac's), the structure of my collection, and the central location of the narrator in the text. While the majority of my work will home in on other people in my micro-generation, it is important to remain reflexive. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* provides a framework for understanding the idea of a city, as well as confronting again the idea of reflexivity; Calvino's main narrator, Marco Polo, never speaks of his hometown because, he says, "Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice." While I will discuss my hometown in the final section, it is important to realize that everything I write is filtered through my own identity.

Over the course of the past few months, I have explored a number of works in the genres and forms that I hope to incorporate into my compendium. One of the first forms that I was drawn to was the fairytale, especially fairytale adaptations. Fairytales on their own provide snapshots of both the concerns and values of the time period in and specific group for which they are written. Their adaptations not only have the ability to update value systems and include contemporary problems, but also comment on the tradition that came before them. In this sense, I intend to provide the fairytales of my cusp generation while also critiquing the stories that we grew up hearing. In anticipation of this aspect of the piece, I have read a great deal of Angela Carter's collected works, including "The Bloody Chamber", "The Company of Wolves", "The Tiger's Bride", and many more. These have been framed by her essay "Notes from the Front Line," in which she states that she is "all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode," which is to say that these adaptations of fairy tales may appropriate old forms in order to supply new meanings.

Angela Carter also experiments with what could be considered a cousin to the fairytale genre in the stories "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe", "Black Venus", and "The Fall River Axe Murders". These pieces place key figures in history--Edgar Allan Poe, Saartjes Baartman, and Lizzie Borden--into stories of her own. Like the fairytale adaptation, these stories rely on

previous understanding of the context surrounding these figures and their lives, while providing updating them, making them fresh, and framing them in such a way that the reader not only relates but finds new meaning in the figure they once knew. In a way, Carter elevates history to myth, historical figures to heroic proportions, which is, in and of itself, a cultural comment. In the same sense that the heroes of Greek mythology shaped and lived within the minds of ancient Greeks, these people have become larger-than-life presences in the modern mind. B.J. Novak, a more contemporary author, does the same thing with historical figures as well as pop culture icons as in “The Comedy Central Roast of Nelson Mandela”, “Chris Hansen at the Justin Bieber Concert”, “Kate Moss”. These pieces of short (or possibly even flash) fiction not only incorporate the figures within, but also seem to satirize them (i.e. Chris Hansen cannot take his daughter to a Justin Bieber concert without raising concerns with parents that there is a pedophile present, finding every pedophile in the crowd, or seeming himself like a pedophile if he actually watches Bieber the entire time). They function as reactions to pop culture, which is a crucial element of constructing generations, and are intriguing pieces of inspiration, both creating relatable scenarios and mocking the odd events that tend to transpire because of technology, media, and other aspects of the modern world.

Poetically, I homed in on the stylistic trends that have arisen most recently in order to understand contemporary poetics. This drew me to the works of spoken word poets, such as Sabrina Benaim’s collection *Depression & Other Magic Tricks* and Rudy Francisco’s collection *helium*. These not only introduced me to stylistic elements of recent poetry, but also the incredibly verbal and (necessarily) spoken nature of these poems. I plan to emulate this quality in my own poetry not only because one of my cusper guides is a spoken-word poet, but also because this is one of the most common means by which this micro-generation interacts with poetry. Furthermore, it pushes past the constraints of written word, which could be another way

to rebel against old forms. Additionally, I read Francesca Lia Block's *Psyche in a Dress*, a series of poems and vignettes which place Greek deities, heroes, and figures in the present, forcing them to adapt to and confront modern issues. These varied mediums, which are not often used for fairytales or mythologies, provide inspiration for possible divergences from standard storytelling techniques.

Other readings in the realm of vignettes included Garth Risk Hallberg's *A Field Guide to the North American Family* and David Levithan's *The Lover's Dictionary*. Both of these works provide examples of the vignettes as definitional, with observations and conversations giving meaning to abstract words and ideas. More than this, they appropriate varied mediums, such as dictionary definitions, diary entries, photographic evidence, family trees, field notes (sometimes redacted), and more. This is particularly of interest for me and my project, as I hope to include mediums that are relevant to the cuspers that I encounter in each city (such as spoken-word poetry, recipes, medical charts, etc.). In this way, I can incorporate the objects and artifacts that this micro-generation encounters everyday. Inspiration for this also comes from Monica Ong's collection *Silent Anatomies*, in which she explores documentary poetry as a means of highlighting cultural silences.

During auto-biographical segments of the collection, I intend to make use of the lyric essay. Rigoberto González's lyric essay *Autobiography of My Hungers* has been a major source of inspiration, especially in its examination of the spaces in between vignettes as opportunities for unspoken statements which colour the following fragments. Maggie Nelson, on the other hand, takes a different approach to the lyric essay in her *Bluets*, structuring it as a numbered list that includes snippets of storytelling, definitions, observations, and more, which are not explicitly connected. The reader, however, finds connections and builds their own narrative based on the pieces that Nelson provides. Both of these vignette and lyric essay approaches could be

methodologies I may use in my project in order to reflect on my own personal experiences, especially in relation to the world around me.

In considering the forms most apt for discussing this cusp generation, it became clear that, on their own, the previous forms could not fully convey the nuances that exist within this group. Thus, I turn now to forms that are unique to these cuspers, or that draw upon daily influences and creations. For example, this group is uniquely influenced by the internet, growing up in a world where they were old enough to know life before Facebook and even MySpace, but not quite young enough to remember a world without technology at their fingertips. With this in mind, it would be irresponsible, perhaps even impossible, to create this compendium without these tech influences seeping in in the forms of social media posts, memes, browser histories, hypertext, and much more. After all, these are intrinsic to daily life and have been integrated into the way we think, communicate, and perhaps even feel. Furthermore, incorporation of mundane creations (apart from what is typically perceived as “creative” or “artistic”) will provide insight into the daily lives of cuspers. This will include everything from class notes to playlists, recipes to diagrams, annotations to emails. It is difficult now to pinpoint exactly which of these new forms I will be working with because I have not yet spent time with cuspers in other cities for this project. These new forms, however, will be a significant aspect of this project. In the language of Angela Carter, this collection will not only put “new wine in old bottles” (as in the forms of short stories, vignettes, lyric essays, and some poetry), but will also put new wine in new bottles. This collection, then, compiles the stories of the generation as well as its forms, which, in turn, tell stories of their own.

While on their own each of the individual forms have demonstrated readability, it is important to consider the impact that the whole of this sort of form-defying work may have on the reader. Thus, finding models for this kind of experimental writing is necessary. Looking to

literary roots, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* provides integration of fiction and poetry, which work in tandem seamlessly. Though taking the form of poetry alone, Walt Whitman's seminal work *Leaves of Grass* seems to carry on without defined form, growing naturally, as though mirroring the growth in nature that Whitman takes an interest in in this work. Of course, many of these examples come from contemporary writing, such as Amy Krouse Rosenthal's *Textbook Amy Krouse Rosenthal*, in which the author creates a "textbook" on herself, consisting of charts, definitions, photographs, and other common elements, as well as vignettes, lyric essays, letters, and poetry. This "textbook" is perhaps the most similar model of writing for my project, though there are other contemporary works that can provide insight as well. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is a horror story told through academic papers, footnotes, redacted texts, and scripts, whereas Lesléa Newman's *October Mourning* reconstructs the murder of Matthew Shepard through poetry written from multiple perspectives, as well as news clipping and critical essays.

All of this is grounded in the idea of generations as social constructs that are necessarily exclusionary. Here, some further reading is required in order to form a solid background. Roland Barthes's theories of deconstructionism are a predominant entry point into this area, especially in his *Mythologies*, in which he deconstructs a series of objects and images within contemporary culture. This examination digs into the deeper meanings, or "significations" of these sources, and considers them as coded--communicating some hidden message. Generations, too, can be considered coded, especially in terms of capitalism (for example, as previously discussed, Millennials are often categorized as maliciously hurting the economy because they do not spend the money in the same ways that previous generations have). Furthermore, its final section, "Myth Today," which I have already read, provides relevant theories on what, exactly, a myth is by today's standards. Barthes's essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" will

also be significant in fleshing out this aspect of the project, as it directly relates to writing and narratology with the deconstructionist mindset. Furthermore, some sociological readings into the theory of generations will provide schema for understanding the construction and function of generations in society. Here, Karl Mannheim's paper "The Problem of Generations" is the best place to begin, as it is one of the first to discuss this theory. Karen Foster's *Generation, Discourse, and Social Change* may also prove helpful, as it revisits Mannheim's concepts and updates them in order to include more current observations. Of course, more reading will be expected as the writing process progresses.

Based on the idea of generations as stabilizing entities, a queer theory lens is an apt method of approaching cusp generations and my proposed compendium. Queer theorist David Halperin states that, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant...It is an identity without essence" (qtd. in Chen). Ultimately, this is a sufficient way in which to view cuspers, as they have been defined, through the silence surrounding them and their experiences, as being without essence. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as it enables cuspers to move past the constraints that generational titles force upon others. However, it will be important to discuss the challenges that cuspers, especially the cuspers with whom I interact, face. As Gloria Anzaldúa states, "We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not share the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions" (qtd. in Chen). It is with this in mind that I would like to write the stories of my generation. By no means will it be comprehensive, and it is impossible that I will share all of the same oppressions as my peers, but this overarching

struggle of not fitting, of living always betwixt and between, is the ultimate focus of the compendium.

The liminal space in which cuspers function allows for freedom from definition, and my writing will enforce this lack of definition. As Judith Butler discusses in her essay “Critically Queer”, the moment that “queer” is defined, it ceases to be queer. The lack of a defined form and genre for the collection is representative of this premise, especially considering that the works are about an “in-between” generation that does not fit into any category, and so its writing should not fit in the traditional sense either. This will also apply to interludes of personal narrative and my own city’s section, in part because because the travel will place me in actual liminal spaces (airports, taxis, etc.), but also because I myself am pansexual, and this identity, like the queer identity, is defined by a lack of definition. As has likely become clear at this point, many of the hallmarks of queer theory can be applied to all elements of this project--the population of focus, the writing itself, and the writer herself.

With all of this in mind, I intend the final product to be a compendium of short stories, poems, vignettes, and lyric essays which amounts to between one hundred and two hundred pages, as well as an accompanying paper detailing my process as well as analyzing the work as a whole. I have previously briefly mentioned my creative plan at several points, but I would like to clarify it here. Initially, I plan to travel across the United States, specifically to San Francisco (CA), Albuquerque (NM), San Antonio (TX), Arnold (MD), and Pittsburgh (PA), where I will accompany my “guides” to school/work, meet those in their social circles (effectively introducing me to more cuspers of the city), travel through the city as a cusper, and even stay with them for the period of time that I will be there (between three and five days). In each city I will be particularly mindful of the experiences I have by maintaining a log that will detail the

events as they transpire and act as a place to collect drafts and rough copies--as Kerouac did while he traveled. In drawing influence from Kerouac's sectioned narrative, each individual work will be grouped by city and based upon the time spent there. Essentially, these sections are meant to present a snapshot of each city and its unique experiences and population. Between these sections, there will also be interludes for travelogue as well as a final city section for my hometown (Wahiawa, HI), which will draw on my personal experiences in travel as well as at home. A significant portion of my writing will necessarily be done over the course of this travel time in order to preserve the authenticity of the experiences, but I am aware that it is nearly impossible to finish the project in such a short period of time.

While my mentor, as well as my committee members, will certainly be involved in the process, and their advice will be taken into serious consideration, I will be responsible for the whole of the work. I will be in charge of collection information and inspiration while traveling, as well as planning, writing, revising, and completing the project. Still, input is an incredibly significant contribution to the process, and I intend to seek input from the "guides" in each of the cities, as it is ultimately they who know their experiences best.

With this in mind, it is important to consider the ethical ramifications of such a project. I will not be seeking approval from an Institutional Review Board, as the work does not fall under the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' definition of research ("a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge"). While the work is broadly focused on the micro-generation born between, it does not attempt to define the generation at large. Furthermore, I will not be conducting formal interviews or taking oral histories; instead, I will be generally basing the pieces in the collection on the experiences in each city, without using direct quotations or events, as this is ultimately a work of fiction and

poetry (during my time traveling and in my own city, the works may be autobiographical, but this nonfiction nature does not span past these sections).

I have taken many courses that have prepared me for this project. In my first years at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, I took courses that built my knowledge of the literary world, including ENG 271 (Introduction to Literature: Genre) and ENG 320 (Introduction to English Studies). These classes enabled me to situate myself within the literary world and broadened my imagination by presenting the scope of what had been done before. In Fall 2017, I took a creative writing course in Florence, Italy, where I improved my short story and travel writing techniques and studied the works of other authors, including Kerouac, for inspiration. I also completed a semester of ethnographic research, under the guidance of Dr. Eirik Saethre, where I learned to simultaneously be present in my surroundings while making note of what is important. While this project will not be a work of ethnography, the techniques I learned and practiced will be critical. This past semester, I have taken of courses in preparation for this project including ENG 313 (Types of Creative Writing: Desire and Memory - Poetry and Nonfiction), ENG 385 (Fairy Tales and Adaptations), and ENG 338 (American Literature Since the Mid-20th Century). These have contributed to both my understanding of the literary history that inform my work as well as my knowledge of writing techniques and methodologies.

Considering that I intend to graduate in Spring 2019, I will have two semesters as well as this summer to complete the project. I have been awarded UROP funds for the travel this summer. My proposed dates of travel are between June 5, 2018 and June 24, 2018, though this is still subject to vary as funds have yet to be disbursed. I intend to spend between five and seven days in each city, and approximately 38 hours in transit, which ought to provide ample material for both the city sections and the travel interludes. During the travel time, I will begin writing pieces for each segment of the overall work, with special focus on the interludes for

travelogue and time spent in each city (apart from Wahiawa), though I do not intend to finish writing the whole of each section. Upon return to Hawai'i, I will spend the remaining time during the summer writing, focusing on the Wahiawa section. By the end of summer, I plan to have at least half of the writing completed. During the fall semester, I will finish writing and begin the revision process. The Spring 2019 semester will be spent finishing revisions and writing the accompanying paper, with plans to submit the completed project in April 2019 and present at the Undergraduate Showcase in May 2019.

As mentioned, I have been awarded UROP funding which will allow me to travel during this coming summer. Funding aside, the only other materials that I will be utilizing will be books and databases, both of which are easy to access at Hamilton Library.

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