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12 December 2016

*Generation X: Universal Themes and the Millennial Audience*

*Generation X*, by Douglas Coupland, is a 1991 novel that focuses on the relationships, hopes, and fears of three adults who represent the generation born in the decades of the 1960s and 70s. *Generation X* captures the mood and sentiment of a particular moment in time with its anxieties of nuclear apocalypse and doomed yuppie existence. It is also full of terminology and cultural references particular to its time. Yet, the novel's strong themes dealing with community, fear of the future, and individuality fighting for space in a homogenous, consumer driven society bridge the generations. These themes help Coupland's novel overcome a set of obstacles created by the generation gap in time and technology and allow the novel to retain a certain relevancy for the modern millennial audience.

To determine whether Coupland's novel is relevant to a modern audience, it is first necessary to establish who that new audience is for *Generation X*. The millennials are categorized as tech savvy with a desire to be connected and a tendency to be more socially active and community oriented (Wiedmer 54, 55). In fact, millennials believe their most distinctive quality is in their use of technology (Millennials: A Portrait 5). Further, while they may still struggle to find employment due a series of recessions, these young people will most likely become the most educated generation, though they currently still lag behind generation x (Millennials: A Portrait 39, 41). Those that do find employment look for a balance between their professional and personal life, and they are seen as less independent due to a stronger family connection early in life (Wiedmer 54).

Interestingly, many of the elements that define millennials are also used to categorize generation x by the prevailing mass culture. First, members of generation x are currently the most educated of all the generations, though many millennials are still in the process of completing their education (Wiedmer 54). Also, this group named technology as their generation's most distinctive quality just like millennials (Millennials: A Portrait 5). Also, looking into Coupland's novel, connectedness and community are major themes, though members of generation x struggle to find this as easily as millennials. Andy, Dag, and Claire spend a large portion of the novel looking for a sense of connectedness, and even though their romantic exploits and appeals to family units for this need fail, they find a sense of community within their own group. Andy declares early in the novel, "I *do* at least recognize the fact that I *don't* want to go through life alone," revealing both his desire for connection as well as his reluctance to seek it out (Coupland 47).

Part of the struggle these characters face comes from challenges generation x faced has a whole like a greater percentage of broken homes and workaholic parents, which lead to a dogged sense of independence not seen in millennials. Thus, members of generation x actually become more family oriented as they go through life and try to create a stronger sense of balance in their lives (Wiedmer 53, 54). With many similarities between the generations, it would seem a logical assumption that the millennials would be able to identify easily with Coupland's characters and their struggles. However, there are several obstacles that might keep these readers from connecting with *Generation X*

From one perspective, Coupland's novel offers readers a glimpse into a specific mindset in a specific time period. There are many people who find this novel worthwhile for the historical references or social commentaries tied to generation X, which Coupland captures so

subtly in his novel. Therefore, *Generation X* can at least work for readers as a time capsule of sorts. Yet, the question remains whether *Generation X* can exist beyond its own time and reach a modern audience, who may be less than enchanted at the thought of reading a story about a previous generation. Millennials, like every generation, pride themselves on individuality, so they will want to feel that their struggles are original and unique as well, breaking away from the values and rules of the previous generation. As Coupland relates, there is always difficulty understanding the generation that came before, so the following portion of this paper will explore how *Generation X* may be challenging to new readers and the ways it remains relevant through its themes (BooktopiaTV).

The first challenge millennial readers may face when trying to connect with *Generation X* is the difference in technology that has developed since the novel was written, like the development of the internet, mobile devices, and social media. According to the Pew Research Center, “Three-quarters of millennials have created a profile on a social networking site,” and they believe technology creates a better quality of life and deeper level of connectedness (Millennials: A Portrait 6). The ubiquity of these modern tools that keep people connected make it much more difficult for the millennial generation to understand a group of young people who would disconnect themselves completely from their former lives. They are much less likely to extract themselves from their web of contacts, followers, and friends to “drop out” and disappear into the desert to start a new life of self-discovery like Andy, Dag, and Claire do in *Generation X*. As Coupland himself says, “Once you experience a certain level of connectedness, it’s just not possible to go back...it changes your sense of yourself, of time, of community, of everything” (Q on CBC).

However, this deep level of connectedness the millennial generation values is one of the things that Coupland's characters seek throughout *Generation X*. The idea of community becomes one of the predominant themes in the novel as the characters seek acceptance and understanding from the people around them. Beautifully illustrating the need that drives the novel's characters, Dag reveals his despair over a lack of connectedness he feels after quitting his job and disappearing from society: "Starved for affection, terrified of abandonment, I began to wonder if sex was really just an excuse to look deeply into another human being's eyes" (Coupland 30). This same need for affection and terror of losing it are what keep modern society addicted to technology and the feeling of being connected it offers. There is the sense that neglecting emails, social media, or text messages will mean being left behind by friends and associates. The fear is, as Andy puts it in the novel, "not having conversation with people makes you go nuts" (Coupland 73).

While Coupland's message may illustrate the necessity of community, he also warns against the wrong kinds of connections, the ones that keep people from reaching their greatest potential selves. The most prominent example of this is Claire's obsession with the yuppie, Tobias that was based solely on a superficial attraction, which she only resolved through heartbreak: "I couldn't believe the brain-dead glutton I'd been - for sex, for humiliation, for pseudodrama...the only way you can deal with the Tobiases of this world is to not let them into your lives *at all*" (Coupland 160). Following the journeys of Claire, Dag, and Andy as they drop out of society to find a better space to live in, can help modern readers question the value of their community and whether they surround themselves with too much arbitrary sound from the wrong sources or people to be able to know and understand their true self (Coupland 59). It is Claire who outlines the ideal for simplifying life and creating a worthwhile community: "I'd like

to go somewhere rocky, somewhere *Maltese*, and just empty my brain, read books, and be with people who wanted to do the same thing” (Coupland 36).

Along with a heightened sense of connectedness being a challenge for modern audiences in relation to *Generation X*, issues related to employment and the workforce can also be an obstacle millennials face in connecting to Coupland’s novel. In an interview, Coupland illustrates the uncertainty facing millennials: “things are changing too quickly. You don’t know in a year from now whether what you do for a living is going to be replaced by ten lines of code from some geek in Palo Alto or if what you do is going to be more valuable” (Q on CBC). The prospect of quitting a career and dropping out of society for the silence is hard to relate to by a generation who has a hard enough time finding a job in the first place.

While Dag voluntarily becomes one of the “basement people” by dropping out of the system and “occupational slumming,” or taking jobs beneath his abilities, many of today’s youth have unintentionally become “basement people” with no other options but low wage jobs available (Coupland 26). Only 41% of millennials age 19 to 24 are employed full time, meaning many of the underemployed or unemployed millennials have no choice but to move back home with their parents. Furthermore, millennials are “among the last hired and the first to lose their jobs,” leaving them in a greater state of job uncertainty than previous generations (Millennials: A Portrait 40).

However, there is a certain universality that comes from the “mid-twenties breakdown,” as Coupland refers to it, that happens with each generation and features a difficulty “functioning outside of school or structured environments” (Coupland 27). This is where the youth of each generation comes to a realization that life is not going to go as planned. Educated young people enter a world that does not match their expectations and struggle to come to terms with career

paths that are less fulfilling and more soul sucking than they anticipated. Andy, Dag, and Claire may all leave their jobs on the basis of principle, but Coupland presents these young people in this same moment of dissatisfaction with life, career, and self. Claire reflects on the personal cost of her job “I don’t think it’s making me a better person, and the garment business is so jammed with dishonesty” (Coupland 36). Likewise, Dag leaves his job feeling “tainted” by the process of marketing and thinking it “had, in some way, taught me to not really like myself” (Coupland 27). Even in the current employment environment, *Generation X* offers commentary on the cost of life choices and the anxiety between responsibility and loss of self that the working world often presents to young people. Perhaps, as Dag says, the “reason we all go to work in the morning is because we’re terrified of what would happen if we stopped” (Coupland 23).

Each generation is faced with moments of confusion and uncertainty, whether it be economic concerns or something more sinister. One of the last obstacles that faces Coupland’s novel in capturing the minds of millennials deals with the fears faced by generation x. This is probably the simplest challenge to rectify because each generation deals with a new set of fears, though they invariably end up represented in some sort of apocalypse narrative. Dag, in particular, is a fan of apocalyptic stories, telling a couple throughout *Generation X* focused around fears of nuclear bombs, while also sending Claire into hysterics over a jar of blasted sand from a nuclear testing site that shattered on her floor (Coupland 76). Fear like this often comes out in film, literature, and other media as a way to express the unspoken anxieties of each generation.

The one fear that all generations share is the fear of the future and the unknown existence it holds. Andy complains about visiting his parents and how they are resistant to change because “they’re terrified of the future,” yet he also envies their upbringing that was free of this feeling of

“futurelessness” (Coupland 84, 86). For a generation raised primarily in the 70s, the narratives that emerged to express these anxieties were apocalyptic futures like Planet of the Apes and Soylent Green. Coupland says we all need to relax though: back then “the ocean was going to be filled with black ink and we’d be wearing loincloths, yet here we are in 2015 and it’s actually not bad. In fact, it’s really good” (BooktopiaTV). However, millennials are still worried about the future in the same obsessive way going by the apocalypse narratives and bleak science fiction futures they consume like The Walking Dead, World War Z, and The Hunger Games.

In the end, *Generation X* may lend itself most to modern readers in the way it is written and the commentary it raises on the purpose of narratives in modern life. Through Coupland’s eyes, “sequence is what is being shattered in our culture right now in all its forms” (Q on CBC). This mirrors what Dag says to Andy in the novel: “I’m just upset that the world has gotten too big-way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we’re stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers” (Coupland 5). This could easily be re-written to say “all we’re stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on twitter” as further commentary on the state of narrative today. Also, the novel further warns against trying to define life by “isolated little cool moments” as Claire labels them, and argues that “either our lives become stories, or there’s no way to get through them” (Coupland 8).

However, with the help of social technology like, email, text messaging, Twitter, and Facebook, the newest generations have a way to tell their stories about a world that is often too big to capture otherwise. Coupland himself admits that there are some stories that do not fit anywhere else “tweeting is about those little haiku moments that have no other place in your universe” (Q on CBC). Through these forms of technology stories are able to reach other people with similar attitudes and views as well. Micro communities can be formed more easily within

the culture, without the need to drop out of society like Coupland's characters do. In many ways, the text of *Generation X* itself is meandering and fragmented into small moments that are threaded together like links on the internet, allowing conversations to continue in some form without remaining in one place or one mode for too long. Likewise, millennials are actually co-opting social media to recapture the continuity in their lives and tell the relevant stories in their lives (Channel 4 News). Speaking of telling stories, Coupland ultimately believes that "as long as the goal is creating something that, even a tiny little bit, can change people's thinking, or their lives, or the way they look at the world, then I think it is an okay effort" (Q on CBC).

Ultimately, *Generation X* is about searching for a stronger sense of community, inner self, and understanding. Millennials that look below the surface of Coupland's novel will find familiar themes of social connection and an evaluation on the limits of certain connections and benefits of building the right communities with the right people. Also, Coupland's characters illustrate the challenges every generation faces when its youth move into adulthood and find themselves alone and unprepared for the crushing reality of corporate life. Andy, Dag, and Claire all come to the realization that the money and consumer items their jobs can provide them are not worth the cost of losing their identity. Once they accept a marginalized life with silence to spare, they are able to face their fears of futurelessness. *Generation X* is filled with universal themes that affect every generation. Yet, Coupland's message on building a life that is worth telling a story about and finding a deeper continuity of narrative in life may be the most relevant to a generation that struggles to tell its story through a fragmented set of lenses.

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