

PERFORMANCE POETRY

Voices from the Cusp Reflection Statement

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Voices from the Cusp is a suite of performance poems through which I intend to express the multifarious voice of my generation¹- we who are on the cusp of adulthood and on the cusp of a generational divide.² My approach was one of embracing paradox through the junction of the centrifugal and the centripetal, the group and the individual. Ultimately, my purpose is to transcend the politics of the content and reveal the humanity beneath; gen y, i, millennial or otherwise, we are first and foremost people whose identity evades the parameters of scholastic discourse. For this reason my chosen medium of performance poetry is intrinsically linked to my concept by way of its unique capacity to convey conceptual complexities (namely paradox), to capture the raw sensibility of humanity, and to unify plurality through the eponymous trope of the 'voice'.

The intended audience for my major work is those outside of my generation who have adopted a broad stroke approach to defining the youth generation of today, whether it be to denigrate or exalt, scold or praise, vilify or deify. I have assumed a basic knowledge of generational theory.³ The work is at times a plea and at large a demand to be received and respected for our present identity, rather than judged for a metanarrative superimposed onto us from an external perspective. In this sense I am aiming to translate, contextualise and refute the presumptuous paradigms applied to 'explain' my generation from the periphery, and shift the perspective to the internal, from the cusp itself.

Conceptually, my work was heavily informed by both the English Advanced and the English Extension 1 courses. From my studies of Belonging I took the notion that belonging, or failing to belong, to a group influences the individual's identity. In respect to my major work this idea is manifest in my generation's failure to fit into the generational divides and our current position 'on the cusp' of

¹ Due to the overwhelming politics of the generational divides, I have been fairly liberal and vague as to whom I include in 'my generation'. As the sole performer and writer, and therefore the filter through which all concepts will bypass in the process of poetic translation, I consider myself the median of the group. Sociologically this is not a viable theory, but poetically, I believe it to be the most genuine approach available to me.

² Technically, I fall between the generations. According to some sources I am Generation Y and to others I am Generation i.

³ The principle that people born within an established time period share definitive traits.

assimilation into adult society. On a more thematic level the gerund 'belonging' suggests a mobility and flux of process, which relates both to the ambiguity I tried to emulate through the tone of the piece and the temporal dissidence emphasised through the variation of tense in *These Are Our Voices* and through an endemic motif of time.⁴ Finally, my study of Emily Dickinson's prescribed poetry endowed me with an (envious) appreciation for the level of meaning a skilled poet can invest in few words. 'I Gave Myself to Him' and 'What Mystery Pervades a Well', with their metrical ploys and subversive religious imagery, were both significant technical influences for me while I was devising 'Christian Lads'.

As an After the Bomb the student I was exposed to the poetry of the Beat Generation, specifically Allen Ginsberg's *The Howl*. Ginsberg's intense, hysterical style opened my eyes to the visceral effects of written-to-be-read poetry. Ginsberg was in many ways a proto-performance poet, though he himself denied it, and through learning some of the history of the genre's inception I gleaned an understanding and respect of its merits. I reference Ginsberg and his Beat Generation contemporaries heavily in *Roly Poly*, which I often view as a contemporary appropriation of *The Howl*; it shares his eclectic use of vignettes and parataxis, overwhelming polysyndeton and consideration of breath to elevate tone, as well as direct intertextual allusions such as "Moloch", "Paterson" and "Laodicean's crime".

With these courses as a foundation, I used my independent investigation to develop my concept and my knowledge of performance poetry. I began my investigation with the academia of generational theory. Immediately, I came across the 'Millennials Rising'⁵ report, composed by the creators of the Strauss-Howe Generational Theory, often cited as instigating the Millennial⁶ furore. Howe and Strauss identified 'Seven Core Traits' which they believed to be endemic in the Millennials; among these were

⁴ time ("pulse", "bop", "chime", "time", "watch", "future", "minute", "digits", "AM", "age", "growing up", "birthday", "eve", "new years", "immaturity", "day", "young", "ancestor", "forever", "will)

⁵ *Millennials Rising*, Neil Howe and William Strauss, Vintage, published September 5, 2000

⁶ Howe and Strauss defined their concerned generation as born between 1984 and 2000, thus the label 'Millennials'.

“achieving”, “sheltered”, “confident” and “special”. Related searches lead me to more recent, backlash articles such as The Millennial Muddle⁷ which criticised Howe and Strauss' generalising approach to linear generational change. Aside from the Millennials model there still exists the traditional boomer, X, Y and Z generational groupings. My investigation into this produced a greater yield of applicable concerns. One such article, Gods, Gadgets and Generation Y⁸ attempted to explain why the youth generation is disillusioned with religion within the context of the digital revolution, wherein “doubt is no longer a dirty word”, a sentiment which resonated strongly with my theme of ambiguity. I compared all my findings to Mission Australia's Youth Survey⁹ to gauge those issues which are of greater concern to Australian Youth.

My overall impression was that the whole industry is perverse and out of touch, clutching at straws and passing them off as fact. Through the thick fog of academic discourse, I could not discern even a whisper of my generation itself. I decided to conduct my own interviews in an attempt to discern an autonomous generational voice. I interviewed fifteen young people, four boys and eleven girls aged between fifteen and eighteen and asked them a series of standardised questions relating to the traits popularised by the millennial debate, particularly entitled, technology obsessed and narcissistic. These interviews were the most formative action I made throughout the whole process- they provided invaluable insight into the minds (and souls) of my generation and triggered a significant shift in my attitude towards the work, suddenly I wasn't devising for myself, I was devising for these beautiful kids whose voices so poignantly negated the validity of those accusations stated above.

The final prong of my independent investigation was my extensive ‘reading’ of performance poetry. I am a strong believer in immersing yourself in high quality material to produce high quality work

⁷ Millennial Muddle, Eric Hoover, The Chronicle of Higher Education, published October 11, 2009

⁸ Gods, Gadgets and Generation Y, Sarah Bunton-Lauer, accessed: <http://mindinpsychology.com/god-gadgets-and-generation-y-researching-the-rejection-of-religion/> 23/02/13

⁹ Mission Australia Youth Survey 2012, Mission Australia, published November 16, 2012

yourself, something I hope to have emulated in my process. I watched hours of YouTube film of poetry slams, both American and Australian, Def Poetry, poetry readings and independent artists. I also explored Aussie Rap,¹⁰ theatre¹¹ and performance art.¹² The wider the scope of my influence, the more varied my poetry and thus, the greater its resonance with the diversity within my generation. Whilst my intended audience is not my peers, I made a conscious effort to make the work hypothetically accessible to every young person, to do their voices justice, however different to my own.

Each poem I wrote represents the junction between each of these aspects of my research. For example, opening poem, 'Roly Poly', echoes the existential anxiety of many of my interviewees, a disillusionment with the times I associated with that of the Beats, as discussed prior. 'I Said The F Word' was inspired by an interview in which a girl expressed a deeply seeded rage about the state of contemporary feminism, which I paired with the style of Slam poetry which is typically angry and political, think Katie Makkai's 'Pretty'¹³, and rap. 'Superboy' brings together the theory that we are the 'Hero Generation'¹⁴ and an interview I had with a boy whose whimsical desire to save the world was coupled with a deflating pragmatism. The honesty of his voice was reminiscent of Sarah Kay's delivery, and so I allowed that to inform my own performance.

I was acutely aware of the danger posed by mixing up such distinct styles, jeopardising the overall coherence and integrity of the work. To avoid this I instilled through- lines, including the motif of time, mentioned above, and of voices and speaking.¹⁵ These themes are fundamentally linked with my concept of a voices from the cusp. Further, despite considering technically distorting my voice to

¹⁰ Bliss n Eso, Circus in the Sky released 28/06/2013 and Running on Air released 30/07/2010

¹¹ 'Silent Disco', Lachlan Philpott, Currency Press

¹² 'Marina Abramovic, The Artist is Present', Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre, released 5/12/2012

¹³ Pretty, Katie Makkai, accessed: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6wJl37N9C0>, 13/04/13

¹⁴ Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069, Quill, published September 30, 1992

¹⁵ "screaming", "my words be soft", "When I say", "unheard", "dirty word", "blurred", "slurred", "syllables", "whispered", "spoke", "screamed", "language", "speak", "words", "heard", "voices"

exaggerate the distinctive personas of the poems, I maintained continuity of my voice, as representative of the singular and multifarious, voice of my generation.

When structuring the work I considered the direction and tone of the work carefully. Due to the fact that each poem is different in subject, style, tone and character, determining an order out of that chaos was challenging. The final structure follows a progression of historical styles, clarity of ideas and confidence of voice, which I chose to synchronise the journey towards understanding of my piece and the audience. The segues between the poems are provided an audio collage of the interview recording. I was adamant from the beginning that I would not use music or other externally sourced sound effects as this would corrupt the sanctity of the voice, and thus my decision to invoke distinct but complementary voices. The interviews are edited to simulate a lo-fi effect which emphasises their source and allude to their more basic form as opposed to the poetry which is complex, thoughtful and begs for greater attention and accordingly the quality of the sound is much greater.

The recording process was undoubtedly my favourite part of the course. I decided to have it professionally recorded due to a lack of personal recording equipment. I believe my performance was elevated significantly by the setting and the quality of the microphone, which allowed me to focus on parts of my voice which are not picked up by low quality recording devices. Recording my major work in a professional studio was a thrilling denouement to the process, and a striking example of how far I'd come.

Although my progress through Extension 2 English was anything but linear my major work is something that I am ineffably proud of. The course instilled in me an appreciation for hard work, organisation and perseverance, and the rewards that follow. Above all, what I will take from Extension 2 English is a sense of confidence and inspiration; I now know my faculty as an artist and I am unashamedly optimistic about my future endeavours. This experience was only the genesis of my

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journey as a poet and performer, and from my position here on the cusp of my creative emancipation, and I can say with confidence and pride that I have a voice, and it will be heard.