



The Unknown Variable: Multiple Target Markets in One...

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Lower your expectations because it has been said that Generation Xers can't write, at least "not in a literary sense" (Dawson, 1997: 22, citing the views of the literary establishment). We are the missing link of literature, disdainful of form, feeling and sensibility.

When publishers Allen & Unwin went searching for the "voice of the young urban Australian" in the early 1990s what they found was 'grunge lit' (Dawson, 1997: 123). Reportage rather than fiction, it depicts a world of disaffection inhabited by characters with "low pay, low status and low future" (Brown, 2001: 125), drifting toward what appears to be self-annihilation. The writing itself is scrupulously detached and without illusion. It seems we quite like to shock the reader, but as to whether we move them or not, well, we pretend not to care.

These so-called non-literary tendencies have been viewed as a cultural trait, arising from the fact that Generation X is "the first generation for whom the book is not the primary source of cultural formation" (Dawson, 1997: 122). Born roughly between 1960 and 1975 (Rymarz, 2004; Dixon, 2004; Brabazon, 1998), we are the urban "children of the media revolution" (Brabazon, 1998: 11): cinema-going, comic-strip-reading, hyper self-aware devotees of pulp, which has the distinction of allowing us to "[indulge] in the playfulness of amorality" (Epstein, 1994, cited in Hopkins, 1995: 15) and try on different identities for size. We appropriate these identities as though they are fashion accessories, discarding one in favour of another, depending on the context and situation.

The only society we have known is market driven. Having grown up against a backdrop of economic rationalism and "in the shadow of a great demographic bulge, which foreshadows certain social problems" (Davis, 1997, cited in Brown, 2001: 126) the forces of the 'real world' are beyond our control, the patterns of our lives established by the market. Outvoted by the baby boomers, the state sets priorities divergent to all our leanings in life; we are valued by both the state and the market for our purchasing power alone. 'Economic participation' is the new sport (i.e. religion) of Australia and those of us without sufficient disposable income are expendable, losers relegated to the margins of society and accused of mental and physical sloth. Ours is a world ruled by

the marketing departments of corporations, crowded with images and slogans that infiltrate and bend the structure of our consciousness, threatening to transform us into “signs that consume” (Brown, 2001: 131).

With “impermanence and uncertainty” (Hopkins, 1995: 17) as the only constants in our lives and no reason to believe that this will ever change, our culture is surely the most high-context in the world today – we have raised situational behaviour to an art form. As Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction gangsters, Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield, say, as they are about to embark on a series of hits, “let’s get into character” (cited in Brabazon, 1998: 17).

This lies at the heart of the culture of Generation X. It is the tacit creed by which we live. We have glutted ourselves in Mathews’ (2000) ‘cultural supermarket’ and are unpredictable not because we are ‘deeply individual’ (Way, 2000) and this makes it difficult for outsiders to get a fix on any group characteristics or cultural norms but because we are each multiple characters, fringe dwellers who prefer an in-between space where tedium and ordinariness are less likely to congregate, identity is unfixed and uncertainty prevails.

As possibly the first generation of Australians to reject national identity (Brown, 2001) and what Bouras calls “the pathology which calls itself nationalism” (2001: 18), we are now finding this in-between space challenging to preserve. Wedged between the boomers and Gen Y – who seem a curious mix of whimsy and ruthlessness, rather like a generation of child stars – most of us Gen Xers have now suffered the indignity of our being appropriated by the institutions, social structures and expectations that we once scornfully watched govern other people’s lives. We live in a climate that seems increasingly hospitable to Pauline Hanson’s extreme-right wing vision of One Nation¹ (who, by the way, has successfully reinvented herself on *Dancing with the Stars*), an idea that one suspects many more were taken with than cared to admit. Unable to see the world as a value-free playground and not quite sure that its heart isn’t dark and fathomless, our answer to date has been denial, a sort of self-imposed exile. Although it has been mooted that Gen Xers like to look real life right ‘in the eye’ (Brown, 2001: 125) and that this manifests itself in our unreserved, grungy tales, there is a faint but unmistakable thrum of anxiety that runs through our literature; the candidness seems counterfeit. We can deal with the ugliness of the world but not yet with the possibility of its meaninglessness. We are not ready for the ‘definitive awakening’, of which Camus writes, that occurs when the ‘stage sets collapse’ and the question ‘why?’ arises (1955: 11). Shunning this moment, or perhaps hopeful that it need not arrive at all, we look about us, finding ourselves in the depersonalised space of offices, shopping malls and supermarkets that could be anywhere. It is a stultifying, musty space where we feel

1 Pauline Hanson, a Liberal Party candidate in the 1996 Australian Federal Election, co-founded the One Nation party in 1997. The One Nation party stood for ‘national unity’ in the face of what Hanson viewed as a division in the Australian community arising from discontent with ‘unfair’ policies that advantaged migrants and Indigenous Australians. At her now infamous maiden speech in the Australian Parliament she put forward the concern that Australia was being ‘swamped’ by Asians who did not ‘assimilate’ into Australian culture, with no apparent awareness of the moral and ethical issues associated with the earlier assimilationist policies of Australia enforced to assure the absorption of Indigenous Australians into White Australia.

that Rushdie's Alicja might be right: perhaps "these days, character isn't destiny anymore. Economics is destiny" (Rushdie, 1988: 432). Surrounded by the manifestations of a singular goal and trapped in spaces designed to pimp the market's wares, our compulsion to consume is literally unforgettable. The thriftiness of the market is unbeatable. It operates 24/7, ingenious at commanding space, creating new strata titles for bill boards, filling nooks and crannies with advertisements reminding us of what we are missing and presenting us with solutions to a discontent it successfully manufactured with last year's films and television shows. Even litter becomes a form of advertising, at once a sharp reminder of our bulimic condition and the ruination of the earth.

Utterly disenchanted with the refuse that surrounds us, we turn and find some truth in Deleuze's 'modern fact': "We [do not] believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film" (Deleuze, 1989, cited in Buchanan and Lambert, 2005: 4).

What we want are *real* Events. Something 'absolutely unpredictable' (Derrida, 2005: 21) and visited upon us with an impact that has zero finesse and shunts the framework we have been operating within so that the way we see and experience the world is radically altered so that something truly different might be glimpsed. We don't want stoppages about a ground "cross-hatched by psychic or real borderlines," we want 'open territories' (Conley, 2006: 95) that enable free movement, multiple connections and impossible, real-life plot twists – the more dislocating the better. It is a strange and beautiful space to occupy and takes quite some creativity to find, but we manage to get there, although sometimes with a little chemical assistance. When mum and dad invite their daughter over for dinner, they quite literally do not know who is going to turn up. And, often, neither does their daughter.

By day she manages staff older than herself and negotiates contracts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in an office that looks like a set from *Gattaca*, all clean lines, plasma screens and white, white walls. Empty, in the half-light of night, "when the evening is spread out against the sky, like a patient etherized upon a table," it looks alien (Eliot, 1917, stanza 1, lines 2-3). A place where humanity has been expunged.

By night, she travels. Compressed into binary code she slips from state to state, place to place, evading the moral boundary riders with ease. The web is transgression made easy; the antithesis of our day time world where we flex and exercise our judgment – which, as Deleuze suggests, deeply implicates us in issues of justice – and where we support the high order, '*partition* of concepts', '*measuring* of subjects' and the hierarchization of these (Deleuze, 1994: 33). In our daytime world we partake of a system similar to that depicted by Derrida and which informed Butler's theory of performativity.² In that world, we "[attribute] a certain force to the law" and anticipate

2 Butler's theory of performativity regarding gender essentially involves questioning the idea that gender (and identity, more broadly) comes from within, or is 'natural', pre-destined or inevitable but rather that gender (and identity) might be derived or manufactured from the sustained repetition of actions and ways of being that are regulated by and subject to the politics of society. Butler seeks to

“an authoritative disclosure of meaning” (Butler, 1999: 94) from a source that frames thought and being and ‘installs’ and legitimises that authority. In cyberspace, although there may be gateways and certain rules and norms, the levers of control are not yet held by a state to which one submits, nor by the hands of a puppeteer like that which Duena Alfonso of McCarthy’s *All the pretty horses*, imagines to be pulling on “strings whose origins are endless” (1993: 231), check-mating her long past but not forgotten plays for freedom, enacting all manner of events. For Alfonso, the question is “whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact” (McCarthy, 1993: 230). In cyberspace we feel we can forge our own patterns, and both abandon ourselves to the fates of unknown worlds and, strangely, choose if not control our journey. Authority is dispersed. It is not disgorged from a source that exercises the “authoritative power of naming” (Bhabha, 1987: 5). Decorous, subservient waiting – for enactments, answers and instructions, in places and in queues – is irrelevant. In cyberspace any identity is permissible and there are new and endless fields in which to play. It is a space teeming with possibility, capacious enough to entertain *anything*, and one in which we can forget that the world might be “so constructed that it [requires] our lives to unfold in this way and in no other” (May, 2005: 1).

Resile from Finitude...

The issue of identity and difference is a consuming but undeclared preoccupation of Generation Xers. Hugh Mackay (2005) has euphemistically labeled us the ‘options generation’ whose approach to life is typified by a single question: “this is great, but what else is there?” This question can be used as a type of ethnographic fulcrum to subdivide Generation Xers into two groups that are fundamentally different. One group believes that “the only source of success and security in [their] lives is [themselves]” (Way, 2000: 18) and asks Mackay’s question quite literally, with the view to weighing up the pros and cons and making a pragmatic decision that is in their best interests (Anon, Australian Company Secretary, 2000; Bright, 2003). The other group is pragmatic about its very identity. It is also disconnected, ambivalent and collapsing under the realization that it lives in a dimension of banality, a world that proliferates sameness. This is the group that listens to the keening of The Dirty Three’s *Ocean Songs*, and, from across those oceans, to Yo La Tengo’s *And then nothing turned itself inside-out*. For this group, Mackay’s question, ‘what else is there?’ is rhetorical. In fact, it unwittingly encapsulates the essence of this sub-culture. We have satiated ourselves on the spoils of choice to the point where everything has become that other definition of ‘pulp’, a “soft, moist, slightly cohering mass” (Macquarie Dictionary, 1998). “What does ‘nothing’ look like when you turn it inside-out,” (Meyer, 2000) muses one music reviewer? Pretty empty...

Although I exhibit traits of both groups, on the whole I identify with the latter category. In terms of this paper, this is problematic. By definition our culture “[aims] to be

challenge the notion that identity is stable and ‘given’, and expose the forces that shape and legitimise certain identities but exclude and alienate those that exude difference.

ambiguous and avoid definition” (Brabazon, 1998: 12) and likes to maintain an ‘ironic distance’ from stereotypes (Burton, 2000: 59). We are acutely conscious that everything in today’s technological world is readily superseded, including ourselves, and our survival technique is the creation of ‘disposable’ selves that are ‘loose, transitory’ and mutable (Hopkins, 1995: 15). To commit to paper and explore a single identity is anathema. For a start, searching for a sense of self is very, very uncool. Secondly, finding nothingness is terrifying. Better to mask it in cynicism. Better still to remain intangible. Given this context, this is a difficult paper to write. Writing in the third person is no problem since we are comfortable with actually *being* the third person; writing in the first person plural is a little more challenging, but at least we can take some sort of cover in the ‘we’. And writing in the first person singular? It’s akin to therapy – horrifying. Interestingly, Dawson observes that grunge lit, a product of our culture, “can only ever be a collection of first books” and is necessarily ‘confessional’ (Dawson, 1997: 121). It may be cathartic, but its permanence is also painful and marks the end of something.

A Curious Diaspora

Although Generation X has its literary origins in North America (Jochim, 1997; Brabazon, 1998; Rymarz, 2004), the homeland of Generation X is virtual and accessed by a range of media. We are ‘media citizens’ (Brabazon, 1998: 13). Our homeland may not be physical, but it is a realm where “simulations are more real than reality” (Hicks, 1996: 75), “experience becomes fiction” and television is our ‘shared reality’ (Hopkins, 1995: 16). As a consequence, *all* members of our culture are diasporic. By its very nature, no one actually physically inhabits the homeland. This might seem a bold claim, given that ‘diaspora’ is a term usually reserved for national or ethnic identities displaced outside of a physical homeland, rather than generational or social identities, especially those with no fixed, cultural address. But there may be something to this: it is possible that this, in part, gives rise to the alienation and dispossession experienced by, and often written about, the Generation X culture.

For Anglo Australian Gen Xers, this sense of disconnection is acute. There is a disconnection from other generations, from society and its institutions, from meaning, and also from the land. The issue of land and belonging is particularly troubling for us. Alienation and exile form the central theme for much of Australian literature (Pons, 2001) which is perhaps not solely due to our country’s post-colonial condition. Brown (2001: 126) captures a similar feeling of disconnect when writing of Gen X New Zealanders, describing it as a sense of “living in Someone Else’s Country” but in her essay this dislocation seems to be attributable to a combination of factors, one of the most notable being the inexorable forces of the market and the changes it has effected in people’s everyday lives. Whilst this holds true for Australian Gen Xers, too, a multi-layered sense of trespass and repudiation has also entered into us that has moral, psychic and physical dimensions.

Ours is a country haunted by the spectre of genocide and shaped actively – strategically – by its ability to control its borders. As a penal colony its ‘national’ origins can be

found in these borders; its suitability for exile is the root of its genesis. It is difficult to identify or describe the impact of this, although Gunew explores the processes brought into play and their effect, an account rather disturbing because there is something in it that chimes true:

The boundaries of the penal colony had been internalized by its inhabitants to constitute procedures of normalization. On the other hand, the emigrants... had to be made aware that they were crossing boundaries and that, indeed, they would never stop crossing boundaries all their lives. By definition, to be a *new* Australian was to be a boundary crosser, a transgressor, in the eyes of those who like to think that they had already been t/here. (1990: 111)

Occurring at the median point where one of the definitional boundaries of the Gen-X cohort lies, it was as recently as 1967 that a referendum saw those recognised by law as Australians vote for Indigenous Australians to be recognised also as citizens of Australia, and not part of its flora and fauna. While in our lifetime we have been an active part of few changes of which we can be proud, the Mabo and Wik decisions of 1992 and 1996 which legally acknowledged Indigenous occupation are notable exceptions (although their potential remains unrealised) that changed the scope and tenor of historiographical debates (Veracini, 2003). We might say that our generation has grown up with an awareness of multiplicity, of other peoples and perspectives, and a deep suspicion of historicity and the Australian settler consciousness. Forays into the interior, the turning of land into pasture (and land holdings), tales of big, bold deeds carried out by big, bold men: the legend of the Australian settler unravels with very little pulling, spinning into different tales which seem at once both far removed and strangely extant.

‘Unfit’ though Australia may be “for (European) human beings” (Pons, 2001: 142), or perhaps precisely because of this, its landscape is nevertheless inextricably linked to our culture and makes Australian Gen Xers fundamentally different from our counterparts scattered in other parts of the world.

Adrift...

Having travelled extensively in America and having lived in New York for two years – and having been confronted by the ‘other’ which Said once famously said both “consolidates our identity” and puts it at risk (cited in Ahluwalia, 1996: 4) – I find that there are some observable differences between American and Australian Generation Xers which may be due to geography and our ambivalent relationship to the land.

In America, urbanization feels absolute. Despite the fact that, like Australia, it is a relatively young country (‘young’ in the sense of ‘discovered’ by European explorers), it is a place in which everything feels compressed and intensified. Its vigour has produced a crowded history and a cleverness which has seen the natural almost completely subjugated by the synthetic or manmade. American Generation Xers live in uncompromisingly urban surrounds. Their cities are of a size that is incomprehensible. Their modern, manmade structures seem, paradoxically, like petrified, primordial matter. Perhaps this compounds the problem which, according to some theorists (Walsh

and Bahnisch, 1999), Generation Xers have in anchoring ourselves in the here and now and “locating ourselves historically” (Sarup, 1988, cited in Hopkins, 1995: 17). For all the advents of technology, signposts of the future and the ephemeral nature of films, television and advertising, American cities feel immutable, almost ancient, and certainly implacable to me. They are the perfect haunt for a culture that “feeds off itself” (Hopkins, 1995: 16).

In Australia, it is the boundless space which is incomprehensible and the land which is primordial. Most of us may live in cities but we are “surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by the desert – a war of mystery on two fronts” (Winton, 1993, cited in Taylor, 1996: 287). For non-Indigenous Australians the space of interior Australia is dizzying. We have nothing to help us decipher the landscape, no spiritual connection to make the land intelligible.

We simply do not belong. For the non-Indigenous, Australia is an uncongenial land. Our relationship with the land is epistemic and has been hollowed out over some 200 years by an accumulation of knowledge selected and shaped by a speculative disposition. We do not dream dreams like those spoken of by Pat Dodson (1999), of Lingiari’s grandfather, “walking carefully through the spinifex, his toes curling into the red soil, following the spoor of a wounded kangaroo,”³ and neither can we understand them through text, for the lives of Indigenous Australians and their ancestors cannot be captured within the standards of written English. Clustered around the ‘civilized’ edges of Australia, where the institutions of the state reside among leafy parks and monuments, our dreams and remembrances of Australia are in many respects confined by ‘inherited barriers’ and the “striated spaces cross-hatched by psychic or real borderlines... that prevent the emergence of new ways of thinking” (Conley, cited in Buchanan and Parr, 2006: 95). Our ancestors’ dreams might consist of mustering cattle, tending the land, mending fences and dancing in the town hall, or of a network of footpaths, driveways, suburban plots with evenly spaced roses, and oceans netted so that we might swim safely. And if, as the Gen-X credo goes, “purchased experiences don’t count” (Coupland, 1991: 87), might not the same be said of those that have been borrowed, stolen, or otherwise acquired by generations of ‘settlers’ before us? This leaves us both literally and figuratively with the problem of reconciliation, which remains unresolved and is a constantly undermining presence, eating at our memories and our sense of self, leaving us rudderless.

The feeling of being cast away from place and time and yet subject to history’s domination of the future is beautifully captured by McCarthy in his Border Trilogy. Although set in a different time and country, the story of John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses* is one of borders and transgression, an unruly land, a search for a life that does not exist and the inevitable reckoning that comes when one tries to defy the world that ‘lies waiting’ “between the wish and the thing” (1993: 238). Towards the end of the novel, after the reckoning, John Grady’s friend, Rawlins, sensing that his friend is still

3 In 1966 Vincent Lingiari led the Wave Hill walk out, a strike by Indigenous stockmen who worked on one of the largest cattle stations in the Northern Territory of Australia, demanding conditions and pay equal to non-Indigenous workers. Wave Hill station was owned by Vestey’s, and English conglomerate that built an empire through the exploitation of its Indigenous workforce.

not at rest or peace asks him where he will go, where his country is, given that his homeland “aint [his] country.” “I dont know, [says] John Grady. I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country” (1993: 299). Notably, Rawlins does not answer. There is something enigmatic, obscure and deeply felt about John Grady’s response that accords the land a presence and power beyond our comprehension and acknowledges its true condition as unknowable. It also, though, hints that its fate is entwined with the peoples whose lives unfold and play out across its surface (but never at its core), locked in an unceasing tension. For John Grady, who is in many respects the transgressor of the novel, the imagined land proves to be illusory. This does indeed “[cure] him of his sentiments” (1993: 238) as Alfonsa predicts, however it does not embitter him.

We might take some comfort from this, and we might also learn from John Grady’s journey and coming of age. For Australia isn’t really our country, either, and neither can we live in cyberspace. However transient, visitant or even unwelcome this may make us feel, we can be deepened by our experience of things and this can bring its own kind of solace and growth, and a potentially subversive courage. There is a release to be found in the melancholia of alienation; the wariness with which outsiders have been regarded since time immemorial may well be justified. As both Bhabha and Butler suggest, liminal lives are unpredictable, non-conforming and potentially destabilizing. They are therefore threatening. More than a protest, they have the potential to radically and persistently interrupt the “illusion of ontological stability” (Salih, 2004: 11).

The fraught nature of our relationship with the land notwithstanding, the Australian coast, bush and desert are part of our subconscious and deeply symbolic (Jalland, 2001; Taylor, 1996). Most Australian Generation Xers have a direct connection to the coast, the bush or the ‘country’, meaning the arable land on the fringe of the bush. We were either born in coastal towns, the bush or the country, or have parents who were born in these places, and therefore relatives who still reside in non-urban Australia. The result is that urbanisation in Australia does not feel quite so bare-knuckled, individualistic and entrenched. Its cities feel less dominating, less insidious than American cities. Here there is the sense that people leave for the weekend, whereas in America urbanization and its concomitant brutality is inescapable, except perhaps through an endless succession of anesthetizing images and sound bites. This makes Australian Gen Xers fundamentally different to our American counterparts. In Australia the landscape is a “sign for the nation... and a repository of dreams and misapprehensions” (Radok, 1997: 14). Its peculiarities and dangers are world famous and recognisably ‘Australian’ (Hogben and Fung, 1997; Jalland, 2001; Taylor, 1996). “The importance of the personal journey in the landscape of Australia” was and is “a source of inspiration to Australian contemporary artists” (Bowers, 2004: 18). For many Generation Xers, our personal journeys of discovery have taken place, in part, in non-urban Australia. “Drenching light, heat in the nostrils,” (Krauth, 2004: 250) clay, sand and soil – things you can actually touch and smell – these are real, physical things that we have absorbed.

A journey that takes place in a wholly urban setting must surely be very different. Although Australian Generation Xers know all too well the “dead reaches of suburbia” (Greer, 2002, cited in Speed, 2004: 56), we do have some ‘referents’ and what Brabazon calls “anchors in the real” (1998: 11). Rather than Australia, it is in America

that Greer's dark vision has been realized: the boredom that terrifies all Generation Xers has "deepened into total inertia and deep silence" (cited in Speed, 2004: 56). It is a place where "absolutely nothing [happens] except behind the closed doors of teenagers' bedrooms, on the Net and on the phone" (Greer, 2002, cited in Speed, 2004: 56). The result is serious disconnection from society.

In It, But Not of It...

Born with brown hair and see-through skin in a time and country where blue-eyes, tanned skin and blonde hair was recognised as the typical, physical features of an Aussie, I always felt vaguely on the fringe of things, a bit of an outsider. My interactions with the land were fugitive: ocean swims stolen in the early hours of morning or at dusk when the sun was low and the beaches empty; coloured, speckled eggs stolen at dawn from the nests of mallee birds. The land and coast is lovely, but it is also physically cruel to someone fair and small, determined not to wear ridiculous hats.

The sub-culture of my youth was burned in effigy by Lette and Carey in their 1979 novel *Puberty Blues*. The exploits of a group of young surfer chicks illustrated within the pages brought to the attention of parents a sub-culture which was nothing short of scandalous. The pre-requisite for the in-group in this culture (in addition to the blonde hair) was, to borrow a phrase from another Australian writer, long legs, "smooth and brown like a kid's back in summer" (Stow, 1965: 158).

If you didn't have these physical qualities, you didn't belong, and needless to say, the majority of young, adolescent girls aren't blessed with these attributes. This left a lot of us dwelling on the fringes of a culture already viewed by others as profoundly different to that of previous generations. What do the outsiders of an 'outsider culture' do? Enter stage left, the Generation X culture, a culture which celebrates anti-belonging and makes it acceptable to look for more desirable identities on the shelves of the "global cultural supermarket" (Mathews, 2000: 16). Mathews contends that the cultural supermarket is one of the 'shallowest' levels of culture, implying that it is not really a 'way of life' and is behaviour that can be controlled and changed. This brings us to the core of Generation Xers' identity. Whilst the browsing, sampling, consumer-oriented behaviour of Generation Xers may be likened to "the peasant who acquires a transistor radio and a taste for Coca-Cola" (Mathews, 2000: 16), the forces which shaped and continue to drive Generation X have their roots in a level of culture altogether deeper. The shaping of Generation Xers has taken place by stealth at a level 'beyond the self's control' and is an experience and 'way of life' that we are only just beginning to comprehend (Mathews, 2000: 15).

Mathews (2000: 15) is spot on, however, when he suggests that the freedom to choose aspects of one's identity is spurious: "Choice is not free, but it seems to be free."

Choice is the poisoned chalice of Generation X and comes at a cost. We seem to have dealt with change and an endless array of options with admirable sophistication but in fact it has left a damaging legacy. "Caught up in the processes of inventing a self" (Hopkins, 1995: 15) we have turned our backs on the darker side of our culture. For

those of us with ‘anchors’ or connections to the land and ocean, the folly of this can be examined through metaphor. Writing of the ocean in *Land’s End*, Winton recalls his father’s advice: “Never turn your back on the sea,” his father warns. “For every moment the sea is peace and relief, there is another when it shivers and stirs to become chaos. It’s just as ready to claim as it is to offer” (cited in Taylor, 1996: 288).

The ambiguous world of Generation X is rather like Winton’s ocean: a hedonist’s paradise but also treacherous, its shores proffering only “things torn free of their life or their place” (cited in Taylor, 1996: 288). For those of us ‘in it but not of it’ it also has an icy loneliness. In our efforts to avoid definition we have neither escaped stereotyping nor found what Matthews (2000: 16) calls a “sense of home [and] fixed belonging”. It is no accident that the alternative term for Generation X is the ‘Lost Generation’ (Rymarz, 2004).

This is a culture that has conspired to “disconnect us, one from another, from institutions, from ideas and from ideals” and has left many of us ‘precariously alone’ (Hickey and Fitzclarence, 1998: 9). As Eckersley (1997) shrewdly observed, sometimes this becomes untenable: “when Generation X loses it, they can lose it big” (cited in Burton, 2000: 55). But if we are disconnected and undecided, lost and dispossessed, we might also be better equipped than others to dwell in that in-between space, more receptive to ambiguity and open to (even part of) those who live at what Bhabha calls the nation’s ‘edge’ or ‘margin’, the ‘wandering peoples’ who “will not be contained within... the national culture... but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation” (1990: 315). We are knots of ambivalence and empathy, unstable and uncertain. We may not have the comfort of belonging, but neither do we experience discomfort when we encounter the Other, because we are other to ourselves.

So who are we? May it remain an unanswerable question, for in the instant we answer we are implicated in a performativity that effects our own finitude, transformed from something unaccountable and uncountable into grist to the state’s mill, no longer a vexatious puzzle, but quantifiable, reducible and susceptible to “the gathering of incriminatory statistics” (Bhabha, 1990: 291). If we look closely towards the end of Bhabha’s essay, *DissemiNation* (1990: 320), we find a call to action: “It is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity.” For Gen Xers, having determinedly left the fold and all its conventions that we abhor but nevertheless dogged by the (rather conventional) need to belong, Bhabha gestures toward a beguiling space where we might find a sense of communion, a celebration of difference and an unceasingly transitional reality impossible to regulate. In this liminal space there is no transcendent ideology and the glittering array of peoples and possibilities seems nothing less than redemptive.

However, it will be tricky to uphold this multitudinousness and address injustice in our world of colonial governmentality if it is only when “the voices of dissent remain individual” that the “boundaries of national culture are open” (Bhabha, 1994: 94), especially when it seems only ‘collective dissension’ or unification achieves change.

The difference between John Grady's world and ours is that his is "redeemable in blood" (McCarthy, 1993: 5) whilst ours requires dexterity with sophisticated instruments designed to privilege certain views, and is under the control of those skilled at deploying Deleuze and Guattari's 'order-words' on behalf of the state. Our world is a place where people burrow down paths of specialisation that "[blunt] the power of the larger questions" (May, 2005: 3) and predestined public policy is invoked, emerging out of ancient philosophical foundations that spawned long ago the liberal theory that is now the grid for our thinking. The debates that take place here seem to be foregone conclusions; they are recitations shaped by the "constraints that haunt our language" (May, 2005: 11) and based on research that "introduces beforehand what it seeks to find" (Derrida, 1978; 2002: 193). In the main, they are also moderated by those hard men of Vestey's.

If we are to be inclusive of the excluded and enable absence to make its presence felt, we have to champion the creation of 'smooth spaces', confront the pitiless nature of Alfonso's puppeteer, and be wide open to uncertainty. Then, one evening, standing in that strange half light of dusk after all the policy makers have gone home, we might feel some kind of instability enter into and occupy the space around us and begin to swarm. We might feel something permeate us, and though it might be foreign to us we will recognise it and know it to be sentience and that until now we have been complicit in our own zombification. We will be no more certain of anything than we were before but the thrum of anxiety and its accompanying white noise might abate, leaving us permanently altered. In this condition, the melancholia will stir and turn inside us and it will be the dreams of others that become lucid, and we will treat them with tenderness and gravity. Now that's an event worth waiting for.

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