Honors Thesis Proposal

For

Promising Young Students: Short Stories

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When Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz addressed an audience at the University of Central Florida in October 2013, he asked his audience to identify by certain criteria, asking us to raise our hands if we identified as Hispanic, immigrants, of the African diaspora, students, and so on and so forth. He wanted to know who in the audience he shared things in common with: similar backgrounds, experiences, and identifiers. When he described students, I was shocked. As he put it, we are “probably overworked, and up to (our) nostrils in debt” (Lecture). While my cohorts and I still were not quite cast in a positive light, for once, it felt like he gave us something we were not used to getting: the benefit of the doubt. It was a far cry from how I am used to hearing my generation described: technology-addicted, taking “selfies” (pictures of ourselves) the way we ought to be taking our vitamins; entitled, somehow having the audacity to expect some form of employment after being raised to think nothing other than, “I am going to college”; and lazy, a label so broad even I cannot comprehend how anyone has deemed it fit for a group that encompasses an entire third of America (reared, mind you, by another third of America). So when Díaz questioned his audience at UCF in October 2013, I found myself determined to write about myself: a Millennial, a student, a woman, a person of color. I realized that because of my identity as many of those things, I was, in many groups, an “other,” and that my identifying as such presented me with unique challenges.

Millennials—individuals born between 1981 and 2000—hold a shaky place in the hearts of those who judge us; sometimes we’re terrible, sometimes we’re celebrated. In May 2013, TIME Magazine released an article on Millennials, titled it “The Me Me Me Generation,” and then argued in its headline that despite how awful they are, Millennials would be the ones to “save us all.” Despite its claim, the article failed to address why Millennials will save the world. It did not, however, fail to portray us as negatively as possible. Early in the article, reporter Joel
Stein describes defines Millennials as teens and twenty-somethings; he claims he has to specify our age for us since we “grew up not having to do a lot of math in (our) heads, thanks to computers” (1). He does not address that the median age for readers of TIME Magazine is actually forty-eight, according to TIME Magazine itself, so he is actually doing the math for his own generation, but I digress.

Stein cites facts and figures about narcissistic personality disorder (he claims it’s nearly three times more common among twenty-somethings than adults sixty-five and over) (1) but correlation does not imply causation. At some point, Stein even borders on insensitive when he describes “poor Millennials” as having “even higher rates of narcissism, materialism and technology addiction in their ghetto-fabulous lives” (2). He does not define “poor” or “ghetto-fabulous” (which is probably for the best).

I could argue against many of the claims Stein makes in his article, but that is not the intent of this thesis. The intent of this thesis is to explore the ways in which Millennials navigate through psychological landscapes, and how that navigation is made more difficult by the unique challenges we face. I will not hesitate to point out the following, however: that a 2010 Pew Research Center survey of over two thousand adults aged eighteen to twenty-three found that fifty-two percent of those polled claimed “being a good parent” as their highest priority. Thirty percent reported that having a successful marriage was their highest priority, and in third place, twenty-one percent claimed it was most important to “help others in need.” And where did having a high salary, free time, and acquiring fame rank? At fifteen, nine, and one percent, respectively (“Millennials”). It’s almost like us Millennials are trying to save our own worlds.

Millennials are a generation brimming with potential. We have more information at our fingertips, on our phones, than someone might have come across in an entire lifetime just a
century ago. We are technology-savvy, digitally social, and capable of reaching hundreds of people at once. For many of us, higher education is not only a privilege; it is a standard, even if it means taking out thousands of dollars’ worth of student loans.

Despite this, we are constantly criticized, and I do see our faults. For one, we are pathologically lonely; we feel compelled to share any mediocre detail about our lives with hundreds of friends through a handful of social media platforms. A single scroll through my Facebook newsfeed, for instance, reveals little more than a few pictures of my friends’ pets, a few pictures of my friends’ lunches, a few cool articles, and a lot of “selfies”. We have difficulty facing ourselves—as Díaz put it in his lecture to the University of Central Florida, “if you are even remotely cute, you are in a perpetual state of dating, talking to someone, or thinking about talking to someone. We date like being single will get us shot” (Lecture). Even Stein readily admits that we are a generation raised on participation ribbons and inclusivity, constantly seeking validation. We are an ironic generation, but I like to think of us as not unlike Yunior, a recurring character in Díaz’s work, who thinks of himself as “…weak, full of mistakes, but basically good” (This Is How 4). Despite his scathing claims, I think Stein would probably agree. He claims Millennials are nice—“more accepting of differences, not just among gays, women and minorities but in everyone” (7).

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Examining my identity as a Millennial forced me to examine other labels with which I identify (namely, my identity as a Hispanic female). I want to write about female protagonists for two reasons. The first is that in readings for my classes, my peers always notice (and question) when a story is told from a female’s point of view. When the protagonist of any given reading is a male, however, it goes unchallenged (and largely, I believe, unnoticed). The second reason I
choose female protagonists is because to be a young female in 2013 is a wholly unique experience. We are, in a sense, expected to be Wonder Women. There is an immense pressure to be both pretty and smart—we are often the daughters of liberated women, after all, so we have no excuse for not being educated and self-sufficient. If we’re too pretty, however, we are viewed as probably not actually smart, and in the event that we are both pretty and smart, we’re intimidating, maybe even threatening. And if we are really smart, but not very pretty at all, then forget it all, abort mission. Sometimes, it’s like our accomplishments are contextualized by our aesthetics.

One of the first books I read this semester was Toni Morrison’s A Mercy, which narrates the sentiments of a slave girl in the 1600s. She writes: “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal” (Morrison 191). I was struck by how that line resonated with me, though I come from a position of privilege. Unlike the novel’s protagonist, for instance, I am a free person; she and I are literally hundreds of years apart. So what is it about being a female in 2013 that made me feel like an open wound? It is plain fact that even in 2013, women are discriminated against. According to the Center for American Progress, for instance, women still earn seventy-seven percent of what their male counterparts earn, even though women are outpacing men in acquiring college degrees. Pay inequities even exist between women of different races. (Glynn and Powers, “Top 10 Facts”) Also, the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault reports that one in four women will experience sexual assault during her academic career (“College Campuses”). It may not be the case that women are still viewed as inferior to men (or at least, no one would readily admit to holding such a belief), but there are certainly institutional powers at play to indicate that the sentiment exists. Although I am a free
woman in 2013, I still face unique challenges; those challenges often make me feel vulnerable, like an open wound.

Morrison was not the first of my literary influences to liken being a female to a perpetual feeling of vulnerability. Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, for example, explores what it is like to come of age as a Hispanic woman. Esperanza, the book’s protagonist, is sexually assaulted, and following the attack, she tells her older friend Sally: “Why did you leave me all alone? I waited my whole life. You’re a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong… Sally, you lied, you lied. He wouldn’t let me go. He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl” (Cisneros 100). In this scene, Esperanza’s desire for romantic love (as it is portrayed for her in books and magazines) makes her vulnerable to attention from men (and by extension, in this case, sexual assault). Young women today are similarly vulnerable, not just to physical assault but emotional assault as well. This emotional assault comes in many forms, including oppressive standards of beauty portrayed in popular culture.

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Prior to beginning my thesis, I experienced little desire to read works by Hispanic writers. I told myself that I could not relate to their experiences, the experiences of immigrants, or the experiences of children of immigrants with parents working blue-collar jobs. I found myself drenched in privilege relative to the characters in these works; my mother, having emigrated from Cuba when she was just a child, speaks flawless English. She belongs to what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the “one and a half generation”: children born abroad, but reared in the United States (4). I, having been born and raised in the United States, learned English first and utilize it far more than I use Spanish. I grew up surrounded by American and Cuban culture, an experience I will elaborate on later in this proposal.
In telling myself that the work of Hispanic writers was not relevant to my interests, I completely dismissed the notion that fiction can be an exercise in empathy. I failed to consider the huge opportunity that writing and language give to oppressed and marginalized groups: it lends a voice to the otherwise voiceless. As Alma Gómez writes in “By Word of Mouth,” “we (Latinas) need una literatura that testifies to our lives, provides acknowledgement of who we are: an exiled people, a migrant people, mujeres en lucha” (7). Other scholars have expressed a similar sentiment. Victor Villanueva writes, “The narrative of the person of color validates. It resonates. It awakens, particularly for those of us who are in institutions where our numbers are few” (15).

With this in mind, I gorged myself on writing by Hispanics. Three authors influenced me the most: Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, and Jennine Capó Crucet. In a lot of ways, my narrow-minded beliefs were confirmed because I really did not share the experiences many of these authors’ characters had. Unlike Yunior—a recurring character in the work of Díaz—I did not up grow up dirt poor, raised by a blue-collar working mother married to a missing father. Still, I could relate to his feeling like an outsider. Unlike Esperanza in The House on Mango Street, I had never experienced sexual assault. Still, I could relate to the way she craved freedom, escape, how she described herself as “a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (Cisneros 9). Esperanza wants a life that is drastically different than the one the trapped women on Mango Street live. My own experiences relate to this; growing up in Miami, I desperately wanted to forge a different life for myself, and like Esperanza, I eventually did through writing and education.

A similar sentiment—that is, a desire to achieve something greater than what is laid out for us—is expressed in How to Leave Hialeah, which has perhaps influenced the direction of this thesis the most. The book contains stories, some interrelated, and most of which take place in
Miami, Florida. Using Miami as the setting for this collection provides the stories with a cultural context, as they feature the dynamics of Hispanic families and Spanish speakers. As a writer, I often struggle with setting, choosing to focus instead on character and conflict. Consequently, some of my work tends to read like it takes place in a vacuum. Like Capó Crucet, however, I chose to set my collection in Miami for two reasons. For one, I grew up there, and am familiar with the area and many of the sentiments Capó Crucet’s characters express. In the titular story of her collection, for instance, the narrator states that after four years away at college, she says claims she had to leave her hometown in order to realize she ever wanted to return (Capó Crucet 159). I view Miami as a weird sort of Promised Land. It opened a Pandora’s Box of opportunity for my parents and the parents of my cohorts, but it also did a fair amount of soul-crushing, revealing the American Dream as an ambivalent promise.

As previously stated, growing up, I wanted to escape badly, to leave behind the obligations of quinceañeras and Nochebuenas, to shed my fractured Spanish (which was always, always accommodated by my well-meaning Grandmother). I knew I wasn’t white, but I didn’t want to be Latina. I saw myself as an American (whatever that means), and to validate my heritage for scholarship purposes I’d write a killer essay and pepper some Spanish words here and there to make myself sound ethnic. Such was my narrow-minded stance on my own heritage. When I came to Orlando for my undergraduate degree, that all changed. Whether I had actually earned my scholarships was never a topic of debate until I got to college and many of my peers didn’t qualify because they were not Hispanic; many of them claimed I’d been given a “free handout.” Once, a porcelain-skinned friend asked me, “So, is your skin always that color? That is so cool.” In that moment, I felt like a unicorn. Perhaps that’s why the following passage in “How to Leave Hialeah” resonated with me so strongly: “…claim Hialeah fiercely since it’s all people
ask you about anyway. They’ve never seen hair so curly, so dark. You have never felt so Cuban in your life, mainly because for the first time in your life, you are consistently being identified as Mexican or something” (Capó Crucet 160).

I finally truly embraced Cuba, Miami, Spanish, palm fronds, quinceañeras and Nochebuenas the night my roommate, with whom I shared a dorm in my freshman year of college, stumbled upon a Hispanic game show in a spree of brainless channel surfing. Her reaction was a bored, “Ew.” I assumed her reaction was in response to the language being spoken and quickly grew angry at her reaction toward what was likely also playing on the television at my own home in Miami enraging. Suddenly, I claimed my heritage fiercely; I was Alice, and Miami, my Wonderland. Interestingly, I then found myself stuck in a hyphen. To my friends, I was Hispanic; to my own family, I was American. It’s true that I don’t fit neatly into either category, and so I prefer to think of the hyphen the way Pérez Firmat does: “...not a minus sign, but a plus; perhaps we should call ourselves “Cubans + Americans” (16).

The other reason I—and so many other writers—chose to utilize Miami as a setting is because it’s an inherently fun, vibrant city. In one of Crucet’s stories, “Animal Control,” a character states, “This Miami es una locura” (164). And it’s true; Miami is absolutely insane, but its people are well-meaning, hardworking lunatics (myself included).

In terms of craft, there are two experiments in particular I’ve taken from the Hispanic writers I’ve studied. One is that I enjoy writing dialogue without quotations. On one hand, quotation marks are not used in Spanish writing. On the other, I am amazed at how—when done properly—dialogue is clearly conveyed without needing quotations marks to indicate conversation between characters. I view it as a testament to the malleability of language—just like the dialect of English used in Miami is slightly different from what one hears in the rest of
the country. More importantly, however, I have chosen not to italicize my Spanish because I find it pointless. Speakers and readers of English do not need a word italicized to recognize that they are unfamiliar with the term. More over, many Hispanic writers whom I admire choose not to italicize their Spanish. Among these are Sandra Cisneros, Jennine Capó Crucet, and Junot Díaz.

* In the titular story of my thesis, “Promising Young Students,” I wanted to explore the concept of how our loved ones view us in light of our failures. This story is told in an epistolary nature, narrated by Mel, the older sister of a girl named Nena. In this particular story, Mel is forced to watch as her sister unravels under pressure. Nena’s pressure has many sources; in her senior year of high school, she struggles to maintain her academic excellence, while trying to find money for college, while trying to decide where she is supposed to go next. Does she want to go away for the purpose of escaping as far from her mother’s and sister’s lives as humanly possible? Or is it something she wants for herself?

I was interested, in part, in exploring how a family might feel watching their beloved—and, in a sense, their most baffling—possession unravel, and not knowing how to help, having viewed this person as impenetrable and in a perpetual state of having-it-under-control. I chose to make Nena a Millennial through and through. She is a young woman who might go to college hoping to learn, rather than to learn how to do something; she is the daughter of immigrants, the first in her family to go to receive a degree. She is a young woman bursting with potential who feels like she is wasting it, surrounded by an enabling family and not a single example of who she wants to be like. It is worth noting that her name is a nickname in Spanish, a term of endearment (or condescension, depending on your politics) which means “baby girl”; indeed, I wanted Nena to come off as being someone who has been pampered and is trying desperately to
break free, even if she has to suffer (and even if her family has to suffer in bearing witness to her self-imposed misery).

I chose to explore the sibling dynamic because Nena’s breakdown—anyone’s breakdown, really—holds a nearly seductive, self-indulgent nature. But I wanted to explore Mel’s pressures, which mirror Nena’s own (though Nena may not even consider that they exist). While Nena might feel an unendurable pressure to be successful and tread new territory, for instance, her family—and her sister Mel, especially—might feel obligated to be role models. And while they think they might be doing a good job, they will have to realize and come to terms with the fact that that Nena doesn’t want to be anything like them. Surely, this is a difficult sentiment for them to process.

I want Nena and Mel to be recurring characters in my thesis. I am interested in experimenting with epistolary storytelling, and in writing stories narrated by the individuals who interact with Nena, who may pass judgment on her behavior (and be victims of it). I inherited this desire from Junot Díaz, who frequently casts the same characters in his work; while one story might be a narration of Yunior exploring the strange boy in his town who was attacked by a pig, an entire novel might be narrating Yunior’s experience living with an overweight nerd who wants to be the next J.R.R. Tolkien. Though these stories are about other people, they are Yunior’s, and plenty is learned about him through his narration. We learn, for instance, that he loves books almost as much as he loves women (and having affairs with them, too). The picture we get of Yunior’s personality is just as clear as the story he tells us. Yet sometimes, readers are told the same story—or a part of the same story—from another character’s point of view, altering the story entirely. Still, what happens is that a missing piece is added to the puzzle that is the
larger story. While each of Díaz’s works can stand on their own, for example, collectively, they create something larger: a portrait of an immigrant family living in the United States.

In another story of my thesis, “Like Ash,” I wanted to explore the same concept explored in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. I was inspired by how Holden Caulfield expresses a sentiment of wanting to save children from running off a cliff (and metaphorically, from growing up), and how he desperately to save these children from growing up and experiencing the same pain he experiences. But Holden goes insane; the premise of the novel is that he has landed himself in an asylum. Is there a way, then, to convey this sentiment without a protagonist going insane? After all, most of us are aware that even our best efforts cannot save everyone. Despite this, we manage to keep functioning. I was curious to see how a narrator (in this case, Mel) might convince a child to choose to be good in a world full of bad; how she might stop a child from running off a cliff, so to speak.

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In *Life on the Hyphen*, Firnat states that exile breeds writers (159). Though I have never experience exile from home the way many of my ancestors have, I have felt exiled due to many of the labels I identify with: Millennial, Hispanic, and female. And so, my intent with this thesis is to examine how people like me come of age, and to provide a voice for myself, and for my generation; to paint us not as statistics or personality disorders, but as what we are: fully-formed, well-intending, promising young students.
Works Consulted


