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The Millennial Generation in American Literature

*Generace mileniálů v americké literatuře*

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I confirm that I wrote the submitted bachelor's thesis on the topic "The Millennial Generation in American Literature" myself under the supervision of my supervising professor. I also confirm that I included a complete list of sources and literature.

In Olomouc .....  
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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to introduce the Millennial Generation in America and American Literature, examine the two main convictions about this generation and, subsequently, ascertain which of those convictions is more veracious based on the works of experts and the works of the selected American Millennial authors.

The Millennial generation has been chosen as a topic of this thesis because the term “millennial” is being used very frequently, especially in the US, in many contexts, by many people, in a mainly bad light. There are two main conceptions about the Millennial generation. The first one is that it is an intelligent, promising and special generation with a great potential to salvage and improve the world. The second opinion is that it is a narcissistic, self-absorbed, and not caring generation who is destined to destroy the American nation and the world as it is now. Being part of this generation myself, I was curious to learn more about this generation as I believe that this generation should not be completely condemned. My aim is to determine which one of the opinions is closer to the truth.

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part concerns with the term “millennial”—who this generation is, how it was shaped, what the members of it are like, what are its main characteristics and how it is viewed by the American society. The second part is dedicated to the analysis of the main characteristics of the Millennial generation taken from critical sources and their demonstration in the works of the three selected authors and their works.

In the first chapters of the thesis I will deal with the term generations as a social group of people and provide the basic information about how generations are created, shaped, and how they behave. Furthermore, I will introduce the most important generations that, in some way and to some extent, influence or influenced Millennials and will help with their determination and characterization. As there are many generations in the American history, I will mention only those that are crucial for this thesis.

For the second part of the thesis I have chosen three American authors who are a part of the Millennial generation and whose works, in my opinion, display the characteristics and opinions of this generation. The first author I have chosen is Marina Keegan, an American Yale student, and her collection of essays and short stories *The Opposite of Loneliness* (2014). The second author is Durga Chew-Bose and her book of

essays *Too Much and Not the Mood* (2017). The last author I have chosen is Ocean Vuong and his collection of poems *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016).

I have selected each of these authors for a specific reason connected to the lives of Millennials. Marina Keegan was a Yale student on the verge of graduating when she was writing her fiction and non-fiction works. Therefore, she could provide the inner look into the struggle of student debt, finding a job, and pursuing one's dreams. Furthermore, Durga Chew-Bose, a woman of color pursuing her writing career in Brooklyn, writing about social issues and everyday happenings. Lastly, Ocean Vuong who I have chosen for two reasons. Firstly, because his work has been praised in various magazines and awarded by many prizes. Secondly, his topics and themes of his poems are very actual and crucial, and reflect the struggles and obstacles of Millennials, mainly those of immigrant parents. In my opinion, together, these three authors cover the most significant and relevant topics of the Millennial generation and, therefore, provide a sufficient material for describing the generation.

## 2. Generations

Julián Marías said in his book that “to ask ourselves to which generation we belong is, in large measure, to ask who we are.”<sup>1</sup> The expansion of the study of generations as social groups emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by numerous historians and researchers. One of them was the historian duo Neil Howe and William Strauss that defines generation as “a society-wide peer group, born over a period roughly the same length as the passage from youth to adulthood (around twenty or twenty-one years), who collectively possess a common persona.”<sup>2</sup> This means that each group of people, a generation, comprises of “cohorts.” Ryder defines cohorts as “the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same event within the same time interval.”<sup>3</sup> This means individuals born and raised around the same time and place, experiencing same historical events and possessing very similar personality traits. All people are different, but belonging to the same generation means being influenced by others’ personas and, therefore, having very similar personality traits. In their book *Generations* they illustrated the generational theory and introduced the 18 generations throughout four centuries of American history<sup>4</sup>, Millennials being “the eighteenth New World generation, the fourteenth to know the American nation and flag, the fifth (and last) to be born in the twentieth century.”<sup>5</sup> For this thesis, the most important generations are the last four who somehow, either personally or through their impact in history, contributed to the upbringing, developing and shaping of the Millennial generation, who is the main concern of this thesis and will be introduced in greater detail in the next chapter. The four generations that “comprise the adults—in their various age roles, from great-grandparent to older sibling—who are setting the stage on which youth is about to enter”<sup>6</sup> are the G.I. Generation, the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers and the Generation X.

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<sup>1</sup> Julián Marías, *El método histórico de las generaciones* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1949), 107. Translation retrieved from [www.jstor.org/stable/489937](http://www.jstor.org/stable/489937), accessed February 24, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Random House USA, 2000), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Norman B. Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” *American Sociological Review* vol. 30, no. 6 (1965): 845, [www.jstor.org/stable/2090964](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2090964), accessed February 24, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 57.

According to the president of the Pew Research Center, Alan Murray, “generations are a product of a moment in history, they drive history.”<sup>7</sup> Each generation was born in a different part of the history and shaped the culture, politics and social life of that time. Those generational shifts are passed down to the following generations and it is up to them to either continue to follow them or create their own. When talking about generations, there are two important elements that we must have in mind—the *length* of a generational cohort-group, and its *peer personality*<sup>8</sup>—to help us distinguish one generation from another. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the approximate length of a generation is twenty or twenty-one years, but it is not a fixed number. The length of a generation may differ from one era to another as the world changes. There are many factors that may influence the length of a generation—current events, history, its people. As for the peer personality, it is a generational persona recognized by common age location, beliefs, behavior, and perceived membership in a common generation.<sup>9</sup> We look at the historical events that each generation is raised in, the beliefs and behaviors certain cohort-groups possess and share, and last but not least, we focus on who the members of each generation generally are.

To know what a generation is like, it is important to know the generations that came before it as it helps historians and researchers to measure and predict social and demographic changes. Each generation is shaped by the previous ones by three important factors—technology, parenting and economy—and has its own special role in history. They might not know what their role might be the moment they are born, but throughout their life comes a breaking point that tells them. Howe and Strauss came with the generational theory and introduced the idea of recurring social cycles that repeat themselves every four generations. Based on this theory, Millennials are now repeating the social cycle of the G.I. generation which is linked to them in “the void they leave behind. (...) their upbeat, high-achieving, team-playing, and civic-minded reputation.”<sup>10</sup> G.Is. were the “hero generation” and now this potential of heroism is associated with Millennials who are expected to follow in their footsteps and salvage the nation.

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<sup>7</sup> “Alan Murray – ‘Generations and the New America: Paul Taylor,’” YouTube video, 00:30-00:35, posted by “Pew Research Center,” March 14, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=28&v=u6gG-Q5gv9I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=28&v=u6gG-Q5gv9I).

<sup>8</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Generations*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Generations*, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 51-52.

### 3. Millennial Generation - Millennials - Generation Y – Gen Y

The Millennial Generation. Millennials. Generation Y. Gen Y. And many other labels used for this generation have been seen around the newspaper, the internet, articles, speeches of politicians and influencers for the past decade in all contexts, good and bad, concerning all kinds of areas of interest. Millennials are the generation that is currently reshaping the world as we know it, and they get both praised and blamed for it. Anything that happens in the world—from curing the economy to killing it,<sup>11</sup> from saving the planet to killing it, from using their voices for greater good to being silent about the things that matter—is somehow the result of the Millennial generation’s doing. When they were born and throughout their teen years they were being called special and seen as the priority in the American society—as the generation with greater purpose that will salvage the nation. Now as they are adults, they are sometimes seen as a threat to the traditional American world, even though all they are trying to do is save, fix, and improve the world their elders created. “Once heroic and talented, [they] were suddenly coddled and entitled. Formerly wise beyond [their] years, critics now complain that [they] refuse to grow up.”<sup>12</sup> Those who raised them are now not sure how to deal with them and stop them from creating their own world that differs from the one they had. Thus, who are the Millennials and are they really here to destroy the world as we know it or improve it?

The term “Millennials” was coined by the historian duo Neil Howe and William Strauss in 1987,<sup>13</sup> which soon started to be used to describe this generation by the media and the older generations, replacing the label “Generation Y” (coined by *Advertising Age* in 1993). In their books *Generations* and later *Millennials Rising*, they introduced the latest six main American generations—the Lost Generation, the G.I. Generation, the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers, the Generation X, and the Millennial Generation—and the influences they have on Millennials. Excluding the Lost Generation which could not influence the Millennial generation directly, the four remaining generations are the main reason Millennials are who they are, as they are the ones responsible for the economic, political and social situation of the country. They

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Thompson, “Millennials Didn’t Kill the Economy. The Economy Killed Millennials,” *The Atlantic*, December 6, 2018, [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com).

<sup>12</sup> Shaun Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us: A Cultural History of the U.S. from 1982-Present* (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2018), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 370.

created the world Millennial kids grew up in, became teens and later adults. In many areas, the older generation did a great job—technology, better working conditions for women, women’s voting rights, the greater level and access to education, etc. In other areas—politics, economy, acceptance of minorities, people’s rights, health care—there are things that need to be improved. And it is the destiny of the Millennial generation “to save the broken world of their parents.”<sup>14</sup>

The exact birth span of the Millennial generation differs from one researcher to another. According to Howe and Strauss, Millennials are people born between the years 1982 and 2002.<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Center considers Millennials as those born between the years 1981 and 1996, with those born in 1997 onward being considered part of the new generation, the Generation Z.<sup>16</sup> What most of them agree on is the beginning of the Millennial generation being the start of 1980s.

Millennials are on their way to become the largest generation in American history, even surpassing their parents, the Boomers. In the year 2019 their number should be around 73 million.<sup>17</sup> Their growth is mainly caused by the growing immigration which allowed them to “become, by far, the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history.”<sup>18</sup> Millennials comprise of many different cultures and ethnicities from all around the world—all of Europe, Asia, Latin America—which allows them to create a nation comprised of cultures from every continent, from all the parts of the planet. In their 2000 book *Millennials Rising*, the duo Howe and Strauss provided the numbers of nonwhites and Latino Millennials who accounted 35,5% in 1999.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, the US Census released new data indicating the growth of minority race or ethnic group (a group non-Hispanic or single-race white) with the Millennials representing more than one quarter of the nation’s population with 44,2%.<sup>20</sup> The exact number of the Millennial population varies, also due to the fact that each source uses different starting and ending point of the generation. Now that the next generation, the Generation Z, is emerging, Millennials will probably come second as to the ethnic and

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<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Dimock, “Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins,” *Pew Research Center*, January 17, 2019, [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).

<sup>17</sup> Richard Fry, “Millennials projected to overtake Baby Boomers as America’s largest generation,” *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018, [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).

<sup>18</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> “Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse, Census Bureau Reports,” *The United States Census Bureau*, June 25, 2015, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

racial diversity. Nevertheless, if the next generation surpasses them in number of ethnical and racial minorities, they will not see it as a defeat, but as a triumph. They are the most diverse generation in American history right now and they will proudly pass the scepter when the time comes.

### **3.1. Who are they?**

In their book, Howe and Strauss stated six distinguishing traits Millennials possess: special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured and conventional,<sup>21</sup> which are believed every Millennial shares. In *Millennials Rising*, the generation is portrayed as almost perfect—the number of abortions dropping, teenage suicide dropping, drug use dropping. This might be due to the people they interviewed or the time of writing the book. No generation is perfect, and so are not the Millennials. This generalization might apply to a large number of Millennials, but it does not necessarily hold for the generation as a whole. “Every generation thinks it’s special,”<sup>22</sup> and in many aspects every generation is. “Specialness” is the main trait Millennials are associated with, being it both their weakness and strength. They were born to parents that wanted children because they wanted to have a family, not because it was a requirement of the time. Some, as for example Howe and Strauss, see Millennial “specialness” in how confident they are in what they are doing, how ambitious they are, how they expect safety from both the society and its institutions. Others, as for instance professor of psychology Jean Twenge, have a different perspective of Millennials. Twenge sees them as conceited, individualistic, entitled, narcissistic and not caring about other peoples’ opinions.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Twenge agrees that Millennials are optimistic, but only during childhood and teen years, then the optimism “fades—or even smashes to pieces—once Generation Me hits the reality of adulthood.”<sup>24</sup> There are many people, even fellow Millennials that have something to say against the Gen Y. Everyone has the right to express their opinion. You do not have to like the Millennials, neither agree with them, nor stand or sympathize with them. They are not perfect, they have a lot of things to improve, just give them a chance.

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<sup>21</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> Marina Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness: Essays and Stories*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 205.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 1-16.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generation Me*, 7.

Millennials are said to be not only the largest, and most ethnically and racially diverse generation in American history, but also the most educated and economically disadvantaged one. Young people know that education is an essential device for a better future, not only individual but national. That is why they, from an early age, aspire to one day apply to college. But not every one of them has the chance. The college tuition prices differ from college to college, but they are still much higher compared with two decades ago,<sup>25</sup> when Millennial parents pursued their college degrees. After obtaining their degree, they have to find a job that will help them pay off the tuition debts, and due to the fact that “the United States simply produces fewer and fewer of the kinds of jobs [their] parents had,”<sup>26</sup> it is not an easy thing to do.

Millennials have been, since their birth, called the special generation and have been treated as such. The moment they were born they were coddled, watched, protected and cared for more than any other generation before them by their parents, the government, the school system, everyone. They were seen as the future of the country. As they got older the narrative changed. Suddenly, the Millennial adults were called entitled, self-centered, lazy. They were seen not as the hero and special generation that was once praised, but as “the symbol of American decay.”<sup>27</sup> They started to have their own vision of what a great American society should look like, how it should behave and what values and goals it should have. Once they started to share their view that was different from that of the elders, they became the scapegoats.

To conclude, it is obvious that Millennials are many things, no matter the perspective we incline to. However, “they do care, they are optimistic, and they embrace traditional values of home, family life, community, and education.”<sup>28</sup> They care about the world and its people. They see the injustice, the inequality, the ignorance, the brutality, the ugliness, the problems—and they try to change them. They shine light on the issues that need to be dealt with, even if their ways might sometimes be wrong. Some might call them “Generation Me” but they really are “Generation We.”<sup>29</sup> They might sometimes be narcissistic, self-centered, selfish, and many other bad things, but they are also caring, team-working, optimistic for the future.

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<sup>25</sup> Farrah Powell, “What You Need to Know About College Tuition Costs,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 19, 2018, [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Hobbes, “Generation Screwed,” *The Huffington Post*, December 14, 2017, [www.highline.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.highline.huffingtonpost.com).

<sup>27</sup> Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 185.

<sup>29</sup> Christian Jarrett, “Millennials are narcissistic? The evidence is not so simple,” *The BBC*, November 17, 2017, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

### **3.2. Historical location / Location in history**

History is a main force that shapes generations and helps to locate them in time. It helps us determine why the world we live in came into existence. Each generation has a different history from start to end, that serves as a guideline for the next generations to learn from. “Millennials are the product of great movements of the past:

The Civil Rights Movement and the push for immigration and nationalization reform in the 1960s; the sexual revolutions and the demise of organized labor in the 1970s; the rise of the female working class and the ascendancy of computer technology in the 1980s. (...) [Their] generation is the physical embodiment of sociological changes that more conservative Americans are still unable to come to grips with.”<sup>30</sup>

They are a product of a rich history and for a long time, they did not have a history moving moment themselves. The life of Millennials was without any of the horrors and traumas their elders lived through in their eras—wars, political and economic crises, economic depressions, social movements. Then the world in which they grew up changed and it brought tragic events that shaped them—9/11, terrorist attacks, school shootings (Columbine in 1999 which was a huge turn in school safety), police brutality, racial issues, natural disasters (Hurricane Katrina). The most painful and significant historical tragedy in the Millennial era was the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 which became known as “the bloodiest day on American soil since the Civil War.”<sup>31</sup> This day became a black spot in the memory of the Millennials, whose latest wave was about to be born. All those sad stories resulted in Millennials being worried about their safety everywhere, even school where kids should feel safe. They went through many trainings, learned how to handle any kind of emergency ranging from fire to school shootings.

### **3.3. Who are their parents?**

Knowing the parents of the generation is important for many reasons. Each generation was raised differently—in different ways, during different eras, with different values and goals. The parents that raised Millennials imprinted themselves on their children who are now reshaping the world with the limited resources they were given. “First-

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<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 120.

wave Millennials are especially likely to have Boomer parents. Late-wave Millennials are more likely to have Gen-X parents.<sup>32</sup> This is mainly due to the fact that the Baby Boomer generation delayed having children because they focused more on their career and life. Having children was not that important at that time. This is why there are two generations having children at the same time resulting in the Millennial generation raised by two different styles. First-wave Millennials were born at the beginning of the 1980s while the late-wave Millennials could have been born at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, despite being of two different cohorts, both of those generations can be described as “helicopter parents.”

Having “helicopter parents” meant that the Millennial kids were growing up under a lot of pressure, under constant watch. One of the main reasons for the parents to act that way was because the focus on children had changed. Having children became more important than during the eras of older generations. Parents wanted to make sure that their Millennial children are safe, well educated, and are being raised right. Very frequently one of their parents stayed home looking after them or homeschooling them, or provided a nanny so that their child could be constantly looked after. If they could not stay home, they put their kids to kindergartens and later schools, where supervision was provided during classes, recesses, lunch time and “bus time”. The peak of technology did not only help Boomer and Gen Xer parents monitor what their children were doing on the computer and other electronic devices, but also raise them. As Millennials grew up in the era where women had the opportunity to pursue both their career and motherhood, some Millennials became the “latchkey kids.”<sup>33</sup> This applies mainly to Millennials with Baby Boomer parents. As a result, children were partly raised by the pop-culture, video games, phones and television. Older generations blame the bad upbringing of Millennials on technology a lot, and especially television, but it provided “valuable lessons about the world around them.”<sup>34</sup> Through television—TV shows, sports, music, the news—they discovered their heroes, their idols they could look up to and aspire to become one day. They saw people of all colors, of all cultures, genders and sexual orientations being represented in media. They saw the news worldwide from the couch in their living-room. They saw people fighting for what is right every day, standing up to the people in power who oppressed those who are

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<sup>32</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> “Children who look after themselves at the conclusion of the school day until their parents get home.” Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 248.

<sup>34</sup> Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 72.

somehow different and seen as a threat. Being exposed to technology is the best and worst thing that happened to those Millennial kids. It provided them with knowledge, virtual bridge with every corner of the world, but also daily dose of terrible news that worsens their mental health and brings skepticism about the future.

### **3.3.1. Baby Boomers**

Baby Boomers, or just Boomers, are the generation born between the years 1943 and 1960<sup>35</sup> as a result of the end of the Second World War. The conditions and period they were born in created “a rebellious generation, distrustful of the establishment and keen on finding their own voice.”<sup>36</sup> This generation helped the American society to recover after the Second World War and the Great Depression and set a new path for their children. They were the main generation of adults that brought family, safety and educational standards to a higher level for the Millennial generation, and are also the parents that “[raised] a cohort of kids who are smarter, more industrious and better behaved than any generation before.”<sup>37</sup> Boomer are the generation that rebelled against their parents’, the G.I. and Silent generations, visions, institutions and establishments, and created their own. They brought their own social, cultural and educational changes that current young generations are still dealing with. Until recently, they outnumbered Millennials, which helped them to stay in power. Now that the numbers are on the Millennials’ side, this generation has the power to change that.

### **3.3.2. Generation X**

The second possible parents of the Millennial generation is the Generation X whose birth years range from 1961 to 1981.<sup>38</sup> This generation was born in a time where being a parent was an actual desire and not an expectancy. Generation X parents “pioneered such Millennial trends as greater economic optimism, higher educational ambitions, and less risky career goals,”<sup>39</sup> and that might be the reason why Millennial kids have a much greater relationship with their parents than any other generation before them.

Generation X is the generation of parents that always put their children first—before their own needs, jobs, passions—and made sure that their children would succeed.

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<sup>35</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Generations*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Beverly Searle, “Millennials, Gen X, Gen Z, baby boomers: how generation labels cloud issues of inequality,” *The Conversation*, January 16, 2019, [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com).

<sup>37</sup> David Brooks, “What’s the Matter With Kids Today? Not s Thing,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2000, [www.archive.nytimes.com](http://www.archive.nytimes.com).

<sup>38</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 46.

### 3.4. Millennials in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

When they were born, people drew their future. They made up an image of what their life would look like and raised them accordingly. And Millennials rebelled against it. They did not follow the same paths as their parents and grandparents, they created their own paths. And they have shown that they will continue to make them. The big generational difference can be seen in politics and social activism where Millennials are breaking free of their parents' convictions and choices.

As a group, Millennials are “the least prejudiced about race.”<sup>40</sup> They do not see the color of one's skin as a factor indicating who they are as a person. As the world changes, so do its people. Young people, including the Millennials, tend to be more open-minded and more tolerable when it comes to race, gender, and sexual orientation. They are more tolerant of same sex marriages than any other generation before them. It might be because they are the most racially diverse generation, for now, and they are used to interacting with people of different ethnicities and races from all corners of the world. They do not see different skin color as a problem or a tool to judge people for. This does not mean that race problems do not exist, they do, and especially in America. And Millennials are in the first line to march against it. In *Millennials Rising*, the historian duo claimed that “Millennials have never personally seen black-white race issues divide America.”<sup>41</sup> This might have been truth, until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is marked with such division and riots, where young people marched into the streets with signs, T-shirts and megaphones to stand up for their peers. The Black Lives Matter movement being one of the most significant ones that served as an exposure of long-lasting injustice being swept under the carpet, as police brutality was masked behind white supremacy. Furthermore, it was seen on social media through “hashtags” addressing the current social issues in America and all around the world. Apart from race problems Millennials are also addressing other social issues—inequality, gender rights (+LGBTQ), people rights, police brutality, misogyny, white supremacy, etc.—showing their discontent by being vocal and trying to find the right way to fix it.

Young people are also becoming more involved in politics, despite the elders saying otherwise. They see what their parents and mainly grandparents' choices and votes are doing to their country, and now, as they are all old enough to vote, they can do something about it. With their vote comes the ticket to a better future. But not all of the

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<sup>40</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 218.

<sup>41</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 219.

Millennials do—mainly because they feel like their vote will not make a difference. Unlike their parents, Millennials “are liberal. Even leftist. Flirting with socialist.”<sup>42</sup> After Obama’s initiation of “a right-to-left shift in the country’s political paradigm,”<sup>43</sup> Bernie Sanders was the Millennials’—regardless of their gender or education level<sup>44</sup>—chosen presidential candidate who shared the same visions as them, stood up against the same things and would continue to shape the country the way they wanted. And they did not get him. In the presidential elections in 2016, Sanders would have dominated the youth vote 55% to Trump’s 45% if he had been the Democratic nominee<sup>45</sup> instead of Hillary Clinton. As they are the largest generation in America, they could change the course of America’s politics, but only if each member of the Millennial generation uses their voice and turns up to vote. Now they have to learn to go and vote even if the candidate they were rooting for does not go through and choose the candidate that will better shape the world they live in. The Boomer generation has, until recently, outnumbered other generations. Now, that Millennials are the largest generation in America’s society and the numbers are on their side, they have the chance to remove Boomers from power. All they have to do is vote even though it is getting much harder, especially in poor areas of the United States.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.5. Millennials and literature

The older generations think that Millennial kids do not read anymore. That all they do is sit in front of their computer screens, TVs or looking into their phones. This might be true, but they use their electronic devices for far more than just social media and texting their friends. Reading has become more accessible with internet providing E-books, audio books and online libraries. However, according to *Pew Research Center*, young people are the main age group using libraries,<sup>47</sup> and therefore printed books. And it is not only college students who browse through tens of books for their thesis or research papers, but also high school students, for both academic works and own pleasure. Since

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<sup>42</sup> Derek Thompson, “The Liberal Millennial Revolution,” *The Atlantic*, February 29, 2016, [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com).

<sup>43</sup> Scott, *Millennials and the Moments That Made Us*, 155.

<sup>44</sup> Jim Norman, “Millennials Like Sanders, Dislike Election Process,” *Gallup*, May 11, 2016, [www.news.gallup.com](http://www.news.gallup.com).

<sup>45</sup> Feliks Garcia, “Bernie Sanders would have easily beaten Donald Trump according to new pre-election poll,” *The Independent*, November 11, 2016, [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk).

<sup>46</sup> “How millennials can become a successful generation | Michael Hobbes,” YouTube video, posted by “Big Think,” February 7, 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNQYylbeaEc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNQYylbeaEc).

<sup>47</sup> Pew Research Center, “Younger Americans’ Reading and Library habits,” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, October 23, 2012, [www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org).

they were little, parents bought their little special children books from all the different shelves of bookstores and read them bedtime stories. Once they learned how to read, they read on their own and bought the books that interested them. For many of the Millennial children, books are an important part of their lives. Not only when reading them, but also writing them. They start off with scribbling their ideas, poems and stories on pieces of papers, than posting them on their online blogs or locking them in their drawers. Later, while attending writing courses in schools they publish their writings in the school journals or send them to different competitions. This is usually how Millennial writers begin their writing career. If they are lucky, they get internships in newspapers or journals and continue to pursue their dreams as writers. If not, they still continue to write, just for smaller audiences.

There has not been much written about the Millennial generation as writers and their contribution to the literary world, mainly because most of the Millennials have just recently came of age and their time is yet to come. As stated in the previous chapters of this thesis, Millennials are concerned with family life, the world, its people, and social issues in all forms. Those are also the main themes of their literature. After reading the three selected authors for this thesis—Marina Keegan, Durga Chew-Bose, and Ocean Vuong—I can say, that all of their writings reflect their own personal and family histories mixed with the current state of the world. Their works cover both epic and lyric genres, from short stories, essays, to poems.

The Millennial generation writers have many tools to help them become successful writers. One of the biggest advantages is of having the ability to attend writing courses in both high schools and universities, where they can try to write on different topics, in different genres, writing in college journals, finding out what will suit them the best. Among Millennials, there has not yet been any Shakespeare, Woolf, Hemingway or Poe. Yet. There might never be any such timeless writer that will leave his or hers ineffaceable mark in the literary world until all the human contributions are damned by the explosion of the Sun. A writer that will be cited, examined, and studied for many centuries to come. Nevertheless, each generation of writers produces works that are worth reading, that are full of interesting themes and ideas, providing us with the inside look of what the world during that time looked like.

Michael Hobbes said that “the thing that truly defines [Millennials], is not helicopter parenting or unpaid internships or Pokémon Go. It is *uncertainty*.”<sup>48</sup> As they are facing the scariest financial future since the Great Depression, the uncertainty lies deep in the future of this generation job-wise, home-wise, finance-wise. There are many things that need to be changed to ameliorate the future not only for Millennials, but for the generations to come. “Much of the conversations about Millennials is about [their] choices, rather than [their] options.”<sup>49</sup> Times change, and so does everything else. What once worked for the older generations does not mean that it will work with the following ones. What was once enough for survival—maintain a job, secure the family and simultaneously attend college and still be able to pay off the debt— is not anymore. Times have changed. Millennials’ options have changed. Now it is time that things did too.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Hobbes, “Generation Screwed,” [www.highline.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.highline.huffingtonpost.com).

<sup>49</sup> “HuffPost Highline’s Michael Hobbes Discusses The Millennial Financial Crisis,” YouTube video, 02:10-02:14, posted by “BUILD Series,” January 22, 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9222RTMGRTU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9222RTMGRTU).

#### 4. Marina Keegan

The first author I am going to introduce is Marina Evelyn Keegan. Marina Keegan was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 25 of October in 1989. She was a twenty-two-year-old author, playwright and journalist. She attended Yale University as an English major where she served as a president of the Yale College Democrats, was an intern in *Paris Review* and had a job waiting for her at *The New Yorker*. Nevertheless, she died few days after her graduation in a car accident. Her professor Anne Fadiman said that “when a young person dies, much of the tragedy lies in her promise: what she *would* have done.”<sup>50</sup> In Marina’s case this does not apply. She had done many things in her limited time. She wrote from her heart, shed a light on her close ones, her readers and her classmates, and left a legacy full of optimism, love and hope in her work. The tragedy of her passing is not only the loss of a young person with talent and potential to become a big writer one day, but also of a person who saw the world differently. Who knew that the world was not perfect, that there were things that needed to be changed, but despite that saw the beauty in it. “And I cry because everything is so beautiful (...).”<sup>51</sup>

On account of her passing, she did not write a book herself. Her only book is a collection of essays and stories she wrote during her student years called *The Opposite of Loneliness* (2014). The book was put together and edited by her Yale professor Anne Fadiman, who also wrote the introduction to this book, and her parents. Fadiman taught writing on Yale and Keegan signed up for her class on first-person writing. In the introduction she provides a different look on Marina, not only as a student but as a writer in making. “When she read her work aloud around our seminar table, it would make us snort with laughter, and then it would turn on a dime and break our hearts.”<sup>52</sup> From the words of her professor it is obvious that Keegan had a real talent and potential. Her writing, both fictional and non-fictional, is emotional, optimistic, sincere and hopeful. As far as I can tell, becoming a writer is a tough path with many obstacles, hard work, rejection, failures. Not everyone can survive the tough conditions. Many of her classmates and Ms. Fadiman’s students gave up and found a different path, different goals. But Keegan did not. She knew about the obstacles, she was even told that she would not make it as a writer, but instead of giving up, she arrived to Yale saying “I’ve

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<sup>50</sup> Marina Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, xvii.

<sup>51</sup> “Marina Keegan – ‘Bygones,’” YouTube video, 04:39, posted by “Word Yale,” December 9, 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmr4S0EZ6yQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmr4S0EZ6yQ) .

<sup>52</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, xiii.

decided I'm going to be a writer. Like a real one. With my life."<sup>53</sup> Not being for her tragic accident, she sure would.

The book *The Opposite of Loneliness* is divided into two parts—fiction and non-fiction—with 17 pieces of her writing, nine fictional and eight non-fictional, supplemented by the essay “The Opposite of Loneliness” she read aloud on her graduation day. Keegan’s fiction comprises of short stories and her non-fiction of essays and think pieces. Some of her writings have been previously published online or presented in seminars, and some were shown to the world for the first time. Throughout her fiction and non-fiction, we come upon her thoughts and themes that are essential not only to her writing, but also to our lives and the Millennial Generation itself. One of them is the importance of our own voice. It is important to be vocal about the things that matter – global warming, wars, saving our planet, volunteering and helping others, etc. In the following chapters I intend to demonstrate those themes in her short stories, essays and poems. Firstly, I will talk about the initial essay “The Opposite of Loneliness.” Afterwards, I will move on to her fiction and mention short stories “Emerald City.” From her essays, I will analyze “Why We Care about Whales,” “Song for the Special” and “Even Artichokes Have Doubts.”

#### **4.1. The Opposite of Loneliness**

The opening essay of the book, “The Opposite of Loneliness,” was primarily written for *Yale Daily News*. The essay became viral after her death with more than million of views and later became the title of her collection of essays and stories. The essay covers three and a half pages and is divided into several paragraphs creating one long speech. In her essay she encourages her fellow students, the Yale’s class of 2012, to “not to settle for high-paying Wall Street jobs if talent, passions and dreams pointed them elsewhere.”<sup>54</sup> She believed in passion being the guiding force in our decisions work-wise and life-wise. Through this essay she became an icon for many from her generation.

It begins with the line “We don’t have the word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that’s what I want in life.”<sup>55</sup> The essay was an empowering speech full of optimism, hope and belief that it is never too late to start over, to change our minds and see what the world has prepared for us:

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<sup>53</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, xx.

<sup>54</sup> Frank Rizzo, “Crash Victim Marina Keegan's Essays, Stories In New Book 'Opposite of Loneliness,’” *The Hartford Courant*, April 10, 2014, [www.courant.com](http://www.courant.com).

<sup>55</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 1.

“(…) we can still do anything. We can change our minds. We can start over. The notion that it’s too late to do anything is comical. It’s hilarious. We’re so young. We can’t, we MUST not lose this sense of possibility because in the end, it’s all we have.”<sup>56</sup>

Keegan argues that there is not only one path written for us. We can change our mind every day, every minute. It is never too late to be who we are meant to be. Every student, not just from Yale, can relate to this speech. When one thing ends, one feels like a huge part of his life ends with it. How ‘the best times’ are over and all that is in front of him is just a spin off – getting a job, starting a career, a family. But that’s not really the case, as Keegan says “the best years of our lives are not behind us. They’re part of us and they are set for repetition as we grow up.”<sup>57</sup> Those “best times” are the starting point and door that opens new opportunities and challenges that might be even better than those we left behind. Fighting for our passions, our goals can be tough and lonesome. Keegan also states that young people set their standards and expectations of themselves high and it is sometimes impossible to live up to them. “We’re our own hardest critics and it’s easy to let ourselves down.”<sup>58</sup> That is why, Keegan says, we need to surround ourselves with people like us, who went or are going through similar things so we can lift each other up. To inspire each other, to help one another. Unlike previous generations that focused more on individual approaches, Millennials are known for their team-working attitude,<sup>59</sup> even though many people see them as “‘The Me Me Me Generation’ that is lazy, entitled, selfish and shallow.”<sup>60</sup> But I disagree. I concur with Keegan that Millennials are hardworking, team-oriented, achieving and they believe in their collective power.

“Let’s make something happen to this world”<sup>61</sup> was the last sentence of her graduation speech. She saw the potential of her generation and the class of 2012. She knew that when young people find their passion and follow it, they can do anything they put their mind to. Even change the world. This whole essay is a message for this and future generations. People do not know where their passions will lead them, neither what their future holds. They should accept the uncertainty, the possibility and hope.

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<sup>56</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Joel Stein, “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation,” *Time*, May 20, 2013, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).

<sup>61</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 4.

They should believe in themselves, in their voices and capabilities and show the world what they have to offer. “We’re so young. *We’re so young*. We have so much time.”<sup>62</sup> And people should not take any of that for granted because life is unpredictable and it can end any minute, unexpectedly. Keegan was very optimistic about the future she, unfortunately, did not receive. She aspired to become a writer and change the world for the better. Unfortunately, she did not get the chance, but maybe her writings will inspire others.

## **4.2. Fiction**

Regarding fiction, Keegan wrote short stories. Her short stories are written in the third person, having a narrator who is the main protagonist of the specific story. Each short story has a different narrator, set of protagonists, and setting, but may share the same themes and viewpoints. From her short stories I selected “Emerald City” which, in my opinion, demonstrates many aspects of the Millennials generation—technology, world affairs, the optimism, and humanity.

### **4.2.1. Emerald City**

In the short story “Emerald City” there is an American architect working as a CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) officer William who is in Iraq during the war to redistrict Iraq. The story is written in the form of emails he is exchanging with his loved one Laura about the war situation, the everyday fears and struggles, the sameness of the days. He is describing the pain, suffering and death. He is telling her how “everyone’s suspicious of anyone and everyone whose skin isn’t pale.”<sup>63</sup> From my perspective, the part about the prejudice of one’s skin is a very actual topic as people judge one another for the color of their skin, try to stop people from immigrating to other countries. Furthermore, he talks about how children are being taken and how there is nothing he can do about it, only watch. He came to Iraq to “[make] a contribution. [He] thought [he]’d be helping the world, not ignoring it.”<sup>64</sup> But in spite of all the suffering and the ugliness of war and the people participating in it, he still sees the beauty and the hope, both in the surroundings – the rivers, gardens – as in humanity.

I assume that Keegan chose to write in the form of emails because it is a form of text known to young people. Exchanging emails is easier, faster, and more comfortable

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<sup>62</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 91.

<sup>64</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 83.

than waiting several days for a letter to leave the post office. Furthermore, in contrast to handwritten letters, emails enable the writer to expand on the topic he is writing about. The structure of the emails in the story is the same as if it were a letter—containing the date, addresser, addressee, salutation, the content structured into paragraphs, and farewell. In this particular case, exchanging emails from a war zone is more reliable as there is a 100% chance of the other person receiving the message. The form of the short story makes it also the only story written in a unique style—other short stories are written as a normal short story structured into long paragraphs—making it one of the reasons why I chose this short story.

### **4.3. Non-fiction**

Keegan’s non-fiction consists of essays dealing with themes concerning the Millennial generation—team-work, the “specialness” of a generation, saving the animals and the planet, and following one’s passions rather than the baits of corporations. Keegan’s essays are written in her voice—in first person—sharing her opinions, ideas and perspective on the world and its people. The essays are of shorter length, ranging from four to fourteen pages. The three essays I have chosen reflect the important issues and viewpoints of Keegan on the Millennial generation which I agree with to a large extent.

#### **4.3.1. Why We Care about Whales**

In the essay “Why We Care about Whales” Keegan talks about how humans concern their resources to save animals but when it comes to saving humans, they are hesitant. She makes her case by comparing humans with whales saying that saving animals is important, they are, after all, part of our planet, of the living system, but thinks that saving people should be more important, or at least just as important.

“When we hear that the lady on the next street has cancer, we don’t see the entire town flock to her house. We push and shove and wet whales all day, then walk home through town past homeless men curled up on benches—washed up like whales on the curbsides. Pulled outside by the moon and struggling for air among the sewers. They’re suffocating too, but there’s no town assembly line of food. No palpable urgency, no airlifting plane.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 154.

In Keegan’s opinion, there are things that the human race is powerless against. Nature is much more powerful than people and they cannot stand in its way. What they can do is use the resources they have, the intelligence they possess and try to do good. It is important to focus on those that cannot help themselves, as are animals. But people should also focus their “time and money on saving those who [walk] on two legs and [speak] without echoes.”<sup>66</sup> Why is it easier to help animals than those of our own kind? Why do people care more about saving species communicating through sound than those communicating through speech same as ours? From my personal standpoint the reason is that we sympathize with animals because they, in most cases, cannot save themselves and need our help. Whereas with people it depends on many things—where they come from, what is their social and economic situation, is it their fault that they ended up in this situation, etc. In my opinion, this is where the collision between individualism and team-work lies. Where young people try to figure out a way to help all—volunteering, raising money, working with or creating organizations<sup>67</sup>—and older generations stand by.

As Keegan looked in the eyes of a dying whale she realized that all those philosophical thoughts and questions are easy to say. And I agree. If we could, we would save everything and everybody, but sometimes, there is nothing we can do.

#### **4.3.2. Song for the Special**

The first essay I chose from the collection is “Song for the Special.” This essay corresponds to the notion of “specialness” that is often used when describing Millennials. Keegan argues that “every generation thinks it’s special—[her] grandparents because they remember World War II, [her] parents because of discos and the moon. [Millennials] have the Internet.”<sup>68</sup> The Millennial Generation basically grew up with phones in their hands and technology following them every step they took, with the Internet being one of the generation’s greatest advantages. Keegan points out the advantages of the Internet—connecting with other people, having access to what is happening in different parts of the world through media, and having all the knowledge of the world at the length of one click. I concur with Keegan that the Internet allows Millennial generation many things. However, it has its limits as it cannot provide all the knowledge in the world since much of the information is not freely accessible.

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<sup>66</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 156.

<sup>67</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 302.

<sup>68</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 205.

“The thing is, someday the sun is going to die and everything on Earth will freeze. This will happen.”<sup>69</sup> This means that whatever the previous generations created and left behind will be destroyed by the inevitable destiny of our planet. We might be jealous of all the writers and artists and ordinary people who created all the marvels of the world, but the destiny of their works is the same as ours. The Millennial Generation might be special, but so were other generations that had “the complete works of William Shakespeare, Monet’s lilies, all of Hemingway, all of Milton, all of Keats,”<sup>70</sup> all that serves as an inspiration to the generations decades and decades after. Many young people, Keegan among them, want to be remembered, to have “their names etched in desks” or on the cover page of their own book. To leave a legacy that will permanently change the world.

Keegan concludes the essay with a thought that somewhere in the remote future, there will be a new generation, whose technology and resources will be far greater than the ones of the Millennials. “The generation flying its tiny cars would think itself special. Until one day, vaguely, quietly, the sun would flicker out and they’d realize that none of us are [special]. Or that all of us are.”<sup>71</sup> I believe that every generation is special in its own way—Millennial generation in the constant childhood praise, boosting self-esteem, unrealistic expectations,<sup>72</sup> and advanced technology. Each generation had something the other did not, they provided and created something for the future generations and their legacy will live on. From one generation to the next one.

### **4.3.3. Even Artichokes Have Doubts**

In this essay, Keegan talks about young people choosing jobs over their passions, and her not being able to figure out why, as she thinks that “most young, ambitious people want to have a positive impact on the world. Whether it’s through art or activism or advances in science, almost every student [she] spoke to had some kind of larger, altruistic goal in life.”<sup>73</sup> Which would indicate that young people would rather follow their passions than apply to the first firm that sends them an email.

Keegan interviewed many of Yale’s ’12 class students, former Yale graduates, workers and professors, as she discovered that around 25 percent of Yale graduates

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<sup>69</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 207.

<sup>70</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 207.

<sup>71</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 207-8.

<sup>72</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generation Me*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Marina Keegan, “Another View: The Science and Strategy of College Recruiting,” *DealBook*, *The New York Times*, November 9, 2011, [www.dealbook.nytimes.com](http://www.dealbook.nytimes.com).

enter the consulting or finance industry.<sup>74</sup> She wanted to know why as she did not understand why so many of them would want to end up in an office with numbers, charts and calculators if they were not interested or passionate about such industry. Many of the interviewed students did not really want to work in this industry. Most of them got an email where they were told to try and apply for that job. Or they listened to their friends or other people who talked about them these jobs with interest so they wanted to see for themselves. Or it was just because they wanted a job, did not know how to get one and this was an easy way out, and it included a paycheck.

But many people who were willing to talk to Keegan had a different narrative: “Eventually, I want to save the world in some way. Right now, the best way for me to do that is to gain essential skills by working in this industry for a few years.”<sup>75</sup> After gaining some skills and experiences they would return to their passions and follow their dreams, whatever they were—music, art, writing, saving the world. Others wanted to do something that “does more good than just enriching [themselves]”<sup>76</sup> or to “place [themselves] in a position to make a very positive difference in social justice.”<sup>77</sup> In general, they saw their future selves doing something for a better future—for enriching the world and future generations.

One of the interviewed students argued that at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two it is hard to change the world when one barely knows where to guide himself. I am in agreement with this thought, it is hard. Keegan shares her worries about her peers who enter the industries that might swallow them, tell them that “this is the best way for them to be spending their time.”<sup>78</sup> She thinks that even if it is just for two or three years, entering such industries is a waste of young people who could focus on helping the world and follow their passions instead:

“ but to me there’s something sad about so many of us entering a line of work in which we’re not (for the most part) producing something, or helping someone, or engaging in something that we’re explicitly passionate about.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 187.

<sup>75</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 191.

<sup>76</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 192.

<sup>77</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 191.

<sup>78</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 200.

<sup>79</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 198.

Nevertheless, she understands that some people enter those industries because of money—to pay off debt, to support their families. On the other hand, she believes that money is only one of the factors why students take finance jobs. The main reason for is, in her opinion, that “[they]’re not sure what else to do and it’s easy to apply to and it will pay [them] decently and it will make [them] feel like [they]’re still successful.”<sup>80</sup> And I agree. It is safer to get a job when they are offering one then take the risky path and follow your passions. Keegan put her passions first. She would rather continue to pursue her goal of becoming a writer than apply for a finance or consultant job to earn money.

I agree with Keegan on this part. There is a chance that those young people may never find their way out of that industry. That they will work long enough in given field and get scared that their dreams are too unrealistic and will not want to risk it. It would be such a shame if young people lost their optimism and hopefulness and passion for something they once loved in the sake of a job they took because they were scared they had no other option. She kept encouraging her peers, motivating them, challenging them, setting them on their rightful path. “She turned a lot of people into who they are.”<sup>81</sup> We need more people like that.

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<sup>80</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, 199.

<sup>81</sup> Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, A Remembrance of Marina Keegan and Questions for Further Discussion.

## 5. Durga Chew-Bose

The second author I have chosen is Durga Chew-Bose, a Montreal-born writer now based in Brooklyn, New York. She moved to the United States with her immigrant parents, who come from Kolkata, India, when she was 17 and has been living in Brooklyn since. Her work has been published in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Guardian*, *Rolling Stone* and many magazines. To be even closer to her readers, she uses one of the biggest advantages of our time—the internet. She posts her own essays, think pieces, writings, and quotes, as well as posts of other artists, on a social network called Tumblr<sup>82</sup> through which she can connect with them in a different way than just through letters on a piece of paper.

Sarah Galo, a reporter in *The Guardian*, said that “if millennials have an intelligentsia, Brooklyn-based writer Durga Chew-Bose is a member of it. Her essays [...] are not churned-out ‘hot takes’, but thoughtful long reads on identity and culture that command readers’ attention.”<sup>83</sup> Chew-Bose’s style of writing and thinking speaks to the Millennial generation, to the young people who experience the same things and have the same thoughts but have no way of putting them together as greatly as she does. By mapping out her memories and fragments of her past onto the pages of the book she allows us to see her world collide with our own. We start to see ourselves in her narration and read the pieces as if we formed a part of them. She writes about everyday struggles, everyday encounters and conversations with her friends, family members, and colleagues, as well as current social issues.

Her debut book called *Too Much and Not the Mood*, published in 2017, is a collection of essays-meet-prose poetry<sup>84</sup> about identity, culture, family, and womanhood. Prose poem is “a poem written in prose rather than verse. On the page it can look like a paragraph or fragmented short story, but it acts like a poem. It works in sentences rather than lines.”<sup>85</sup> Chew-Bose uses prose poetry and integrates it into her essays creating long passages of her own thoughts. Prose poetry can be seen in the works of authors such as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, André Breton or Julio

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<sup>82</sup> [www.durgapolashi.tumblr.com/](http://www.durgapolashi.tumblr.com/).

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Galo, “Durga Chew-Bose: ‘Women have been edited since we were little girls,’” *The Guardian*, (March 2015), [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), accessed 15 December, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Durga Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), back cover page.

<sup>85</sup> David Lehman, “The Prose Poem: An Alternative to Verse,” *The American Poetry Review* 32, no. 2 (2003): 45-49, [www.jstor.org/stable/20682182](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20682182).

Cortázar.<sup>86</sup> The title of the book comes from Virginia Woolf's 1931 diary called *A Writer's Diary*. Woolf ends her diary entry with "too much and not the mood," describing how tired of correcting her own writing she was in order to please her readers. Wondering if she had anything at all that was truly worth saying.<sup>87</sup> In an interview, Thora Siemsen asked Chew-Bose why she used this line from Woolf's diary entry as her book title. She said that she "loved the rhythm of it"<sup>88</sup> and since could not think of a different title. In my opinion, the title fits the book perfectly. How I perceive the title is that we all have so much to say. We all experience many things throughout our lives that are worth sharing with the world, but we usually do not share them. We lock them inside us and wait for other people to tell them for us. We may feel like they are not good enough stories and experiences, or we simply do not know how to put them together, which is not the case of Chew-Bose who does that, in an elegant, romantic and personal way, believing that "[her] experience and what [she] might share of it has merit."<sup>89</sup> The essays are narrated by the author herself, using long paragraphs of monologues supplemented by occasional direct speech or rhetorical questions. The length of the essays varies, ranging from ninety-two pages to only two pages. The language of Chew-Bose's book is very lyrical which is attained by the arrangement of each word in the sentence.

The personal essay collection divided into fourteen pieces captures Chew-Bose's life from her childhood—growing up in Montreal, as a "first-generation kid,"<sup>90</sup> as a child of immigrant parents growing up in two worlds—to her 20s in America. Taking those moments of her life and broadening them into something more, something her readers can identify with. She talks about home, nostalgia, family, womanhood, race, gender and so much more, in a way that it stays with the reader. As Chew-Bose explains, the practice of writing requires "leaving the world behind, so you can hold fast to what's strange inside, what's unlit."<sup>91</sup> She takes those things and lights them, gives them life by putting them on the paper. That is where her power of writing lies.

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<sup>86</sup> Julia Johnson, "Introduction." *Mississippi Review* 34, no. 3 (2006): 7, [www.jstor.org/stable/20132575](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20132575).

<sup>87</sup> Durga Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, back cover page.

<sup>88</sup> Thora Siemsen, "Durga Chew-Bose on the power of uncertainty," *The Creative Independent*, September 29, 2017, [www.thecreativeindependent.com](http://www.thecreativeindependent.com).

<sup>89</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 162.

<sup>90</sup> "To be first-generation means acquiescing to a lasting state of restlessness. It's as if you've inherited not just your family's knotted DNA but also the DNA acquired from their move, from veritable mileage, from the energy it took your parents to reestablish their lives." Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, p. 160.

<sup>91</sup> Anna Furman, "Durga Chew-Bose: 'I don't really believe in writing as catharsis,'" *The Guardian*, April 13, 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

The most significant essays from the collection, in my opinion, are “Heart Museum,” “D As In,” and “Tan Lines,” which deal with some of the main themes of the Millennial generation—race, family, womanhood, and self-identity—and are mixed and interposed with personal stories of the author. I would like to focus on those three essays and demonstrate the main characteristics of the generation and the personal thoughts and experiences of the author in this book. The essays cover different parts of Chew-Bose’s life and show different attitudes toward sundry situations depending on the part of her life she came in contact with them. As the author points out in her essays, her writing is inspired by everything she sees and feels—from ordinary everyday things, people, places to art. When she gets stuck, anxious, or lost in her writing, what helps her find her way again is to return to films, poems, or email exchanges with her close friends that remind her of why she sees things the way she sees them.<sup>92</sup> Her perception of the world is, in my opinion, what could potentially make her the voice of this generation.

### **5.1. Heart Museum**

The collection starts with the essay “Heart Museum” which represents an Asian Heart Institute in Mumbai she is looking for to visit her family member. Before finally finding the hospital, Chew-Bose talks about many things—the human heart, her family and the importance of it, the things that inspire her, and more. She starts the essay by talking about the human heart, its capacity and tirelessness. How it “races, dimples, is weary and deflates, it never exhausts. [It] stays going. On and on.”<sup>93</sup> Chew-Bose argues, that no matter the time of the day, the situation, the stress, anxiety, heartbreak, that “four-chambered, fist-shaped muscle we carry—that carries us—with constancy<sup>94</sup> continues pulsing toward its daily quota. More than one hundred thousand times a day.”<sup>95</sup> She talks about all the times the heart should get tired and just stop, but it does not. She mentions all the times her heart makes her aware of itself when she sees a movie, a piece of art, nature or hears her favorite song or something that makes her excited and inspired. I think that we can all identify with such feeling. We all have a heart that is moved by different things, in different ways, to a different degree. We all experience

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<sup>92</sup> Siemsen, “Durga Chew-Bose on the power of uncertainty,” [www.thecreativeindependent.com](http://www.thecreativeindependent.com).

<sup>93</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, p. 7.

things differently, but the one thing that is just the same is the fist-shaped muscle beating in our body.

Furthermore, Chew-Bose talks about the importance of family mentioning her grandparents, aunts, and family stories involving birthdays, Easter, Thanksgiving, and other festive days. Though she does not have a sister but an older brother, she talks about sisterhood “as a secret inlet. A relationship whose shape is uniquely undisclosed.”<sup>96</sup> Her mother has two sisters and as they celebrated holidays together, Chew-Bose could see what having a sister meant because it is not the same as having a brother. For her, having a sister meant “not having to learn how to join. You were already part of something. You could be a crowd.”<sup>97</sup> This indicates the importance of womanhood. I agree with the author that it is a promise that you will never be alone, no matter what happens to the world. There will always be that person that looks a little like you, talks like you, and shares the same blood in her veins.

#### **5.2. D As In**

The main reason for such a diversity that occurs in America is immigration which has been swelling and bringing young Millennial immigrants to the U.S. for work, education, and life experiences. The important number when talking about immigration to the U.S. is the year 1965—the year that started the wave of immigration which numbers raised to 59 million people.<sup>98</sup> Families from all around the world came to America because of the vision of the American Dream promising them and their children prosperity and a start of a better life and thus increased the numbers of immigrants. From my perspective, immigration was and is America’s biggest strength, not weakness, as many might say. A strength that enriches American nation which otherwise would have nothing but a plain tasteless culture without a pinch of every flavor of the world. Nevertheless, with such diversity come its problems—racism, self-deletion, acceptance of one culture over the other—and Chew-Bose experienced some of them.

The dominant theme of the essay “D as In” is self-deletion as a tool for assimilation into American society. As a child of immigrants, Chew-Bose’s name is different and hard to pronounce or grasp to Americans. Chew-Bose talks about the

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<sup>96</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, p. 43.

<sup>97</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, p. 44.

<sup>98</sup> Phillip Connor, D’Vera Cohn and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065,” *Pew Research Center*, September 28, 2015, [www.pewhispanic.org](http://www.pewhispanic.org).

struggle of having her name mispronounced when introducing herself or ordering coffee at a coffee shop. Subsequently, as she was called “Durgan. Jerga. Durva. Derika. Durgid”<sup>99</sup> instead of Durga, she started to delete herself by placing her orders, reservations or just simple introductions on “Just D.”<sup>100</sup> She explains that this was easier than to constantly correct her mispronounced name. I understand that, the desire to assimilate, to fit in, is stronger than the possibility of self devaluation and deletion that one does not realize might happen. However, after some time Chew-Bose started to question her decision of deleting her name. As she explicates, she realized that her name contains her parents’ country, her immigrant roots, all the fragments of herself and most importantly, who she is. It was her mother, and in some part her grandmother, who reminded her that she should be proud of her heritage, that she comes from a line of strong women of color and she should not be ashamed of it, on contrary, she should embrace it. She received a golden *D* ring passed down in their family from one woman to another as a reminder that she is “an accumulation of them and [herself].”<sup>101</sup> A reminder that she is from somewhere and all those women have something to do with it,<sup>102</sup> and are somehow a part of her that will always be there. She was reminded of the power and importance of womanhood that she will once pass to her own daughter.

In this essay, Chew-Bose talks about the children of immigrants, the first-generation kids, who try to assimilate to a world that they grew up in but are, at the same time, from an entirely different world—that of their parents. How much of the children’s identity and character is built on the connection they feel to the world their parents were raised in, but they only got to know through pictures and videos.<sup>103</sup> The immigrant children are a mixture of two completely different worlds and mentalities which makes it hard for them to assimilate to just one. In my opinion, people should be able to embrace their origin without feeling bad about it, with all its perks and pieces, not hide from it to fit in. Chew Bose said that “nothing will make you fit in less than trying, constantly, to fit in.”<sup>104</sup> I agree with the author that not embracing your origin, the gift of your parents, does not only mean betraying your family’s history or your country’s identity, but mainly your own. Denying or losing yourself over other people’s expectations of you, or to make it easier for them to accept you, is not worth it. And

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<sup>99</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 157.

<sup>100</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 157.

<sup>101</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 165.

<sup>102</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 165.

<sup>103</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 160.

<sup>104</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 161.

Chew-Bose realized it soon enough, before it was too late. She came to the realization that self-deletion, and especially that of immigrant children, becomes a choir, an addiction. How “mechanically disallowing [their] name in favor of what [they] assume is more commonplace has (...) become reflex.”<sup>105</sup> Because when one does something on a daily basis, it becomes a reflex, a habit that is hard to break from.

### 5.3. Tan Lines

As the Millennial generation is the most ethnically and racially diverse generation<sup>106</sup> in America’s history, there is no surprise that there are many Millennial writers of color who write on racial issues and their own encounters with them. In the essay “Tan Lines,” Chew-Bose discusses the theme of skin tone and the inheritance as a first-generation person and “all that it means: a reflection of [her parents’] and [hers]; of source and story.”<sup>107</sup> She talks about what it was like to grow up in mostly white neighborhood, interacting with her white friends who got excited about the summer and tanning, while she was coming in terms with “what [her] dark skin means in the world (...) and the access it allows [her].” In my opinion, the prejudice and differentiation of one’s skin color is not innate, it is learned—by parents, grandparents, society. Children do not see it, but once they are introduced to it their view on the world might change, especially if they are about to experience it on their own. Millennials might be the least prejudiced generation when it comes to race, but it does not mean that they can escape the racism aimed by their parents and elders.

Furthermore, Chew-Bose articulates how white people praised her skin when she was a child “innocent to the syntax of difference”<sup>108</sup> and did not understand the concept of racism. How she accepted their praise of her skin and their constant looks with a polite smile. As most children, she did not realize until reaching a certain age that “praise is presumed to conceal bias.”<sup>109</sup> Her brown skin played a huge role throughout her life, but she only realized that when she got older. She started to “notice its veiled prominence in [her] life. [She] wasn’t so much blind to it, but uninvolved in it. Emotionless about it.”<sup>110</sup> I believe the notion that when people constantly point to what makes one different, he starts to notice it, feels ashamed of or insecure about it, and tries

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<sup>105</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 158.

<sup>106</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 85.

<sup>107</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 180.

<sup>108</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 185.

<sup>109</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 185.

<sup>110</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 101.

to fight it—usually by denying his or her true self—which might curb their potential of *A Tremendous Her: big goals, big wants, and dreams left in the cold or crystallized*.<sup>111</sup> As a woman, and especially as a woman of color, she experienced double the amount of comments most girls and women do growing up: “She is *this*. Looks great in *that*.”<sup>112</sup> As if being a woman was an instant invitation to unnecessary commentary about anything and everything she is and does.

In conclusion, Chew-Bose talks about many themes that are actual with the Millennial generation—diversity, the importance of family and its history, relationships, social issues, self acceptance. Chew-Bose’s endeavor to try to assimilate into American world while also remaining true to her roots, origin, and herself is, in my opinion, the main reason why she speaks to so many young people who are trying to do the same. Chew-Bose took her time to realize that to fit in is important, but one should do it not by deleting himself but rather by embracing who he is. By carrying the legacy of one’s family. As she stated, her family was the main impulse for her to comprehend the importance of carrying one’s family’s history and accept all the fragments of one’s being. In my opinion, Chew-Bose’s book carries many important messages for the younger generations that might help them not only with the struggle of assimilation to the world, but also the importance of being true to one’s self.

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<sup>111</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 158.

<sup>112</sup> Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood: Essays*, 186.

## 6. Ocean Vuong

The last author is Ocean Vuong who was born outside of Saigon in 1988. At the age of two, after spending a year in a refugee camp in the Philippines, he immigrated with his family to the United States where he grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. He now lives in Massachusetts where he serves as an Assistant Professor for Writers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is a Vietnamese American poet, essayist and a recipient of the 2017 T.S. Eliot Prize, among other honors and prizes, for his collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016). Vuong's poems have been featured in many newsletters and magazines—*The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, etc. In June, his debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, named after one of his poems in the collection, is being published.

Vuong had to face many obstacles to become the writer he is now. As a Vietnamese native, his mother tongue is Vietnamese, not English. Therefore, he first had to conquer the language barrier which made him feel like “there was this whole second world that [he] was always outside of.”<sup>113</sup> However, being bilingual gives him a big advantage—he can use the musicality and lyricism of Vietnamese and transform it into his English.

Vuong wrote three collections, but it was the last one that caught the most attention. His debuting full-length collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, provides an inner look to the life of an immigrant who was forced to leave all behind and adapt to a whole new world. The collection is divided into three parts—his family and its history, mythology as a tool to re-tell history, and his own self-discovery and sexuality—that are interconnected throughout the book and mixed with other themes. The collection contains thirty-four poems—the first, “Threshold,” serving as an introduction and the last one, “Devotion,” as a conclusion. The poems contain stories from the years before Vuong was born (the time of the fall of Saigon and the Vietnamese war), Greek mythology (Homer's *Odyssey*), family, violence, war, love, loss, grief, among other themes. All the poems are “reflections of a person he once was, if not quite who he is today.”<sup>114</sup> He learned about his family's history through the stories his grandmother used to tell him. He might not personally have experienced all the things his family has,

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<sup>113</sup> Jonathan Shia, “Ocean Vuong,” *The Last Magazine*, April 13, 2017, [www.thelast-magazine.com](http://www.thelast-magazine.com).

<sup>114</sup> Shia, “Ocean Vuong,” [www.thelast-magazine.com](http://www.thelast-magazine.com).

but it is all inscribed in his blood. In Vuong’s own words, he got to re-tell the stories “through a poetical re-imagination, without claiming witness of [his] own.”<sup>115</sup>

What makes Vuong’s poems interesting are not only the themes he uses, but also the structure he gives them. Vuong does not only play with the language, but also with the body of his poems. Each poem has a different shape, length—both long and short—follows different patterns, and narration—the author, his mother and father. Some poems are written in couplets<sup>116</sup>, other in chiasmus<sup>117</sup>, footnotes, haibun<sup>118</sup> or prose blocks. Furthermore, what Vuong’s poems show is his mastery of juxtaposition that can be seen within every page of the collection, as for example in the poem “Aubade with Burning City:” “a soldier spits out / his cigarette as footsteps fill the square like stones / fallen from the sky. *May / all your Christmases be white.*”<sup>119</sup> The song “White Christmas” was used as a code for evacuation during the fall of Saigon and is used here to show the contrast between a happy cheerful song about Christmas and the violence and terror in the streets of Saigon. The style of the poems shows the imagination and creativity of the author’s writing and is what, for the most part, captures the readers’ attention. I will divide the collection into three parts based on the predominant themes—family, mythology, and self-love—and demonstrate his thoughts and viewpoints in the selected poems, including the reference to the Millennial generation.

### 6.1. Family/family history

As I stated in the second chapter, family is very important for Millennials. The history of Vuong’s family started way before he was even born and it forms an important theme of the collection. His grandmother, who had his mother with an American soldier, is the reason this collection exists and contains their family history as she was the one who told him those stories from the moment he was in his mother’s womb through the oral tradition of poetry. Vuong did not remember anything from Vietnam as he was only

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<sup>115</sup> “Ocean Vuong talks about his work,” YouTube video, 01:03-01:10, posted by “T. S. Eliot Prize,” January 4, 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE).

<sup>116</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, s. v. “couplet:” pair of lines in a poem, esp. when connected by rhythm, rhyme, or meaning. Accessed April 12, 2019, [www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/couplet](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/couplet).

<sup>117</sup> *Oxford Dictionary*, s. v. “chiasmus:” a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order. Accessed April 12, 2019, [www.en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chiasmus](http://www.en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chiasmus).

<sup>118</sup> “A work that combines haiku and prose.” Edward Hirsch, *The Essential Poet’s Glossary* (New York: Mariner Books, 2017), 125.

<sup>119</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, New York: Vintage Publishing, 2017, 10.

two-years-old when they had to flee because it was not safe for a mixed family to live in Vietnam at that time. All he remembered was his American life and that “[his] and [his] mother’s life wouldn’t have happened without the war.”<sup>120</sup>

The most important protagonist of the collection is the author’s father to who are dedicated many poems, most of which are drawn from mythology and therefore will be discussed in the next subchapter. From the first poem we learn about the absence of Vuong’s father in his life as he is trying to, through his poems, recreated a picture of him. Vuong describes his father as cold, violent, and fearsome, but still capable of compassion and deserving of the author’s love. The father-son relationship is being examined throughout the first part of the book in poems, as for instance, “Always & Forever,” where the narrator receives a shoe box sealed in duck tape inside of which lies the Colt .45. As the narrator holds the colt he wonders if by looking through it he will see his father tightening his embrace of the boy as he is wrapping his arms around him. The poem “My Father Writes from Prison” is an imagined letter his father is writing to his mother from prison telling her that “some nights [she is] the lighthouse / some nights the sea / what this means is that [he doesn’t] know / desire other than the need / to be shattered & rebuilt.”<sup>121</sup>

Vuong creates an image of the arrival of his parents to America in the poem “Immigrant Haibun.” The poem is told in the voice of Vuong’s mother who is narrating the story of leaving the burning city behind while living on the sea for a long time to her son: “The ship rocked as you swelled inside me: love’s echo hardening into a boy.”<sup>122</sup> . As his father disappeared soon after their arrival to America, the upbringing of Ocean was left to the women in Vuong’s life—his mother, aunt and grandmother—which may be one of the reasons why his beloved mother is one of the main themes of the collection. In the poem “The Gift” he describes his mothers struggle with language: “*abc abc abc* / She doesn’t know what comes after.”<sup>123</sup> The poem comprises of nine non-rhyming stanzas where three of the stanzas are a single line “*abc abc abc*.”<sup>124</sup> The poem is written in the first person narrative from the author’s point of view. The theme of the poem is Vuong’s relationship with his mother and him trying to pass on to her his gift of literacy. At the age of 11 Vuong became the first literate member of his family,

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<sup>120</sup> Claire Armitstead, “War baby: the amazing story of Ocean Vuong, former refugee and prize-winning poet,” *The Guardian*, October 3, 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

<sup>121</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 15.

<sup>123</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 23.

<sup>124</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 23.

which made his family very proud even though they could not appreciate his work. When he was growing up his and his mother's roles changed as he was trying to teach her how to read, "that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed [their] hierarchies, and with it [their] identities."<sup>125</sup> Being an immigrant living in exile, in a strange country, is hard, especially when one cannot cross the language barrier and his broken English. In the poem "Headfirst," Vuong suggests that America is not in reality the harmonious and loving melting pot it makes itself to be. In reality, people are constantly judging, looking, talking. But for immigrants it is important to maintain their pride of their origin. "When they ask you / where you're from, / tell them your name / was fleshed from the toothless mouth / of a war-woman."<sup>126</sup>

## 6.2. Mythology

The next recurrent theme is the one of mythology. The author stated in a video for T. S. Eliot Prize, where he talks about the collection, that his book started to open up to him when "[he] started to collaborate with classical literatures and to see [himself] in those spaces."<sup>127</sup> We can see a lot of poems in the collection that draw from mythology and attempt to navigate history. The usage of mythology, mainly the inspiration from the "poetic forebears like Homer, Dante, Newton,"<sup>128</sup> enabled Vuong to talk about the war in Vietnam, the queer American body, and re-create the stories of those who could not tell them.

The main application of mythology can be seen in poems featuring his father. As he did not know him, he relied on mythology to help him recreate an image of what he could have been like. In the first poem "Telemachus" we see the author, a son, as he "[pulls his] father out / of the water, [drags] him by his hair / through white sand"<sup>129</sup> as they felt their bombed city behind them. The poem is filled with love, concerns as he pulls him out of the water with a bullet hole in his back. What Vuong tries to say with this poem is, in my opinion, that our parents—fathers in particular—always stay in our lives. Vuong uses the Greek mythological figure Telemachus, son of Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey*, to tell his own story. As Telemachus loses his father who goes off to

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<sup>125</sup> Ocean Vuong, "A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read," *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2017, [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com).

<sup>126</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 19.

<sup>127</sup> "Ocean Vuong talks about his work," YouTube video, 01:26-01:35, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE).

<sup>128</sup> "Ocean Vuong talks about his work," YouTube video, 00:27-00:32, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE).

<sup>129</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 7.

fight in the Trojan War, Telemachus becomes the head of the family<sup>130</sup> which reflects the situation Vuong finds himself in, taking care of his mother after his father abandoned them. The last poem I want to mention that draws from mythology is “Eurydice,” the title being inspired by the nymph in Greek mythology who died by a snake bite. The poem, in my opinion, creates an image of a graveyard where a girl and a boy are “standing in the cold field / again. Him calling the girl. / The girl beside him,”<sup>131</sup> where the scene resembles the death of Eurydice. The character of her husband, Orpheus, appears in “Notebook Fragments” which has a structure of a diary, having all kinds of thoughts on different subjects and themes, one of them being “if Orpheus were a woman, I wouldn’t be stuck down here,”<sup>132</sup> where the author sees himself as Eurydice.

Vuong’s usage of mythology creates histories that resemble the myth and its protagonists, but are different stories. This play with mythology and the incorporation of it into his poems creates unique image that is characteristic for Vuong.

### 6.3. Self-love

Writing poetry allowed Vuong to share his most intimate self with the world and his readers—the part of embracing his sexuality, the “queer American body.”<sup>133</sup> Through the second part of the collection he is discovering his sexuality through the attraction to other men. In the third part he is talking about sexuality and love in more depth and detail as he fully accepted his gay identity. His coming to his senses with his orientation can be seen in the poem “Because It’s Summer,” which is about gay love and its roots, about realizing how one person can change who you are and all:

“you say *thank you thank you thank you*  
because you haven’t learned the purpose  
of *forgive me* because that’s what you say  
when a stranger steps out of summer

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<sup>130</sup> Gilbert P. Rose, “Odysseus’ Barking Heart,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-2014), Vol. 109 (1979): 215-30, [www.jstor.org/stable/284059](http://www.jstor.org/stable/284059).

<sup>131</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 46.

<sup>132</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 66.

<sup>133</sup> “Ocean Vuong talks about his work,” YouTube video, 00:41-00:44, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3LJEmbMtqE).

& offers you another hour to live.”<sup>134</sup>

In “Anaphora as Coping Mechanism” he illustrates the pain and heartbreak of losing his loved one, of a lover. “He dies as your heart beats faster, as another war coppers the sky. He dies each night you close your eyes & hear his slow exhale.”<sup>135</sup> The narrator is the author himself, talking in the second person singular to lure and include the reader in his pain, sadness and coping with his loss.

However, he does not only use his voice to illustrate the sensitive and beautiful image of gay love and its blossoming, but also addresses the violence and crimes committed against the LGBTQ community. In the poem “Seventh Circle of Earth” Vuong draws attention to such violence, narrated by a voice of the man that was murdered. The title refers to Dante’s “Seventh Circle” in *Inferno* where homosexuality is punished by flames falling down from the sky.<sup>136</sup> The poem is written in the form of footnotes with the index numbers, from one to seven, being scattered on the blank page. It is a poem re-telling the story of a gay couple that was murdered in immolation in their own apartment at the beginning of 2011 in Dallas, creating an image of the burning of two people in love: “Another torch streams through / the kitchen window, / another errant dove. / It’s funny. I always knew / I’d be warmest beside / my man.”<sup>137</sup> In the poem “Into the Breach” Vuong incorporates into the poem the story of the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer who murdered seventeen young men. Again, Vuong contrasts the one’s “tenderness / a thing to be beaten / into”<sup>138</sup> with violence.

One of the closing poems is “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong.” As Vuong notes<sup>139</sup>, he used the title “Someday I’ll Love” “*After Frank O’Hara/ After Roger Reeves.*” The poem is written in one long stanza and third person narrative—the author talking to himself: “Ocean, are you listening?”<sup>140</sup> The theme of the poem is self-love and embracing one’s self, to not be afraid:

“Ocean, don’t be afraid.

The end of the road is so far ahead

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<sup>134</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 34.

<sup>135</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 38.

<sup>136</sup> John E. Boswell, “Dante and the Sodomites,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 112 (1994): 63-76, [www.jstor.org/stable/40166490](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40166490).

<sup>137</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 39.

<sup>138</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 35.

<sup>139</sup> Ocean Vuong, “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” April 27, 2015, [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com).

<sup>140</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 78.

it is already behind us.”<sup>141</sup>

Through this poem, the author is reminding himself and his readers that no matter what paths we take along the way they are not our final destinations, that there are still many more to come. “Ocean. Ocean - get up. The most beautiful part of your body is where it’s headed.”<sup>142</sup> As he is realizing the power of self-love, of acceptance amid pain, loneliness and sadness, he closes the collection with the poem “Devotion” about the relationship with another man and the celebration of gay love: “There’s nothing / more holy than holding / a man’s heartbeat between / your teeth.”<sup>143</sup>

In conclusion, Vuong’s poetry is a combination of personal and emotive stories with issues that are important, actual, and need to be said and heard. His combination of different themes creates a vulnerable, human, and important collection which supports the notion that the Millennial generation is not uncaring or unconcerned about what is happening in and to the world. In my opinion, Vuong’s emphasis on history illustrates that the past is always present—whatever happens always affects the future. In Vuong’s case, the fall of Saigon, his family immigrating to America, and accepting different culture is what made him the person he is, and he will always carry those moments of history inside of him. In my opinion, the most powerful theme of the collection is the one of self-realization and acceptance of one’s self, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where LGBTQ community is under constant hatred.

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<sup>141</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 78.

<sup>142</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 78.

<sup>143</sup> Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 80.

## 7. Conclusion

The Millennial generation, the people born between the years 1980s and 2000, are the current leading young generation in America. They are the largest, most educated, most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history. They are also the economically most disadvantaged generation, carrying student debt on their backs and struggling to survive on the low income. The last wave of Millennials have come of age last year and it is time for them to take the destiny of their nation into their own hands. Since they were little, they have been praised and brought up to reach the stars. Now that they are adults and are starting to take over the wheel and reshaping the world to their own image, the elder generations are trying to stop them—even though they are the ones who raised them and provided them with all the tools they now possess.

The three authors I have chosen for this thesis—Marina Keegan, Chew-Bose and Ocean Vuong—they all used their personal histories and combined them with social issues, wisdoms, and worries about the future in their works. All three authors used their platform to talk about important issues that need to be discussed, encouraging young people to do good, to be true to themselves and to care about what is happening around them. In Keegan's *The Opposite of Loneliness* (2014), the author encourages her fellow students, her generation, to speak up, to take action, to follow one's dreams and overcome the obstacles thrown at him. Even though her life was suddenly taken away from her, she did manage to inspire many who are now trying to go in her footsteps. In *Too Much and Not the Mood* (2017), Chew-Bose uses her book to talk about the importance of family, origin, and self acceptance while trying to fit in and assimilate into a different world. She talked about how she, in her own way, overcame self-deletion, racism, and the struggle of assimilation to show young people that it takes time, but that it is possible. Lastly, in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), Vuong, among other things, points out the struggle of LGBTQ community and the hatred aimed against it. He draws attention to the struggle of coming to terms with one's own self, one's own sexuality and identity in a society that judges everyone who is slightly different. All these themes illustrated in each book represent the Millennial generation. After the examination of the above mentioned books what prevails in them is, in my opinion, the world-concern rather than narcissism.

As Shaun Scott argues, “Millennials have become a stand-in for something bigger.”<sup>144</sup> They are taking stand and being vocal in what matters—politics, racism, sexism, unemployment, the environment, equality—and are trying their best to do something about them. They know it is in their power and that the outcome of their trying will leave a mark and legacy for the generations to come. They have the potential to repair all that has been damaged, to restore the traditional ways that have been forgotten, to start doing the good deeds and guide the country to a better future.

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<sup>144</sup> Shaun Scott, “Millennials Are Not Here To Save Us,” *Jacobin*, February 18, 2016, [www.jacobinmag.com](http://www.jacobinmag.com).

## 7. Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo představit generaci mileniálů v Americe a americké literatuře, zaměřit se na dva hlavní názory popisující generaci mileniálů a následně tyto názory podložit nebo vyvrátit na základě prozkoumaných materiálů odborníku, kteří se generacemi zabývají, a analýzou děl třech vybraných autorů. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. První část se zabývá generacemi a pojmem „mileniál“—kdo je tato generace, jak byla utvořena, jací jsou její členové a jak je viděna americkou společností. Druhá část je věnována třem autorům patřícím do této generace a analýze jejich děl, jejímž úkolem je poukázat na hlavní rysy generace mileniálů.

Toto téma jsem si zvolila zejména proto, že termín „mileniál“ je v poslední době velmi používán, především ve Spojených státech, a to v mnoha kontextech, mnoha lidmi, a především ve špatném světle. Existují dva hlavní názory, které charakterizují generaci mileniálů. První názor popisuje mileniály jako inteligentní, nadějnou a výjimečnou generaci s velkým potenciálem, která může v budoucnu zachránit a vylepšit svět. Druhý názor vidí mileniály jako narcistickou, egoistickou generaci, která se zajímá pouze o sebe a je jí předurčeno zničit svět takový, jaký ho známe. Jakožto člen této generace jsem se chtěla o této generaci dozvědět více, zjistit, který z těchto dvou názorů se více přibližuje opravdové charakteristice mileniálů a podložit svůj názor, že by tato generace neměla být zcela zatracena, protože má podle mého názoru mnoho nabídnout.

První část této práce se zabývá kapitolou generace, jakožto společenské skupiny lidí, a poskytuje základní informace o tom, jak generace vznikají, jak vypadají a jak se chovají. Dále čtenáře seznamuje s důležitými americkými generacemi, jež do určité míry nějakým způsobem ovlivňují nebo ovlivňovaly generaci mileniálů, a jež slouží jako jeden z nástrojů pro její charakterizaci a přesnější určení. V americké historii existuje mnoho generací. Nicméně, v této práci jsou zahrnuty pouze ty, které jsou nějakým způsobem klíčové pro téma této bakalářské práce.

Ve druhé kapitole se zabývám termínem mileniál, neboli generace Y. Zde vysvětluji rozhraní této generace, čím je charakteristická a výjimečná, jaké je její historické zasazení, jak je vnímána americkou společností, kdo jsou její rodiče, tedy generace Baby Boom a X, které ji vychovali, a v neposlední řadě se zaměřuji na mileniály v 21. století a jejich počínání v politickém a společenském dění. Tato kapitola zobrazuje mileniály od jejich narození, přes dospívání, až po dovršení dospělosti, a soustředí se na podložení dvou výše zmíněných názorů o této generaci.

Druhá část této práce začíná třetí kapitolou, která představuje první autorku, Marinu Keeganovou a její knihu *The Opposite of Loneliness* (2014). Keeganová byla studentkou prestižní univerzity Yale, kde zahájila svoji spisovatelskou kariéru. Během studií začala psát eseje, krátké povídky a příběhy, které byly součástí seminářů na kreativní psaní, nebo se jednalo o články na školní web. Po nešťastné autonehodě, která mladou Keeganovou stála život, se její rodina a profesorka Fadimanová rozhodli vydat jejím jménem knihu obsahující většinu jejích prací. Kniha *The Opposite of Loneliness* obsahuje 17 povídek a esejí plných optimismu a naděje, ale také problémů dnešní generace a světa. Odkazem Keeganové je kniha, ve které pobízí a inspiruje své vrstevníky, aby dělali to, co je správné, jak pro sebe, tak pro ostatní. Aby dělali to, co je baví, aby šli svým snům naproti, ať jsou sebevíce těžko dosažitelné, aby se ze strachu z budoucnosti neupsalí firmám a společnostem, které jim sice nabídnou dobrý plat, ale nepomohou jim realizovat jejich sny.

V další kapitole představuji autorku Durgu Chew-Boseovou. Jakožto autorka snědé pleti a dcera imigrantů, Chew-Boseová nabízí jiný úhel pohledu na život mileniálů v Americe. Její kniha esejí *Too Much and Not the Mood* (2017) mísí témata jako identity, rodina, nostalgie, kultura a problémy týkající se ras a pohlaví. Hlavním důvodem pro výběr této autorky bylo její úsilí o asimilaci do amerického světa a současně snaha o uchování si svých kořenů, své identity a původu. Autorčiny autobiografické příběhy psané formou esejí, popisující dlouhotrvající a vyčerpávající boj o začlenění se do americké společnosti, ukazují náročný život rasově a etnicky nejrozmanitější generace v americké historii. Chew-Boseová klade důraz na to, že je důležité zapadnout do světa a kultury, ve které žijeme, ale zároveň je důležité zůstat věrný sobě samému a kořenům našich předků, tedy jejich zemi, kultuře a tradicím, které nás celý život ovlivňují a utvářejí.

Poslední kapitola je o autorovi vietnamského původu, Oceanu Vuongovi. Vuongova sbírka básní *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) nabízí pohled do světa imigranta, který byl donucen opustit svou zemi, svůj život a adaptovat se do úplně nového a cizího světa. Sbíрка je rozdělena do tří částí: autorova rodinná historie, mytologie jako nástroj pro převyprávění historie a objevování sebe sama a své sexuality. Vuong prostřednictvím svých básní upozorňuje na témata a problémy, které jsou v dnešní době velmi důležité a je potřeba o nich mluvit. Jedná se například o nenávist a násilí, které je směřováno na komunitu LGBTQ, jíž je sám autor součástí.

Dále poukazuje na to, jak důležitá je znalost historie, protože události, které se v minulosti staly, jsou naší součástí a ovlivňují náš každodenní život.

V průběhu této práce jsem došla k závěru, že nelze zcela vyvrátit ani jeden ze dvou hlavních názorů, kterými jsou mileniálové charakterizováni. První názor popisuje mileniály jako výjimečnou, optimistickou generaci mající týmového ducha a velké předpoklady k tomu napravit škody způsobené předešlými generacemi. Druhý názor tvrdí, že mileniálové jsou narcističtí, egoističtí a zajímají se pouze o sebe samé. Existují mileniálové, kteří jsou narcističtí a zajímají se převážně jen o sebe. Na druhou stranu jsou zde mileniálové, kteří se zajímají o dobro ostatních více než o dobro vlastní, kterým není budoucnost mladších generací a tohoto světa lhostejná. Dle mého názoru nám odsuzování celé generace na základě jednotlivce, nebo souzení jednotlivce podle generace, do které patří, neposkytne objektivní představu o tom, jací doopravdy jsou. Více se však přikláním k názoru, že generaci mileniálů není to, co se děje ve světě, lhostejné, a že má potenciál zlepšit tento svět, pokud bude chtít.

## **8. Anotace**

Jméno a příjmení: Veronika Sevránková

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: „Generace mileniálů v americké literatuře“

Vedoucí práce: prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

Počet stran: 55

Počet příloh: 0

Klíčová slova: mileniálové, generace mileniálů, generace, generace Y, Marina Keegan, Durga Chew-Bose, Ocean Vuong

Charakteristika: Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na generaci mileniálů v Americe a americké literatuře. Cílem této práce je představit tuto generaci, zaměřit se na dva hlavní názory popisující generaci mileniálů a následně tyto názory podložit nebo vyvrátit na základě prostudovaných materiálů a analýze děl vybraných autorů. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. První část se zabývá generacemi a termínem „mileniál“—kdo je generace mileniálů, jací jsou její členové, jak ji vidí americká společnost. Druhá část je věnována třem autorům patřícím do této generace a analýze jejich děl.

## **10. Abstract**

Name: Veronika Sevránková

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title: 'The Millennial Generation in American Literature'

Supervisor: prof. PhDr. Michal Peprník, Dr.

Number of pages: 55

Number of attachments: 0

Key words: Millennials, Millennial Generation, Generations, Generation Y, Marina Keegan, Durga Chew-Bose, Ocean Vuong

Characteristics: The Bachelor's thesis deals with the generation of Millennials in America and American literature. The aim is to introduce this generation, examine the two main convictions about this generation and ascertain which of those convictions is more veracious based on the works of experts and the selected authors and their works. The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part concerns with generations and the term "millennial"—who is the millennial generation, what are its members like, how is it viewed by the American society. The second part is dedicated to the three selected authors and the analysis of their works with the emphasis on finding the main characteristics of this generation.

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