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**EMOTIONAL RESISTANCE IN KIM ADDONIZIO'S *JIMMY & RITA*:
REPRESENTING THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF BABY-BOOMER VALUES
ON GENERATION X**
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JIMMY, RITA, AND GENERATION X

Kim Addonizio's book of poems *Jimmy & Rita* offers a story arc typically found in narrative fiction in order to pursue the complex lives of two characters drowning in the dark, destructive, heroin-fueled world that often serves as the setting for representations of Gen X youth culture. What's more, *Jimmy & Rita* dramatizes how the parents of its Gen X protagonists influence the lives of these characters from their childhoods -- and thus the book suggests that these parents ultimately cause these Gen Xers' sense of apathy, frustration, and disillusionment as they reach adulthood. On the level of content *Jimmy & Rita* proposes that the parents are responsible for the inevitable hardships Jimmy and Rita face. In terms of form, *Jimmy & Rita* proposes mistrust and distance between the characters and the audience which represents the attitudes of Gen Xers formed by their difficult childhoods. We are given a limited view into Jimmy and Rita's bleak reality through changing first person and third person perspectives. The book's narrative tone -- no matter the point of view -- ensures that the reader is an outsider, only there to access, assess, and diagnose the issues of these characters without being given any explicit explanation of how the characters feel. The traumas of Jimmy and Rita resound through their actions rather than their thoughts, and even this distance between the characters represents the defeated, misplaced attitudes Generation X adopted from the assertion of baby-boomers' flawed generational values. The argument I'd like to wager here, then, is that *Jimmy & Rita* not only represents the Gen X youth culture, it also offers an understanding of the characters' actions by showing how Jimmy and Rita's parents directly influenced their distant, disillusioned attitudes.

Jimmy and Rita's lives include many elements typically associated with Gen X culture. Their romantic relationship blooms in the ill-lit squalor of various trashed apartments in the projects of San Francisco as they shoot up heroin and have sex, working infrequent, demeaning jobs to afford their fixes, but not much else. Heroin use increased in popularity with Gen Xer's, and is commonly viewed as a mode of escape for much of the Gen X youth. The dangerous impact of heroin represents how widespread the distant, discontented attitudes were as "heroin users increased from 68,000 in 1993 to 325,000 in 1997, and heroin-related emergency room visits rose more than 150 percent from 1990 to 1996" (Furek 696). For example, the poem "Fixing", organized through Rita's perspective as she lets Jimmy shoot her up, Rita associates the comforting relief of the drug's effects with Jimmy's presence. This poem takes place early on in the story, and kickstarts Jimmy and Rita's addictive yet destructive relationship that becomes the center focus of the book. As their relationship unravels and becomes increasingly abusive we are given moments of their past that allow us to look closer at their psyches. Doing so we discover not only how their parents' own failures and disillusionment affected their childhoods, but also how they internalized the traumatic instances of their pasts and as a result adopted the same defeated attitudes.

The poems are distant, insofar as they only depict action rather than emotion. The poems are oftentimes short -- but they all evoke an image of Jimmy and Rita that is a hauntingly real amalgamation of the disillusioned, detached, and deviant behaviors of Generation X. In the book's first poem "December" we see Rita rejecting the conventionality of a job as she "works / at a massage parlor on Eddy Street" (Addonizio 15). Rita never holds a stable job; something that would be unconventional within the

work-centered baby-boomer culture. We see the dissolution of traditional romantic values in “Five A.M.” when Rita is alone while Jimmy leaves town to visit his mother before she dies, and Rita wakes up to a man she doesn’t know, admitting that without Jimmy she gets lonely. We see Jimmy’s emotional resistance through his growing frustration and violence, and we also see it through his interactions with Rita. The fear induced in these characters by the inevitable hardships and failures in their lives makes them emotionally inaccessible to each other. In “Her Voice”, even Jimmy actively tries to avoid a deep emotional connection, perhaps because of the risk. In that poem, however, the narrator says that “[Rita] talks him down, / her voice a tide / carrying him in / and for once / he doesn’t resist it” (Addonizio 40). By the same token, then, these are poems that suggest their Gen X characters do indeed desire an authentic emotional connection. However, the impact of the broken emotional bonds both characters experienced as children hinders their ability to fully pursue such a connection.

The resistance we see with the characters and how they are portrayed in the narration is similar to the resistance Lauren Berlant uncovers in the Generation X era movie *Mysterious Skin*, analyzed in her essay, “Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*”. Berlant explores the significance of characters underperforming in movies or literature, and whether this is an unintended effect, or a greater statement towards the social and psychological effects of major events in that time period. In her analysis of *Mysterious Skin* Berlant focuses on passive reactions and emotions portrayed by characters after experiencing traumatic events. Berlant argues that the distanced emotional reactions of the characters give the viewer (or reader) only a sense of how the characters feel, and this produces a desire to see the character actually elucidate their

emotions. The lack of communication then actually becomes the only communication between the characters and the viewer. According to Berlant, “A style that seems casual, therefore, can point to something stuck, neutral, or withheld in relationality, a hesitation or a defense against presence. It can point to the overcloseness of the world, and be a distancing mechanism. Or, sometimes a space of recessive action can be both a defense and a scene of appeal for help in shifting the way things are” (Berlant 195).

The fiction-like story arc of *Jimmy & Rita* allows the reader to become invested in Jimmy and Rita’s lives, but the events and emotions themselves are imparted so impersonally from both the narrative and the characters, and this makes it seem as if the reader is actually intruding on the narrative. We are hardly told how the characters feel; we get glimpses of dialogue and action, but we are never explicitly told the emotions of these characters. As Berlant suggests, the lack of emotion creates a sense of conflict that the reader must gather through the characters’ responses towards each other. What *Jimmy & Rita* is in essence suggesting is that, like the disunity seen in families of disillusioned Gen Xer's, the reappearing traumas of the characters' pasts suggest that their inability to cope or connect stems from the instability they experienced in their relationships growing up.

Through these apathetic and distanced attitudes and behaviors we are able to sense that the characters are disenchanted by the world they grew into. As we see in greater detail later on, Jimmy and Rita witness the once-desirable structure of the nuclear family collapse when their parents lose their jobs, give up on their failed dreams, leave each other, or abuse each other. Because they experienced broken or distanced relationships as children, Jimmy and Rita resist creating new emotional bonds as a way to

avoid the loss of unity they witnessed growing up. Watching their parents lose their jobs and abandon their responsibilities as spouses and parents, the characters don't see the worth of trying to have a chance at success because they have only witnessed a negative result. Internalizing what they saw growing up, Jimmy and Rita both loathe and mimic the defeated behaviors of their parents. *Jimmy & Rita* not only represents the distanced attitudes of Gen X, it also suggests that the characters' parents directly influence the emotional resistance that is seen through the narrative, and the actions of Jimmy and Rita.

BABY-BOOMERS AND GENERATION X: EXPLORING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Before looking closely at individual poems and what they say about Gen X and the role of generational conflict in the making of Gen X, a few more words about Gen X as a historical category are in order.

Gen X became a popular concept after the publication of Douglas Coupland's book *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. Yet, before the generation was given its name there was already a growing unease among baby-boomers who believed that Gen Xer's, who at the time had reached adolescence and early adulthood, were apathetic and lazy for their discontented attitudes and their rejection of the new established authority asserted by baby-boomers.

The criticism Gen Xer's received from baby-boomers wasn't completely unfounded, though Generation X did, in fact, prove to be successful by being more educated than boomers, with 60% of the Gen X population attending universities. Unlike the work-driven baby-boomers, Gen Xer's found more value in other aspects of life, like family and traveling. That said, Gen Xers aren't precisely opposed to work; rather, they

have different ideas about work and culture, tending to deviate from the traditional, corporate nine-to-five work environment, and often opting instead for free-lance work, more relaxed office settings -- and thus also expressing a strong sense of self-reliance (Harber).

Generation X's resistance to the traditional middle class roles and social norms is reflected in the popularized trend labeled as the "grunge scene". Young Gen Xer's embraced their personas as the restless, rowdy kids who rejected work, authority, and social conventions. Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the grunge band Nirvana, captured the essence of Gen X youth wearing torn flannel shirts and ripped jeans and singing about disillusionment and nonconformity. Cobain, like many Gen X youth, experienced the divorce of his parents, and throughout childhood he lived with various family members. Cobain also abused heroin like other Gen Xer's, and drew away from public eye as he became increasingly famous. After struggling with his addiction and depression, Cobain committed suicide at twenty-seven. Cobain's life encompasses the struggle of Gen X youth, and the effects that can result from trauma and disillusionment. Cobain's case is extreme, but still a depiction of the causes and effects of Gen X attitudes. Though Gen Xer's were viewed negatively as they reached adulthood, many Gen Xer's embraced their nonconformist attitudes to rebel against flawed baby-boomer values.

Of course, baby-boomers themselves were also linked to rebellion during their youth. This was the generation that aimed to overhaul a sexist U.S. society. Which is to say, the baby-boomers are not only known for their unprecedented birth rates and their important presence in the work force -- they are also known for facilitating the civil rights movement, feminist protests, and protests of the Vietnam War. Baby-boomers also

rejected traditional values as women gained equal rights and began to play a larger role in the work force. The idea of a traditional home where the man worked and the female stayed home to take care of the family became increasingly rare, allowing boomers as a whole to be “described as work-centric, independent, goal-oriented, and competitive (Wiedmer 52-53). The baby-boomers dismantled the authority and values left behind by their traditional predecessors because they viewed them as limiting and unequal. However, despite their social consciousness, baby-boomers greatly criticized the Gen Xer’s who came along and resisted the newfound values and authority baby-boomers considered “right”. Counter-culture icon Abbie Hoffman addressed the contradictory nature of the open-minded yet authoritarian views of baby-boomers when he said, “We were young, self-righteous, reckless, hypocritical, brave, silly, headstrong, and scared half to death. And we were right” (Sullivan 87).

The tension between baby-boomers and Gen Xer's occurred because Gen Xer's denounced baby-boomer values and also exposed their flaws and contradictions. While the baby-boomers raised Gen Xer’s on the principles of hard work, civil rights, sexual liberation, and equality, many components of baby-boomer values, particularly the tendency to assert their values with authority, brought along a discontented response from Gen Xer’s who had to suffer the negative side effects of this newly liberated world that baby-boomers didn’t consider, and struggled to recognize.

One side effect of baby-boomer "progress" was the dissolution of the traditional, nuclear family. Twin developments suggest that the traditional, nuclear family was less desired in U.S. society. First, after the feminist movement women increasingly entered the workforce. Second, there was an overwhelming increase in divorce that ultimately

characterized Gen Xer's as the "latchkey" generation because much of the youth was "exposed to lots of daycare and divorce" and "often experienced broken families [and]... absentee parents... [who] were often workaholics driven by personal gratification, authority, and rankings (Wiedmer 53). The distanced attitudes of many Gen Xer's are now considered responses not only to the recession of the late eighties that left many boomers -- and Gen Xer's -- jobless but also to the changes in tradition within middle-class families.

In other words, the feeling of disunity felt by Gen Xer's was brought about by absent parents and divorce. Looking back at the broken-down concept of the nuclear family many Gen Xer's dealt with, it is no wonder their youth culture revolved around resisting the stringent authority of predecessors who were oftentimes seen as neglectful.

What I want to argue, then, is that *Jimmy & Rita* represents the complex relationship between baby-boomers and Generation X, illustrating the negative effects of boomer values through the characters and poetic form. In *Jimmy & Rita* we sense the characters' disillusionment, discontent, and frustration in their limited world while also looking into moments of their pasts that created these attitudes. We watch the characters attempt to live in the wake of these traumatic experiences, and after abuse, excessive drug use, and becoming homeless, the characters finally begin to discover a sense of themselves. In order to understand *Jimmy & Rita*'s role in this generational conflict we must identify the characteristics of Generation X at play in the narrative and form, and how the representation of Generation X makes a larger statement about the effects of baby-boomer values on Gen X youth culture.

READING JIMMY

Jimmy and Rita's disconnection from the world around them and even each other is an evident side effect of the disenchanting world they live in, and their inability to cope or accept their past traumas that have led them to the present. Though both Jimmy and Rita struggle to make sense of their troubling pasts, they both react differently when faced with hardships, and they are both in pursuit of and at odds with conventional gender roles and the conventions of working and building a family.

Addonizio doesn't hesitate to thrust us in the grim reality of the characters' present day lives, and she also doesn't hesitate to initiate the relationship between the characters and their pasts. Within the first six poems Addonizio not only gives us enough detail to understand Jimmy and Rita as characters in their present, Addonizio also introduces two poems that begin the narrative of their pasts.

The poem "Beer. Milk. The Dog. My Old Man." is set in Jimmy's perspective, and it shows us the complicated relationship he had with his father as he was growing up. There is a sense in the poem that Jimmy felt both admiration and fear for his father. Many of the interactions between them include Jimmy's father trying to make Jimmy act tough and masculine. In the poem Jimmy states, "He taught me to fight / by smacking the side of my head / with his open hand, calling me / a pussy" (Addonizio 22). Not only do we see Jimmy's father coercing him to adopt these masculine traits, we also see his father demeaning him as a means to assert these values. A few lines later Jimmy's mother enters in a scene that mirrors abusive scenes between Jimmy and Rita that come later in the story. Jimmy says, "When he smacked / my mother she didn't hit back, / just yelled at him" (Addonizio 22). In terms of their relationship, it is clear that Jimmy's father takes

on a role that asserts dominance over Jimmy's mother. Here we see that, first, in this poem boomer parents in reality haven't moved past the patriarchal roles their generation sought to fix, and, second, that the boomer family is anything but unified. The images Addonizio gives us show the grim reality Jimmy is faced with that eventually effects his present day life. It also is important to note that Jimmy's retelling of these events feels distanced and withheld as it only shows the facts of what happened, but not how any of them felt during or after these tumultuous moments. Jimmy is therefore detached from these images, or at least he attempts to detach from them by never confronting the traumas of his past. Harkening back to Berlant's observations, as readers we only sense the trauma by knowing that it exists, but we do not directly experience the actual emotional weight of it.

In "Beer. Milk. The Dog. My Old Man." we not only see the abusive, broken family Jimmy was raised in, we also see Jimmy's attempt to admire his father, despite his father's lack of affection and his tendency towards violence. There is a sense throughout the poem and the book that Jimmy wishes to fulfill the masculine role portrayed by his father; a role that includes concealing his emotions or avoiding portrayals of weakness. Towards the end of the poem Jimmy says,

Sometimes I'd sit up
at night in the garage and watch
how he drank [beer], tipping his head
way back, and I'd try to drink mine
exactly the same,
but quietly, so he wouldn't notice
and send me away. (Addonizio 23)

Here we get a sense that Jimmy is similar to the Gen X-associated image of a "latchkey kid" by the way he wishes to be close with his father, and also in the way that he

anticipates being told to leave if he makes his presence too known. Such a sentiment implies absence and distance, not within Jimmy, but within his father. Unlike most instances in his present, Jimmy is actually pursuing a connection here in his past. His father, on the other hand, is disconnected from him. Jimmy later on deals with the conflicting emotions of both hating and loving his father, and in many ways, through ignoring his past and his emotional state, he actually does fulfill the same masculine roles his father fulfilled through abuse, distance, and violence.

Jimmy also grapples with the disappointing reality that he was never able to make it as a boxer, and he is frequently troubled by his lack of success, and also his inability to hold a job that could sufficiently support him and Rita. Much of Jimmy's struggles throughout the story are with his inability to fulfill the traditional, masculine expectations placed upon him by his father. Jimmy is unsuccessful, addicted to heroin, and bears great similarities to the father who instilled such hopelessness in him. When Jimmy feels that his masculinity is compromised he reacts with increasing violence, and this distances him from Rita and even from himself, to the point where he is completely lost and alienated from the world.

The accumulation of trials Jimmy goes through explains the nature of his emotional reactions and how it is so difficult for him to confront or even cope with his past. When we begin to get to know Jimmy in the present day we immediately see his frustrations. In the poem "Round" Jimmy is watching a boxing match on TV and ignoring Rita as she talks to him about possibly getting married. Rita is the only person who talks in the entire poem; Jimmy is completely focused on the boxing match and his desire to become a boxer. In "Jimmy's Boxing Career" we learn that Jimmy couldn't

become a boxer because he “Got started too late / to be serious about it” (Addonizio 28). There is the implication here that Jimmy’s dreams evaded him by a matter of chance, and this creates the sense of frustration Jimmy feels as he watches the matches. He ruminates heavily on the possibility that he could have become a boxer, rather than entertaining Rita’s thoughts about marriage. Here we see again how Jimmy is bogged down by his past, to the point that it hinders his current life, and possible future. His emotional distance inevitably results in losing Rita, so it is important to see Jimmy ignoring her fantasies of marriage, focusing only on the opportunities he missed. The last sentence of the poem evokes the sense of defeat Jimmy feels towards boxing and his lost chance at success. As he is on the couch with Rita watching the match “he sees the crowd / on its feet, screaming, / him just lying there” (Addonizio 29). Here we not only see Jimmy detaching from Rita, we also experience the sense of disappointment Jimmy feels for not being able to pursue his dreams. However, as the poem also reveals, because the characters do not confront the events in their pasts, they continue to stay in the same stagnant state, and the hopelessness and disillusionment of having nothing and being close to no one further buries them in their defeated attitudes.

One of the most important poems concerning Jimmy’s emotional resistance is “Trenton”. The poem describes Jimmy returning to his home to see his mother who is staying in the hospital and dying of cancer. Apart from the abusive scene between her and Jimmy’s father, this is the only other time Jimmy’s mother is mentioned in the poems. We know so little about Jimmy’s mother that it is not clear whether he thinks positively or negatively of her, but in “Trenton” Jimmy shows affection by taking care of her, spending “Nights holding her / until the pills work” (Addonizio 32). Though the poem is

about Jimmy coming home to see her, Jimmy's mother is only mentioned in this instance, showing distance between them, or at least Jimmy's act of distancing himself from having to come to terms with her mortality. The poem's focus leads away from his mother and at the end Jimmy ends up at the graveyard where his father is buried. As he looks at the grave he imagines his father telling him, "Look at me you dumb fuck / At least you're still alive (Addonizio 32). Instead of addressing his mother's illness and eventual death, he is still stuck imagining his father's criticisms that have only deepened Jimmy's feelings of inadequacy. When Jimmy returns home in "What Happened", there is a suggestion that his mother has died. Jimmy recalls his aunt taking his mother's old clothes, and when Jimmy gets back to San Francisco Rita meets him at the Greyhound station in a scene where Jimmy's sadness is briefly shown:

What happened?
 Rita asks, touching his face.
Nothing. I don't know.
 He starts crying. Hurries her outside
 and walks fast ahead of her. (Addonizio 34)

The heaviness of the situation suggests that his mother died, and even though Jimmy does show his emotions, he is obviously resisting Rita in order to escape from the reality he faces. As tensions build between Jimmy and Rita as the story goes on Jimmy loses the ability to conceal his emotions, and the accumulation of events leads to bursts of anger that usually leave Rita as the victim.

The incredible psychological effects of Jimmy's broken and abusive childhood lead to the destruction of his relationship with Rita. Unable to deal with his emotions and unresolved past, Jimmy cannot get beyond his own issues to completely love Rita. The unemployment, dissatisfaction, and loss of unity the characters face all mirror what they

witnessed as children. Jimmy's frustration comes from how he is limited and stuck in a reality that reminds him of a childhood he tries so desperately to disassociate from.

Eventually Jimmy breaks in the poem "Race" in which Addonizio describes Jimmy in bed with Rita:

Jimmy wakes up and wants
to hit her, lying there curled
towards the window.
Just once,
hard,
so she'd cry out
and he could comfort her. (Addonizio 55)

The dynamic here is actually similar to Jimmy's relationship with his father. There is the duality of abuse and affection; Jimmy wants to hurt Rita so he will have a purpose, so he will be able to take care of her and comfort her. It is a senseless, destructive approach, but Jimmy desires this approach in order to conceal the emotions he feels. Instead of coping with the emotions Jimmy has learned to equate to weakness, he overcompensates by damaging Rita in order to make himself feel stronger. There is a sense of both sympathy and distance at play in this poem. Despite the severity of his desires, Jimmy is struggling to create an emotional connection. Jimmy feels his lack of success detracts from his masculinity, so he overcompensates by reacting violently, something his father, who taught Jimmy to be masculine, did frequently. Jimmy is afraid of being perceived as weak, even though he desperately needs an emotional connection. We gain sympathy watching Jimmy struggle against the idealized vision of manhood his father expected from him, and we also see distance through Jimmy's use of force and violence that gives him a moment of power in a life that limits his abilities and makes him feel weak.

In “Eviction” Jimmy feels the weight of his failures and limitations when he and Rita come back to the apartment to find that they have been evicted. Addonizio writes, “*Don’t look at us, he screams. / Punches the blue door / of the building, the pain / focusing him*” (Addonizio 58). In “Nightlife” he also becomes violent when he is in the kitchen of an apartment with Rita eating a meal of cheese and crackers, and she says, “*No one / can live like this for long*” (Addonizio 60). In response Jimmy

Pulls her
against him, twisting her arm back.
*Haven’t I been good to you? Jesus
fucking Christ I don’t know
what you want* (Addonizio 61)

Rita does not make a direct comment at Jimmy that would suggest that he has failed her by not being successful, yet this is what Jimmy perceives. Jimmy’s sense of disillusionment began in childhood as he dealt with his parents’ abuse and the deprecating comments from his father. Jimmy feels like a failure, and it can be seen in this passage because he immediately assumes that is what Rita means when she makes the comment. Through this overreaction it can be concluded that Jimmy’s extreme responses to situations are caused by his insecurities. Jimmy’s father also asserts authority over Jimmy, creating expectations Jimmy must reach to be a real man. Haunted by these expectations Jimmy becomes a victim of his limitations, unable to remove himself from the moments of his past that have created the inability for him to move forward and pursue success.

READING RITA

Like Jimmy, Rita's inability to cope with the present state of her life connects to the events in her childhood. The second poem in the book "Portrait" gives us a look into Rita's life growing up and dealing with her father leaving their family. In the poem we learn that Rita is responsible for most of the chores and for taking care of her siblings while "her mother would be in bed, / yelling for her to bring something – / her medicine or a drink" (Addonizio 16). "Afternoon" is a poem about Rita's home life that comes later in the book and also shows Rita taking on her mother's responsibilities at a young age. The poem describes that "Rita would hunt for money / to buy groceries, / shape hamburger meat / into small patties" (Addonizio 71). Rita not only experiences disunity within her own home, she is also forced to grow up quickly and take on the responsibilities of a mother to compensate for her parents' absence.

In "Portrait" we also see that Rita's father left their family when she was twelve. Rita's father represents the unemployment rates that affected many of the boomers in the eighties. Rita's father is immediately described as a man who "sold 8 x 10 portraits / from Golden West Photography" (Addonizio 16), and this particular description suggests the significance of his job, and his position as a man who must find employment to provide for his family. In the next few lines we begin to see a growing disillusionment when his business begins to fail: "door after door closing on him / in neighborhoods in Nevada – / places no one went / or came from" (Addonizio 16). These last lines are reminiscent of Jimmy and his missed chance at becoming a boxer. Like Jimmy, Rita's father is limited because of his family's status and location, and this undermines the possibility of success. Despite his lack of success, the next few lines portray Rita's desire to make her father proud:

Rita has pictures of
 herself at every age to twelve
 in front of a velvet backdrop,
 holding the latest baby,
 smiling to please him. (Addonizio 16)

Rita holding the “latest baby” also shows the responsibilities she took on in place of her mother who is hardly mentioned in the poem at all. The passage is striking when Rita’s father eventually runs off to Vegas, leaving the family behind and sending letters with money to them every once and a while before disappearing completely. The only interaction we see between Rita and her father is Rita attempting to make a connection with him, just before he leaves them all behind. At the end of the poem it is revealed that Rita sent a picture of herself to the address her father’s last letter was sent from.

Addonizio writes that the picture “came back finally, a crease / wrinkling her best dress / and the sea behind her” (Addonizio 17). This scene is jarring because the crease wrinkling Rita and the view of the sea juxtaposes the happier sentiment portrayed earlier when Rita takes photographs in front of a velvet backdrop, smiling for him. The use of “finally” also suggests that the return of the picture was inevitable; another missed chance. The portraits were once a point of connection and bonding between Rita and her father, but the picture of Rita by the sea does not even reach him, and becomes damaged in the process. This not only symbolizes Rita’s loss of her father, but also the damaging effect on Rita and her bond with him because he is absent. The idea of the “latchkey” generation appears here, not only with the absence of both of Rita’s parents, but also with the responsibilities she takes on in their place.

The first poem of the book, “December”, combines Rita’s past and present to show the similarities in the disillusionment she felt then and feels now. In the poem we

learn that Rita works at a massage parlor, already deviating from baby-boomer values by basing her income on selling sex which diminishes the idea of working a steady job to fully support herself. In the poem it is clear Rita does not enjoy this work, but as we learn later in the book she takes on these jobs to support her heroin addiction that prevents her from holding a stable job.

In “December” we also see Rita’s detachment from herself as she washes her hands after seeing a client. Addonizio writes,

She washes her hands seven,
eight times a day. Dreams
of scrubbing off skin,
red strips of it falling
into a sinkful of suds. (Addonizio 15)

While Jimmy tends to take out his frustration on others, namely Rita, Rita tends to take out her frustrations on herself. Here Rita is fantasizing about scrubbing off her skin in order to forget what she does for money. There is a clear sense that Rita despises her own decisions, but the detail that “she washes her hands seven, / eight times a day” shows that Rita is stuck in a lifestyle that is perpetuating her disenchanting view of the world and herself. The following lines further this idea by suggesting Rita was fated to end up in such a limited world:

She buries what’s left
of her hands in the white
froth, piled
like new snow
she would scoop out
as a child to make
a man. (Addonizio 15)

Rita buries her hands in what seems to be a gesture of resigning herself to not only her situation, but the aftermath as well. The froth of soap in the sink suddenly transforms to

snow, and Rita recalls making snowmen as a child, but what is really implied through the language is that Rita has been primed for this moment. From her childhood we see that she takes on the responsibilities most married women do, in order to make up for her parents' absence. Rita took on these traditional roles as a child, but now as an adult she is far from the expected image of a traditional woman. The line "to make a man" implies that Rita tried to recreate the image of a father she didn't have. In the book Jimmy is withholding and abusive, but there are also moments when Rita shows her own apathy towards their relationship, and I believe that this is because the only male figure she had left her. It suggests the same distrustful attitude Gen Xer's portrayed toward baby-boomer values. Rita experienced a male figure leaving before, and her inability to become closer with Jimmy seems to suggest that she is preventing herself from having a deep connection that could result in a similar loss.

Rita's mother plays a larger part later in the book, specifically in the poem "Afternoon". In this poem we are finally given more context on the absence of Rita's mother in the story. The poem describes Rita looking for her mother and "checking the hall closet – / she'd found her there once, / crouched with a knife. *Don't be scared. / No one's here*" (Addonizio 71). Later in the poem it is suggested that Rita's mother ended up killing herself:

(That last time, calling *Mama*,
opening the bathroom door –
the tub water rose-colored,
still warm, but she wouldn't wake.) (Addonizio 71)

These poems portray the aftermath of her father leaving, and the effects it had on her mother. Rita ends up acting similarly to her mother, falling into a cycle of abuse with Jimmy and also holding herself responsible for his violence. In "Watch" Rita tells that us

she “[brought] a pair of scissors back to bed... I guess I fall asleep because Jimmy wakes me taking the scissors from my hand” (Addonizio 56). Rita’s reaction here to the continuing decline of her happiness, fulfillment, and purpose mirrors that of her mother’s reaction to the overwhelming hardships she experienced. Both characters are protecting themselves in fear of being hurt, but both characters also do extensive damage to themselves. Rita’s mother does this by committing suicide, and Rita does this by blaming herself for not only her misfortunes, but for Jimmy’s violent reactions. In “Our Words” Rita shares the growing disconnection between her and Jimmy, but focuses the blame on herself. She says, “Jimmy won’t touch me anymore. Afraid he’ll fall in. I’m a hole” (Addonizio 63).

The poem “Fairmont” explicitly refers to Rita’s disconnection to the rest of the world as a result of fear and trauma. The poem takes place when Rita is seventeen and in San Francisco for the first time with her brothers who are in search of drugs. Rita leaves them to see the Fairmont Hotel where she is picked up by an older man who has sex with her in the bathroom for money, but leaves before paying her. Rita’s emotional responses are hardly described, but the traumatic weight of the incident is finally felt at the end of the poem when Addonizio writes that Rita was “waiting / until the shame went away / and the other girl came, / the one with the same name / but no memories” (Addonizio 38). It is clear from this moment on that Rita chooses to ignore the hardships of her past, making it harder for her to move on into the future. There is, again, the sense of escapism, and not believing that there is anything better, or anything that can’t possibly fail. In “Smaller Each Day” Rita finally addresses herself when she says,

At night I feel my heart
beating too hard

and I'm afraid.
 Stop, I tell it.
 But it keeps on
 saying *Rita, Rita, Rita*
 as if she'll answer. (Addonizio 73)

Rita directly addresses the disconnection she feels from herself, which explains her distance from other characters and from reality.

READING *JIMMY & RITA*

Jimmy and Rita are not only characters that personify many elements of Generation X, they are also characters that represent the inter-generational conflict between Gen Xer's and baby-boomers. The struggle itself shows the reasons behind the sense of disillusionment felt by many Gen Xer's as they saw success turn to failure, and as they watched the idealized bond of marriage become replaced by divorce. Growing into an atmosphere comprised of failure, disappointment, and stagnation, these characters learn nothing but to expect such negative outcomes, leaving them with apathetic attitudes similar to many Gen X youths.

Jimmy and Rita eventually part after becoming distanced from each other. We see less of Jimmy in the last section of the book, focusing more on Rita's declining mental health and slow recovery. In the end there is a glimmer of hope even though the characters do not completely escape their bleak environment. In the poem "Dancing" Rita feels confident and in control of her life after living in a shelter, seeing a therapist, and becoming a stripper. Though Rita is still subjected to hardships and patriarchal standards, the first line of the poem states that Rita believes stripping is "better than being a whore -- / no one touches her" (Addonizio 83). Unlike "December" where Rita is portrayed as

fulfilling the sexual desires of men and not herself, in this poem we see that Rita is autonomous, and that she finally believes she is beautiful. The poem moves away from how men perceives her and moves toward how she perceives herself, and the fact that no one touches her suggests that she doesn't need male gratification to reach fulfillment. After being called sweet by another stripper Rita reflects on herself: "*I'm sweet*, Rita thinks, / sliding her hands down / her own hips, smiling / at nobody" (Addonizio 83). Again, we are not given an explicit emotional response, but through Rita's actions we see her finally adopt a positive image of herself that isn't defined by the desires or expectations of men.

There is also a sense of hope with Jimmy as well, as we see in the poem "Window". Riding the bus home from work, Jimmy sees Rita standing on the street. "Window" is a rare poem in the book because we are actually told, through Jimmy's point of view, how his insecurities as a man negatively affected his relationship with Rita. He states,

I scrape off food [at work] and think
about her. How I couldn't make
her happy. How I'm tired
of having nothing
and nobody. (Addonizio 84)

Jimmy also reveals, in a more distanced way, that he goes "home at night and sit[s] there" like his "old man used to" (Addonizio 84). There is a confirmation here that Jimmy does have traits similar to his father. We do see a transformation, however, at the end when Jimmy says, "*Only pussies cry*, / my old man used to say. / My old man, / who didn't know shit" (Addonizio 85). Jimmy distinctively calls his father "my" old man, suggesting that he feels connected to his father, and affected by his father's actions. However, Jimmy

also breaks away from his father's influence by admitting that his father "didn't know shit". We are able to sense that Jimmy understands how his father's influence negatively affected his perception of the world, and his relationship with Rita.

Jimmy & Rita does not necessarily offer a happy ending, and I believe that it is not supposed to. The book of poems portrays the effects of baby-boomer values on Generation X and how the broken families of the characters affected their ability to cope with the traumas of their pasts and their ability to build a promising future. We see how divorce and unemployment created a sense of disillusionment, and how the characters eventually adopted their parents' issues and inability to create a sense of unity in their relationships. On the level of form we see the characters distancing themselves from each other and the audience, portraying the distrustful attitudes Gen Xer's had towards the flawed norms of middle-class. In the end we see the characters pursuing work and reflecting on themselves and their relationship, and though there is no clear resolution, we get the sense that the characters, like Gen X, grow up and eventually face the issues that have caused their hardships. Addonizio's *Jimmy & Rita* not only captures the essence of Gen X youth culture, it also outlines the causes of Gen X attitudes as a way to deny baby-boomers' negative perception of Generation X.

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