

COMPLICATED GEOGRAPHIES: DOUGLAS COUPLAND'S NORTH AMERICA

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By

JESSICA MCDONALD

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## ABSTRACT

Starting with his breakout novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* in 1991, Canadian writer and visual artist Douglas Coupland has published more than twenty works of fiction and non-fiction. Coupland's prolific writing career has helped him achieve popularity across diverse reading publics, including mainstream or general book-reading publics, as well as scholarly circles. One recurring feature of his work that makes it compelling to read and rich to study is what this project terms *complicated geographies*. That is, his writing features dynamic textual renderings of space that are complicated in two senses: first, they are sometimes complicit in reinforcing conventional notions of space at the same time that they are often complex, subversive, and resistant to reading practices that try to fix them in meaning; and second, these renderings work to complicate easy, and oft-used, narratives about space. In other words, the complex textual "maps" provided by Coupland's writing often trouble how public discourse views particular spaces. To study these complicated geographies, I examine depictions of North American space in short- and long-form fiction and non-fiction written by Coupland, from *Generation X* (1991) to *Bit Rot*, released in 2016. While North America is the broader frame of reference for this project, I focus in particular on five key spaces from Coupland's oeuvre: the American Southwest desert region, Vancouver suburbia, British Columbia wilderness, Mexico, and the road. Pairing traditional literary analysis of individual texts with the work of contextualization, in which I discuss how the texts align with or alter popular geographies of North American space, this dissertation argues that Coupland's works demand that readers rethink how they consume landscapes. His writing provokes individuals to consider how their give-and-take relationships with place influence ecological and social justice. By grappling with and itself embodying both the "good" and "bad" ways of consuming the world that surrounds us, Coupland's written work exposes the charged ethical issues at stake in the everyday acts of understanding and inhabiting space.

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## Introduction

In a 1996 published postcard from the Bahamas, Canadian writer and visual artist Douglas Coupland proclaims, “‘Place’ is a joke” (*Polaroids* 112). Thirteen years later, with similar aplomb, he announces in his biography of Marshall McLuhan, “Geography has become irrelevant” (*Marshall McLuhan* 15). The subtitle of his first-ever major solo art exhibition, *Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2014, expresses the same sentiment: *place* can no longer be taken seriously in a globalizing world seemingly characterized by *placelessness*, by the encroaching influence of a homogenizing “McNugget culture” (Coupland, *Polaroids* 23), by the transformation of everywhere into “Nowhere” via a “complete obfuscation of differences” across space (Augaitis 25).<sup>1</sup> From the 1990s to present day, across the three decades of his writing career, the perspective that place is increasingly irrelevant has been tacitly and overtly present in Coupland’s written work. His widely popular first novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) inaugurated this sentiment in his fiction. Set primarily in Palm Springs, California, where the transient protagonists find more a reflective stop on their lifelong itinerary than a permanent home, the novel is populated by characters who appear to have only provisional, shallow relationships to particular cities; who move across countries and borders without being especially affected by differences in location; and who face the realities of a globalizing, “accelerated” world with what is presented as a generation-defining mix of apathy, irony, and nostalgia. These features of the novel are likely what made it relevant to include in a graduate class on North American Literature, where I first encountered it and where the seminar

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<sup>1</sup> Coupland offers a notably different reading of the art show title, as he understands it, in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. He explains, “It’s a reflection of how these days everyone has to become a jack of all trades, everyone has to know everything. It’s about the simultaneousness of today’s world” (38). While his explanation of the title does not concern place in literal terms, it approaches a similar meaning to my own reading of the subtitle: just as specific places are ushered toward becoming “everywhere” (or so the story goes), people are ushered toward being “everyone.” Contemporary social and economic pressures can seem to exert a homogenizing force on both place and people.

discussions trended toward how difficult the novel is to *locate*—how it seems detached from a specific *sense of place*. In the words of one protagonist from *Generation X*, using language that closely mimics Coupland’s own, “where you’re from feels sort of irrelevant these days” (4).<sup>2</sup>

But since and beyond the publication of that breakout text, Coupland’s writing has in fact proven to be *all about place*. Michael Prokopow goes so far as to say that Coupland’s creative work “is constantly driven by a need to define place and the fact of being in a place” (49). A reader need only look to a few of Coupland’s published works to see this is the case, including his two non-fiction essay collections on the spirit of Canada, *Souvenir of Canada* (2002) and *Souvenir of Canada 2* (2004) (along with the series’ accompanying documentary film), or his “insider’s look” at Vancouver in *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland’s Vancouver* (2000), or his collection *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996), which devotes a significant portion to the famous Los Angeles neighbourhood Brentwood. The very fact of these texts’ publications reflects how even if place is increasingly “irrelevant” or “a joke,” in Coupland’s words, it is a joke that he has spent a lot of time, and page space, thinking through. It is a joke he has taken quite seriously.

This central contradiction of Coupland’s written work and writerly reputation provides the motivation for this study. Keenly attuned to that feeling many express as a kind of spreading *placelessness*, but also devoted to the unique *particulars* of individual neighbourhoods, cities, and nations, Coupland’s writing feels urgent and necessary to study in the current spatial moment. As the damaging inequities and stark imbalances of globalization increasingly polarize how modernity is experienced; as scales of the local, regional, national, and continental are radically renovated to fit new models of community, travel, and government; as climate crises abound and render the future of human life on Earth more and more precarious, Coupland’s writing invigoratingly engages with the dynamic landscapes of our time. Collectively, his work takes on such timely, spatialized topics as the difficulties and possibilities of creating community in a globalized world (as in *Generation X*) or under corporate capitalism (as in *The Gum Thief*, *JPod*, or *Microserfs*), and they powerfully negotiate the spatial realities of the Anthropocene,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Of this line, Bent Sørensen has made the valuable comment that “[a]pparently place is not so easily done away with, since it leaves this residue of having to be mentioned” in the scene in question (98).

<sup>3</sup> As a scientific concept used to describe the current epoch, marked by humans’ irrevocable impact on Earth, the Anthropocene has, in the last decade, come to be used by Humanities scholars studying how literature and culture comment upon ecological conditions of the



including ecocritical concerns like Colony Collapse Disorder (in *Generation A*), plastics pollution (as in the *Souvenir of Canada* series, but also in his 2018 Vancouver Aquarium exhibit *Vortex*), and the apocalyptic scenarios that can emerge from humans' drastic impacts on Earth (as in the oil crisis of *Player One*). These large-scale, macro concerns are matched, in Coupland's oeuvre, by close attention to the small-scale, micro concerns woven into the quotidian textures of our daily geographies—in the cul-de-sacs of suburbia (*Girlfriend in a Coma*) and in “invisible” urban structures and infrastructures like roads (*Miss Wyoming*), hotels (*Life After God*), bridges (*City of Glass*), and parking lots (*Polaroids from the Dead*). It is this sustained attention to quotidian place that leads Bjarke Ingels to proclaim that Coupland taught him “to look out for the potential meaning in the mediocre,” and “to distill from a landscape of highway overpasses, shopping malls, suburban homes and corporate brands a sensibility as rich in meaning as any traditionally charged cultural context” (116). Such critical responses suggest that Coupland's representations of space, from the continental to the local, from the highways of the United States to the aisles of the stationery store, render geography anything but irrelevant—indeed, render even the overlooked or seemingly insignificant corners of geography “rich in meaning.”

In short, Douglas Coupland crafts *complicated geographies*. I use this phrase as an anchor for this project because it encapsulates a few relevant meanings. In the first sense, it means that Coupland's representations of space, and particularly North American space, are *complicated* in the adjectival sense of that word: they are complex, intricate, sometimes difficult to comprehend in their contradictions and cacophonies. Consider, for instance, his depicted Vancouver suburbia, both wild and domesticated, a haven and a spatial harbinger of apocalypse (more on this in Chapter 2); or his vision of the road, a channel for wide-eyed fantasies of personal freedom, but also a ruse fated to bring about failed escape (see the Conclusion). But the term *complicated geographies* also expresses another meaning, encapsulated in the verb form “to complicate.” Coupland's geographies work to complicate easy, and oft-used, narratives about

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contemporary moment. For some valuable examples of this scholarship, see Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015); Lynn Keller's *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (2017); Elizabeth M. Deloughrey's *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019); and the collection *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (2017), edited by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino.

space. The textual maps provided by his writing often trouble how public discourse, constituted by scholarly, creative, and everyday outputs and communications, views particular spaces. And even when his maps mimic or reproduce those very views, even when Coupland's work aligns with "dominant geographies" (McKittrick) or "popular geographies" (Gregory), they do so in ways that invite complex thinking and critique. I argue that Coupland's complicated geographies demand that we rethink how we consume landscapes and provoke us to consider how our give-and-take relationships with place influence ecological and social justice. By grappling with and itself embodying both the "good" and "bad" ways of consuming the world that surrounds us, Coupland's written work exposes the charged ethical issues at stake in the everyday acts of understanding and inhabiting space. Whether that exposure involves troubling the Anglo-North American's "othering" desire for Mexico, or billboarding the settler colonial and environmental destructiveness of representing wilderness as empty, or any number of other interventions his writing offers in how individuals consume space, Coupland's re-mapping of North America expresses and inhabits a complex relationship with typical understandings of the spaces it depicts. A single work of his can animate space in a spectrum of ways, ranging from repetitions of the most predictable imaginative geographies, informed by colonial rhetoric and discourse, to innovations containing the most surprising geographical revisions. Such a spectrum is visible, for instance, in his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, wherein the unoriginal story of suburbia's tedious lack is juxtaposed with the more unusual narrative of suburbia the wild. Anchored by these complications, by this spirit of the both-and and the all-at-once, Coupland's written geographies are rich and rewarding objects of study from both literary and spatial perspectives.

If Coupland's work is uniquely positioned, then, to contribute to and complicate the public spatial imagination, this contribution is made all the more significant by the fact that Coupland has achieved popularity and prevalence across very diverse reading publics, including mainstream or general book-reading and art-consuming publics, as well as scholarly circles. According to estimates offered by his author's notes, Coupland's written work has been translated into as many as forty different languages (Author's Note, *Marshall McLuhan*). This international reach means that ideas about place embedded in his works have the chance to circulate widely—for better or worse—beyond local (Vancouver or Pacific Northwest) or national (Canadian) readerships. That he is so prolific in his written (as well as visual) creative outputs—twenty-five full-length written works published to date and participation in at least

twenty-nine solo or group exhibitions (Wall 263-71)—means he has accumulated a notable level of literary celebrity, so much so that Kit Dobson calls Coupland “a household name” (“Politics of Marginalization” 200). Coupland also works across a wide array of genres and forms of creative work, including personal essays, travel writing, short and long fiction, documentary and other film, and visual art such as painting, sculpture, photography, and digital creations. That variety means that there are simply more opportunities for individuals, of different types and aesthetic interests, to encounter, internalize, critique, applaud, or otherwise engage with his representations of space. As a complicated culture-maker, then, who is of both popular and scholarly interest, and who works across diverse media and uniquely taps into the key contradictions of space in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, Douglas Coupland merits sustained study.

This dissertation is therefore animated by my assessment that Coupland’s writing constructs place in interesting, troubling, and intellectually stimulating ways. In the pages that follow, I examine depictions of North American space in short- and long-form fiction and non-fiction written by Coupland, from his first novel published in 1991 (*Generation X*) to *Bit Rot*, released in 2016.<sup>4</sup> In choosing a breadth of texts for this project, I have focused especially on those that are understudied, such as some of the short works from *Life After God* and *Polaroids from the Dead*, or those that are more popular, such as *Generation X* or *Girlfriend in a Coma*, but that merit further critical attention because of what I see as gaps in how scholarship has approached them. Coupland’s breakout novel, *Generation X*, is revisited in significant ways in more than one chapter because it is his best-known, most “canonical” publication, which, I argue, has not been sufficiently examined for its spatial politics.

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<sup>4</sup> I have chosen to study Coupland’s fiction as well as non-fiction because both forms of writing contribute to spatial discourse in significant ways. It is through the dialogues and convergences between ostensibly “fictional” and “nonfictional” worlds that places are most strongly produced. With Kylie Crane, who in her study chooses to “draw on fictional and nonfictional texts alike” because she is “considering them first and foremost as narratives,” I too “refrain from distinguishing too strongly between the terms [fiction and non-fiction] because such differentiations tend to foreground the degree to which a text is deemed accurate or representative” (14). I am not concerned with how accurate Coupland is trying to be, by writing with or without the “cover” of fictionality, but am instead interested in how *all* of his writing contributes to and intervenes in popular geographies. Where applicable, in the chapters, I attend to the ways in which differences between his fiction and non-fiction are important to discussions about space.

Depictions of North American space are the broader frame of reference for this study (the reasons for which will be discussed later in this introduction), but the specific sites I analyze within that framework are deserts, suburbs, wilderness regions, Mexico, and, most explicitly in the conclusion, the road. I name them in general terms here, but in the individual chapters and conclusion, I locate these broad spatial categories within specific North American geographic parameters. The American Southwest desert region becomes the focus of the first chapter, since that region is central to some of Coupland's key texts and ideas. The suburbia of Coupland's youth in Vancouver (and the municipality of West Vancouver, more specifically) takes centre stage for the second chapter on suburbs, as do the wilderness areas around Vancouver and in British Columbia for the third. In the chapter on Mexico, I focus especially on the U.S.-Mexico border and on the town of San Felipe, since those locales figure strongly in Coupland's breakout novel, but I also attend to the ways Mexico and its cultures pop up in other spaces of Coupland's writing, including texts set in North Bay, Ontario, and Lancaster, Washington. The conclusion, which delves into the space of the road as depicted by Coupland, returns to some of these key locales (for example, the dusty grid road of the American Southwest desert; logging trails that line the way into Northern British Columbia's forests), while it also brings in new sites of interest (such as the all-American, cross-country highway road trip).

My work has been anchored by the following questions: How might Coupland's representations of North American space help rethink key spaces in the continent, particularly in light of those spaces' dominant (McKittrick) or popular (Gregory) geographies? How can Coupland's works contribute to more complex, critical, and dynamic understandings of these spaces? In short, I am asking how Coupland's works *complicate* North American geographies as they are "mapped" in the public spatial imagination. In order to study Coupland's depiction of the five key spaces identified above, in relation to these research questions, I employ different methods of reading the literature—for example, close reading of individual passages, identifying and analyzing patterns within and across texts, and undertaking "macro-level" digital text searching (particularly in the chapter on Mexico)—and I investigate my findings in light of popular and scholarly conceptions of each North American space. The chapters therefore pair traditional literary analysis of individual texts with the work of contextualization, in which I discuss how the texts align with or alter popular geographies of North American space. To consider text in light of context, I draw on a host of scholars who theorize that space is a process

and a product of relations (Lefebvre, Massey, Soja), but also that, more specifically, literary and other representations play an important role in this production of space (Basso, McKittrick, Gregory, Said), a theoretical framework I will explain later in this introduction. Each chapter also enters into conversation with more specific scholarship on the individual places the chapters study, such as critical work on deserts and the American Southwest, suburb scholarship, ecocriticism and theories of wilderness, tourism studies and work on Canadian-Mexican relations, and literary and cultural studies approaches to the road. Drawing on these theories and using the described methods, I argue that Coupland's written work offers a complicated spatial "remapping" of North America that exposes (while it sometimes repeats) the social and ecological problems with the characterization of North American spaces in the public imagination, including in the scholarship I study. These problems are visible in the way that, for instance, wilderness is explicitly and implicitly used as a colonial concept to shore up the "civilized" identities of white settler Canadians. But, I argue, his work also forwards possibilities for thinking about these spaces in alternative ways—ways that acknowledge the richness and complexity of the seemingly barren desert, the cookie-cutter suburb, the unspoiled but "primitive" wilderness, the intoxicating Mexico, and the road that takes you away from all your troubles.

My awareness of this tricky balance in Coupland's writing was what initially sparked my interest in studying, in a close and sustained way, his complicated geographies. I observed early on that no matter the "type" of North American space—arid Mojave land, clean-cut Vancouver suburb, mountains of Northern British Columbia, small Mexican town of San Felipe, or winding American highway—Coupland writes about them in ways that straddle problems with how the spaces are typically conceived and possibilities in how they could be reconceived. Particularly through his alternating complicity with and critique of the settler-colonial geographies of North America, Coupland writes about space innovatively, creatively, subversively, but also stereotypically, troublingly, predictably. Each of my chapters, then, takes on both sides of this consistent tension in Coupland's spatial politics: the original and the tired, the good and the bad, the just and the oppressive. This means, for instance, negotiating how Coupland's privileged characters generally follow the tired cultural narrative of road travel as an escape from problems (as I discuss in the Conclusion), alongside how that option fails for most of his characters in a way that seems to *critique* the behaviours of privileged contemporaries who leave their identities

and accountabilities behind to take off on a whim. In its examination of Coupland's spatial politics, then, each part of this project balances what individuals can learn about space directly from Coupland's work with what they can learn from critiquing it.

Apart from the work of Andrew Tate, few scholars have returned to study Coupland in more than one article (with the exceptions of Dobson and McCampbell), and thus this dissertation undertakes one of the first long-form studies of Coupland. Tate's monograph, *Douglas Coupland* (2007), remains the only single-authored, book-length scholarly project on Coupland. His project is a valuable start to long-form Coupland scholarship, but it is somewhat dated and, as an introduction to Coupland's oeuvre, it necessarily takes a broad, survey-like approach, tackling a range of topics such as narrative, consumer culture, spirituality, and, in one chapter, place. Given the important tensions in how Coupland's writing treats place, my project stems from the premise that the topic of place in/and Coupland requires more attention than a single chapter could provide. And space is made all the more necessary as a topic of study in Coupland scholarship as it is overlooked in comparison to the typical approaches taken to his writing, usually based on time or history (how Coupland freshly captures the mood of Generation X, or the spirit of a particular moment in contemporary life), or on spirituality (as in much of Tate's work on Coupland), or on technology and the ubiquitous presence of consumer culture.

With this project, I also intend to contribute to cross-disciplinary dialogues about the key spaces I examine, especially about how those spaces are "produced" discursively (more on this theoretical focus, including Lefebvre's contributions, later in this introduction). I hope, then, for this project to be of interest not just to Coupland scholars but also to those who are invested in the tensions and complications of the North American landscape and, particularly, in the five spaces I study in the pages to follow. Following Edward Said's wise words, that "texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (*Orientalism* 94), I hope that this dissertation will contribute to knowledge on Douglas Coupland's world-creating texts as well as to understanding of the worlds they create.

### **"Nope, still not Canadian": North America's Douglas Coupland**

Douglas Coupland is a nearly life-long resident of Vancouver, British Columbia, but he was born on a NATO base in West Germany in 1961. In addition to being a Canadian citizen,

and a key figure in the Canadian literary and artistic establishment, he is sometimes seen as a *U.S.-American* author, sometimes as a *North American* author, and sometimes as a *transnational* author with more attachments to the global than to any particular nation. A cursory scan of the paratext binding almost any long-form work written by Coupland will disclose these assorted authorial-spatial attachments. Author's notes describing Coupland, on the back covers and flyleaves of his books, tend to emphasize that his texts have been translated into many different languages: twenty-two, thirty-five, or forty, depending on the note, the text, and the date of publication. At least four of his published works paratextually feature the curious phrase that Coupland has been "published in *most* countries" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Several emphasize Coupland's fame as a writer of *international bestsellers*.<sup>6</sup> Two of them communicate that he tours across North America, Europe, and Asia with his art exhibitions.<sup>7</sup> And one tells of Coupland's history at educational institutions across the globe, name-dropping his attendance at Vancouver's Emily Carr, Hokkaido College in Sapporo, Milan's Istituto Europeo di Design, and the Japan/America Institute of Management Science in Honolulu and Tokyo.<sup>8</sup> Of the eighteen author's notes included in my own personal collection of Coupland books, eleven of them figure Coupland simultaneously as a Vancouverite, as a Canadian, and as a nation-crossing, worldly, cosmopolitan writer of international acclaim. So while Coupland is frequently tied to Vancouver, as a long-time and public advocate of the place, his books tend paratextually, and, it seems, deliberately, to expand this association between the author and his favorite city.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> These include *The Gum Thief* (2007) Vintage Canada Edition (2008); *Generation A* (2009) Vintage Canada Edition (2010); *Marshall McLuhan* (2009) Penguin Group Canada paperback edition (2013); and *Highly Inappropriate Tales for Young People* (2011), published by Random House Canada.

<sup>6</sup> The Vintage Canada Editions of *The Gum Thief* and *Generation A* feature paratextual comments about the "international bestseller *JPod*," while the 2014 Vintage Canada Edition of *Worst.Person.Ever.* (2013) and the Random House-published *Kitten Clone: Inside Alcatraz-Lucent* (2014) champion *Generation X* as an "international bestseller."

<sup>7</sup> *Kitten Clone*, published by Random House in 2014, and *Marshall McLuhan*, published by the Penguin Group in paperback edition in 2013.

<sup>8</sup> The 2002 Vintage Canada edition of *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Coupland is frequently associated with Vancouver, as the city he grew up in and in which he currently works and lives. He has written several texts set in or about Vancouver (including *City of Glass*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, *JPod*, and *Life After God*); has had deep and ongoing ties to the visual arts scene there (even constructing public artworks around the city); and is known to speak romantically and idealistically about Vancouver, even writing that he "spent [his] twenties

These paratextual details introduce a central and relevant tension that undergirds Coupland’s “literary citizenship” (York) as it is publicly fashioned. That is, Coupland’s relationship to Canadianness—or to Canadian literature as an institution—is both firmly established and rather ambiguous. Consider, on one end, the many ways Coupland has been formally and conventionally tied to Canada’s cultural landscape: he has two times been longlisted for the Giller Prize, one of the main institutions of Canadian literary prize culture; his novel *Generation X* was a contender on CBC’s “battle of the books”-style competition, Canada Reads; he gave the Massey Lectures in 2010; he recently joined the likes of P. K. Page, George Bowering, Lorna Crozier, and other staple figures of so-called CanLit when he was awarded the Lieutenant Governor’s Award for Literary Excellence; and he was even asked, several years ago, to develop “a collection exploring Canadian identity for Roots Canada called Roots X Douglas Coupland”—a commercial as much as creative endeavour that also marks his ongoing investment (think: dollar signs) in the spirit of the nation (Gray 256). He was also named an officer of the Order of Canada in 2014 (Wall 271). In scholarly circles, too, Coupland is sometimes given the distinction of being an expressly *Canadian* author. Take, for instance, Toby Litt’s comment that the “mood [Coupland] encapsulates better than any other writer is that of being underwhelmed,” which Litt calls “a very Canadian type of dissidence—a direct response to being culturally overwhelmed by America” (15). Litt’s assessment uses the content, or mood, of Coupland’s work to justify tying him to Canada, but Jefferson Faye goes beyond that to draw on Coupland’s own self-identification and his writerly reputation: “He writes as a Canadian, publishes as a self-identified Canadian and, from my perspective at least, Coupland has assembled a body of work which represents some of Canadian popular fiction’s most incisive analyses of ‘American’ culture, the pervasiveness of the U.S.’s cultural imperialism, and its deleterious effects on Canada and Canadian sovereignty” (501-02).<sup>10</sup> For these critics, it is textual mood and attitude that solidify Coupland as a Canadian culture-maker. In ways that carry both economic and cultural capital, then, Coupland has routinely been recognized by many of the

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scouring the globe thinking there had to be a better city out there, until it dawned on [him] that Vancouver is the best one going” (*City of Glass* Revised Edition, back cover).

<sup>10</sup> Note how both Litt and Faye use some form of antagonism toward the U.S.—and especially its “overwhelming” and invasive cultural outputs—to describe Coupland’s particular brand of Canadianness, a judgment that I find intriguing in light of how often (and sympathetically) Coupland writes about issues and individuals in the U.S. and in light of how other critics often characterize Coupland as an American writer.



most notable Canadian cultural institutions across the overlapping circles of industry, arts, and scholarship.

Despite these many ways he has been formally recognized in national accolades and endeavours, in his own public commentary, essays, and self-presentation, Coupland has cultivated an image of himself as more-than-a-Canadian, and indeed sometimes not-really-a-Canadian, author. Periodically, and in spite of critics like Litt or Faye, Coupland has remarked that readers will not “accept” his work as Canadian or as part of the canon of Canadian literature. In the film *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland directly responds to this (real or imagined) perception that he is not a Canadian writer. Even after he started to set his books in Canada, he says, the public response was: “Nope, still not Canadian.” This same sentiment is brought up in his essay “What is CanLit?”, in which Coupland notes that while he *is* Canadian, and while he does “write books—some even about Canada,” his fiction is “way outside CanLit’s guidelines.” More recently, in a published interview with Brenna Clarke Gray, Coupland goes so far as to say that CanLit simply does not exist anymore (258). Still, he admits that he has been “bugged” by people saying or thinking that “Doug’s really trying to join our party”—the party of CanLit (259). For Coupland, the CanLit “party’s over,” and he has his “own party going” (259). These examples provide some sense of how Coupland has distanced himself from being read only within the context of the nation.<sup>11</sup> His self-fashioning, in this respect, has focused on his perception that the Canadian literature gatekeepers refuse to welcome him to “the party,” despite his writing being evidently qualifiable, and has emphasized his defiant conclusion that none of this matters because CanLit is over, anyway. Yet the many notable and public ways in which Coupland has been recognized by the Canadian cultural establishment would suggest that his attachments to the nation are not as weak as he would admit. His literary citizenship is, like the geographies he constructs in his writing, a complicated matter.

Coupland is not entirely wrong, of course, in his assessment of the mixed public reception to his literary citizenship. As Tate explains and as mentioned earlier, Coupland *is*

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<sup>11</sup> Note that alternate readings of Coupland’s public self-fashioning, around his literary citizenship, include Dobson’s view that “Coupland has begun more consciously to position himself as a representative white Canadian male, making it his particular practice in his two *Souvenir of Canada* books to speak as a sensitive, artistic guy’s guy about the things that supposedly make Canada Canadian.” However, as Dobson shows, “all the while” Coupland “continues to produce novels that document the quirks of North American—and, increasingly, global—society” (199-200).

frequently treated as a U.S.-American author, such as in the cases of *Newsweek* (Tate, *Douglas Coupland* 7) and a Paris literary festival (Coupland, “Strong and Free”) mislabelling him as American.<sup>12</sup> Even in more scholarly publications, such as *An Introduction to Contemporary American Fiction*, Coupland is sometimes included as U.S.-American. In that publication, Alan Bilton asks, “Leaving aside his Canadian citizenship for a moment, in what sense does Coupland deserve to be taken seriously as a great, even canonical, American writer?” (220). Bilton’s answer, in essence, comes down to: the themes of Coupland’s writing make him American. Bilton is not alone in this idea, as it has even featured occasionally in Coupland’s own words and self-fashioning. “Thinking of me as American,” Coupland writes in one essay, “makes the lives of some people easier” because it means that readers do not have to work hard to figure out why this Canadian author is writing what seems to be un-Canadian material (“Strong and Free”). In Coupland’s eyes, the sense that he does not write about stereotypically Canadian topics, whatever those might be, has prevented the powers that be from deeming him truly Canadian:

[I]f you think of me as a Canadian, then you also have to redefine what being Canadian means. Whatever that redefinition is, it must include the huge number of Canadians who live in the suburbs—not small towns—and who have largely assimilated from whatever their ancestry is or was. They’re middle class, they shop at Canadian Tire and they watch the Weather Network while wearing pilled fleece garments. This overwhelming statistical fact drives a certain kind of Canadian mental. Suburbs are supposed to be invisible! Only people in small towns or recent immigrants have a situation distinct enough to generate Canadian-osity! (“Strong and Free”)

In these speculations around his own literary citizenship, Coupland does more than continue his long complaint against those who “nope” his Canadianness, to use language from the *Souvenir of Canada* scene. He also turns that complaint, here, into a constructed position of marginality by figuring himself as the kind of “invisible” Canadian whom history or culture ignores.<sup>13</sup> He is

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<sup>12</sup> Being mislabelled as U.S.-American puts Coupland in the company of other popular Canadian authors, such as Margaret Atwood.

<sup>13</sup> See Dobson’s article on Coupland’s *Generation X* for more developed commentary on how Coupland tries to occupy a marginalized position while clearly having many of the privileges and advantages of being at the centre (as a white, middle-class, educated man). Dobson reads the protagonist of the novel, Andy, as undertaking a similar kind of “marginalizing” manoeuvre when Andy “constructs fulfillment and plenitude as *lack*” (210). Like Coupland himself, in comments about his exclusion from CanLit, the characters of *Gen X* seem to show a “lack of

almost too typical, too clearly Canadian, he believes, to be legible to the Canadian literary establishment, and this makes him an outsider to that body of work. Pair these moments of self-fashioning, in which Coupland becomes the “outsider” to Canadian literature, with his ongoing participation in Canadian social and cultural mainstays such as the Giller Prize, the Massey Lectures, or the Order of Canada, and there emerges an even stronger sense of the contradictions that structure Coupland’s literary citizenship. These tensions are important enough to understanding the writer that Tate explicitly brings them up on the first page of his full-length monograph about Coupland. He asks whether Coupland is “a Canadian who strategically chooses to write with a US accent, an involuntary American novelist who happens to hold a Canadian passport or a writer whose narrative concerns transcend national boundaries?” (1). Twelve years after Tate’s book, this question remains difficult to answer.

For this project, the complexities of how Coupland is seen and sees himself across Canadian and U.S.-American contexts explain, in part, why I have chosen to read Coupland’s works using a North American framework. As a literary figure precariously but persistently tied to Canada and the United States, as well as to a border-crossing, post-national ethos, Coupland invites examination as a North American writer.<sup>14</sup> In the first place, his biography, in literal fact and as composed by the machinery of literary celebrity that churns along his career, urges us to read him transnationally: born in West Germany, long-time resident of Vancouver, but well-travelled (temporary) resident of many different cities across the globe, Coupland is certainly readable beyond a Canadian or national perspective. The extent to which this biographical trajectory meets with the subject matter of Coupland’s work, though, makes Bent Sørensen call Coupland only “nominally a Canadian author” (95) whose birth “overseas on a NATO base in . . . West Germany” is “a biographical fact which to an extent shapes his career as a migratory author, creating characters who are preoccupied with location and place” (95-96). This influence of biography on subject matter, the adoption of a “migratory” rather than fixed spatial perspective, can be seen in the way that Coupland’s writing often foregrounds transnational issues and characters who manoeuvre across national bounds. Prokopow describes this as Coupland’s long interest “in the corporatist transformation of national citizens into post-national

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demonstrated awareness of marginalization beyond the privileged world in which they live” (211).

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter on Mexico for more discussion of how Mexico and Latin America fit into the public image of Coupland as a North American author.

participants and in the implications for nation-states in an age of globalism, ahistoricism, not to mention the erosion of old systems of allegiance” (63).

Because these transnational issues are strongly expressed in Coupland’s body of writing, and because constructions of North America feature so heavily in his works, I undertake this project from the perspective of the *continental*, rather than from the broader “post-national” or “global”, to use Prokopow’s terms.<sup>15</sup> But this North American angle also provides other benefits. For example, it allows me to examine understudied places in CanLit, including the American Southwest, Mexico, and suburbs. If CanLit, as industry, body of writing, and scholarship, has produced what Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley call the “enduring stereotype . . . that Canadian literature revolves around descriptions of nature,” and in particular descriptions of the “rugged mountains, whirling snowstorms, and desolate prairies” that texture the national landscape (xvi), I hope to broaden that narrow stereotype by looking beyond just the depictions of Canadian nature in Coupland’s work and toward overlooked spaces of transnational import. This study, therefore, extends from and reflects the recognition that, as Dobson notes, “writing in Canada has become transnational” (*Transnational Canadas*, xvii). More specifically, Sabine Milz writes, “Canadian literature today . . . is conceived less as a space of assertively national literature,” and more as an intersecting matrix “of local literatures, provincial literatures, urban literatures, post-national or transnational literatures, and/or literatures not conceived in terms of spatial markers” (14). With these developments in mind, I approach Coupland’s spatial politics as North American ones because CanLit is changing, and it is no longer feasible for studies of CanLit stop

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<sup>15</sup> As I discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 4, other than being a Vancouverite, being a North American might be Coupland’s most frequent designation by other critics and scholars. Consider, for example, the blurb in the exhibition catalogue *Anywhere is Everywhere* that describes one of Coupland’s pieces as invoking “the specifics of North American adolescence” (169); or Bruce Grenville’s description of Coupland as capturing “late-twentieth-century, North American consumer culture” (248); or Mary McCampbell’s comment that Coupland’s work engages with “the sins and longings of contemporary capitalist North America” (83). I argue that positioning Coupland as a North American writer is more defensible than reading him as a global writer, given his writerly focus on North American (and especially U.S. and Canadian) places. Coupland is not an author who writes about, for example, Eastern Europe, or Middle-Eastern countries, or Australia, with any prolonged attention. And despite his works being translated into many different languages, he writes primarily in a form of English most recognizable to Canadian and U.S. readerships, given, for instance, the frequent use of North American slacker-culture slang, or the language and references drawn from Silicon Valley and Vancouver start-ups, or even the particular place-names used in passing throughout Coupland’s texts, such as the reference to the small city of Brandon, Manitoba, on the first page of *Generation X*.

at the nation's borders, intellectually speaking. Instead, scholars like me must study the ways these literatures develop along and across micro- and macro-scales of place, as I try to do in this project.

North America is a frame of reference that, for these reasons, feels important to understanding Coupland in the contemporary cultural moment. That being said, in adopting this continental approach to Coupland's works, I am not suggesting that his oeuvre provides a thorough map of North America, with all its expected parts, nor am I implying that the study to follow will equally distribute attention across all parts of North America. The first explanation for this is practical: Coupland, naturally, does not write about every place in North America, and for that reason chapters in this project have by necessity emphasized the most frequented of his textual locales.<sup>16</sup> This project thus bends toward, but is not limited to, the Pacific Northwest—which features prominently in the chapters on suburbia and wilderness—and southward down the West coast of the United States and Mexico, with Palm Springs, a border crossing in Mexicali, and San Felipe of particular importance to chapters on the desert and Mexico. This bend reflects Coupland's own writerly focal points as a “West Coast cocooned but trans-Canada savvy” (Prokopow 55) author. Certainly, Coupland's textual map of North America, as discerned across his body of work, is a West-oriented one, even if his writerly “locatedness,” as Augaitis indicates, “expands from the West Coast to incorporate all of Canada” (28) and, I would add, the continent.<sup>17</sup> This project therefore follows that orientation in its study of the continent.

The second explanation for why I do not call this a comprehensive study of North American space is theoretical: I do not pretend, in this project, that North America is a

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<sup>16</sup> That Coupland's map is not comprehensive in its vision of the continent is no surprise, given that maps of all kinds “mask over other interpretations or uses of landscapes, always foregrounding specific meanings” (Crane 1).

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Melsom locates Coupland firmly in this West Coast context when he focuses on how “*Polaroids* very clearly follows a north-south line of exploration, moving from San Francisco to Vancouver and then (with a brief detour into Europe) back to Brentwood, California. This same pattern of wandering along the coastline can be seen in several of his other works including *Generation X* (1991), *Shampoo Planet* (1992), *Microserfs* (1995), and *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003)” (Melsom 114). Pivoting from comments by Melsom, who concludes that “civilization for Coupland is almost entirely restricted to experiences of the West Coast,” I acknowledge that Coupland's body of work often features the West Coast, but I believe it is important to attend to his ongoing ties to other scales of place: Vancouver in particular, but Canada and North America more broadly.

continuous entity that *can* be coherently mapped from North to South, East to West. Continents are, in part and after all, fictions. Certainly, they have utility and material importance for political, economic, and social reasons. However, as Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen explain, they are, at their cores, constructs that are “convenient” but do “injustice to the complexities of global geography” (1). Obscuring complexity is indeed one of the dangers to conceiving of North America as a place that can be mapped, studied, or represented in some sort of single entirety. Doreen Massey, building onto the work of Michel de Certeau and others, has warned against this investment in the illusory “coherence of space,” which often “enables the existence of only one history, one voice, one speaking position” (42). In light of this warning, I emphasize that the spaces I study across Coupland’s textual map of North America are not neatly adjacent to one another, nor do they all link up to create one perfect “whole.” This project tries to avoid thinking about geography through a “jigsaw-puzzle view of the world” that “expect[s] that a proper map will always show a set of sharply bounded units that fit together with no overlap and no unclaimed territory” (Lewis and Wigen 11). Not only does this way of thinking create a false sense of stability in the public’s views of the “world order” (11), but in my case, it would create a false sense of stability in Coupland’s depiction of North America. Neither Coupland’s North America, nor the North America I construct by studying his works, are stable, continuous grids surveyable and “knowable” from one side to another. If, as Gregory points out, all maps are partial and situated (*Geographical* 7), then so too is the map this project provides; no map can thoroughly and accurately cover all the many parts or complexities of a given land—at least not indisputably (7).

With this project, then, I do not intend to study North America as “a coherent totality” (Hoyler 72) thoroughly mappable through Coupland’s work, but instead I examine what I see as some of the most significant spaces that make up Coupland’s particular map of the continent. Because the length of the project limits the number of spaces that can be studied here, indeed parts of Coupland’s map are left out. The five key spaces that feature, then—deserts, suburbs, wilderness regions, Mexico, and the road—not only embody many of the issues bound up in concepts such as non-places and in scholarly approaches to space such as ecocritical or decolonizing ones, but are also some of the more richly charged areas of Coupland’s complicated geographies.

## Theorizing Space: As Process, Relations, and the Stories-so-far

One of the most relevant and timely features of Coupland's complicated geographies is that they show an awareness that space is not merely a neutral, material background to social life, but is instead a dynamic and ongoing *process* that combines the physical, representational, and lived aspects of the human and nonhuman world. For instance, in his "insider's guide" to Vancouver, *City of Glass*, Coupland constructs the space of the city through essays that deal variously with material features of its landscape, such as Grouse Mountain (44) and Lions Gate Bridge (113), social dimensions of the city, such as the Cantonese language (22) or the possibilities of Food Porn (41), and experiences and events held in Vancouver, including Expo 86 (37).<sup>18</sup> *City of Glass* offers one example of many of how Coupland, in addition to bearing witness to the tricky place-to-placelessness tension I discuss in the opening section, expresses an equally complex understanding that place cannot be reduced merely to the concrete surroundings that can be seen and felt.

Coupland's work thus falls in step with essential spatial scholarship of the last few decades that has thoroughly developed this notion of space as an ongoing process—rather than a fixed, static, or closed field—constituted by the physical, the representational, and the experiential. This scholarship builds from the germinal work of Henri Lefebvre, whose *The Production of Space* (1974, translated to English in 1991) posited that "[s]ocial) space is a (social) product" (26) that emerges from the "conceptual triad" of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (33)—or, as he rephrases it later, of "the perceived, the conceived, and the lived" (39). Drawing on and reframing Lefebvre's triad, Edward Soja's work has been central to these ongoing developments in spatial scholarship. Soja is particularly critical of what he calls the "two persistent illusions [that] have so dominated Western ways of seeing space" (*Postmodern* 7). The first he names Firstspace, a "perspective that is focused on the 'real' material world" (*Thirdspace* 6), in which the tangible, sensory, and perceivable aspects of humans' surroundings are foregrounded in an understanding of space. The other he calls Secondspace, a "perspective that interprets this [material] reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality" (*Thirdspace* 6), therefore centring space *as* representation or space as constructed *by* representations. In general, Firstspace is material-

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<sup>18</sup> In Chapter 3, I discuss further how the particularly assorted genre of *City of Glass* informs Coupland's construction of Vancouver's wildernesses in that text.

focused, while Secondspace looks to imaginative or discursive construction to make sense of space. Warning contemporary thinkers away from either of these two “persistent illusions” about space, Soja refigures Lefebvre’s triad to propose a third way of comprehending the world around us: Thirdspace. The Thirdspace perspective “draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism” (11)—in other words, upon Firstspace and Secondspace—by figuring space as both a “social product” of relations and a “shaping force” of those relations (*Postmodern* 7). However, Thirdspace also “extends well beyond” these two perspectives (*Thirdspace* 11). In its view of space, Thirdspace accounts for what is “[s]imultaneously real and imagined and more” (*Thirdspace* 11)—the material aspects of space combined with the representational aspects, but all underscored by the vital recognition that space is also *more* than the material and representational can convey, in all of its lived complexities.

Lefebvre and Soja’s work comes down to the idea that space is an open, dynamic “social product” of daily life (Soja, *Postmodern* 129), an idea that forms the centre of a turn in thinking about space that Derek Gregory calls “the ‘socialization’ of human geography” (4). This “socialization” means, in part, recognizing that “social and spatial relations are dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent; that social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent” (Soja, *Postmodern* 81). In other words, people and space are mutually constitutive, as they shape one another in complex ways—a seemingly simple conclusion that has vital implications for creating just geographies, as Soja later theorizes in his *Seeking Spatial Justice* (2010).<sup>19</sup> Roughly speaking, these ideas collectively reflect what is called New Cultural Geography, described by Elizabeth Jones as a discipline working with the “notion that space is not a dead passive arena in which things happen, but rather an active force in the world that is imbued with ideology and politics” (221). As Massey writes, “space” is not merely “a surface on which we are placed” (7) but is “the product of interrelations” (9), just as humans are a product of its influence. This complex understanding of space is reflected in the terminology I use. In this project, I use both *place* and *space* to refer to the local, national, continental, or global environments that are my objects of study. Historically, these terms have been invested with meanings that make *place* the emotionally loaded, specific counterpart to a more neutral,

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<sup>19</sup> Most notably, Soja explains in that publication that the notion of space “as a kind of fixed background” (2) has been “blocking from view how space is actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination” (*Seeking* 4).



“scientific,” and general concept of *space*. As this dissertation will make clear, I find these hierarchies of meaning, between “place” (geography as social construct) and “space” (geography as material container), to be problematic, especially as the hierarchy exemplifies the colonial attitude that in order for space to count as place, “land must bear visible evidence of the colonizer, signs, that is, of modernity’s presence” (Razack, “Colonization” 266). In the vein of Soja’s *Thirdspace*, then, I envision space, in addition to place, as having complex meanings derived from the interactions between material, social, and representational factors; that these factors cannot be easily or reliably separated suggests, to me, that social and representational place cannot be separated from material space. This “distinction between space *per se*, space as a contextual given, and socially-based spatiality, the created space of social organization and production” (*Postmodern* 79) is therefore, as Soja explains, an “illusion” (7). Following Doreen Massey, I put into practice the refusal named by the following question: “what if we refuse that distinction, all too appealing it seems, between place (as meaningful, lived and everyday) and space (as what? the outside? the abstract? the meaningless?)” (6).

The terminology I use, reflecting these developments in Euro-Western spatial scholarship, is also informed by what Indigenous theorists have long understood about space: it is a matter of *relations* between elements in the world (Coulthard 79) and it encompasses “not only the land (understood here as material), but also people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on” (Coulthard 80). Space, in this case, becomes less a material substance and more a relational interaction. This conceptualization appears in other Indigenous contexts, such as in “the traditional Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) creation story of Sky Woman,” which, as Lisa Brooks tells it, “suggests that the earth is neither solid nor constant, but exists only through the interrelated activity of its inhabitants” (2).<sup>20</sup> In language and story that significantly predate the

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<sup>20</sup> This way of understanding place, as relations between beings and phenomena more than as a physical background or “container,” has huge ethical implications for human behaviour. Yellowknives Dene scholar Coulthard explains that the relational understanding of place, as it was historically understood, meant that “humans held certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and lakes in much the same way that we hold obligations to other people. And if these obligations were met, then the land, animals, plants and lakes would reciprocate and meet their obligations to humans, thus ensuring the survival and well being of all over time” (Coulthard 80). Foregrounding relations in understandings of space can also facilitate resistance to oppressive structures, Coulthard argues, as that perspective becomes “the radical imaginary guiding our visions of a just political and economic relationship with non-Indigenous people and communities based on principles of reciprocity and mutual obligation” (81).

work of Lefebvre and Soja, then, Indigenous peoples have circulated the knowledge of place as a “process of interanimation” (Basso 108) in which, as Keith Basso describes in relation to Western Apache notions of the world around us, “places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, [and] these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed” (107).

Basso and other scholars working from Indigenous and/or decolonizing perspectives about space have continued to emphasize one element vital to a relational “practice of place-making” (Basso xxiii): *stories*. Part of Lefebvre’s triad or Soja’s Thirdspace, in that they are a form of conceived space, the stories we share about place can have enormous power in producing places, just as those places will in turn shape the stories we tell. For instance, in the context of Western Apache groups, Basso describes how oral narratives “establish enduring bonds between individuals and features of the natural landscape,” thus becoming a central feature in how relations of place are produced (40). The importance of oral narratives to place-making is matched, for scholars like Edward Said and Katherine McKittrick, by the importance of studying written story and literary representations in order to better understand how power and ideology influence spatial surroundings (*Orientalism* 57). For McKittrick, this means urging us to “take the language” in addition to “the physicality of geography seriously” (xiii). Language is as central to understanding place as physical presence, McKittrick shows, and what she calls the “‘sayability’ of geography”—“[a]cts of saying and expressing place”—can be especially important to marginalized people’s experiences and understandings of space (such as black women’s experiences, which form the focus of her book *Demonic Grounds*) (xxiii).

If the described theories have shown us that space is an ongoing process rather than a fixed “given,” that space is constituted by the relations between living as well as non-living entities rather than being a background constant, and that language and literature play a vital role in this process and these relations, then it makes sense, for this project, to adopt Massey’s powerful articulation of space “as a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (9).<sup>21</sup> Two aspects of this

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<sup>21</sup> Note that Massey consistently warns against the ways individuals “tame the spatial into the textual and the conceptual; into representation” (20), and wisely advises that scholars not equate space with representation. However, she also recognizes the power that representations have to shape space, just as space itself shapes and influences those representations. If we imagine space textually in order to “tame” it (152), as Massey writes, my project then asks: how have these North American spaces been “tamed” in ways that are troubling, simplistic, or stagnant?

articulation are important for the present study: first, the idea of space as a collection of simultaneously unfolding and intersecting *stories*, an idea that allows us to look at Coupland's work, in particular, as contributing to the stories-so-far of North American space. Second, the "so far" part of Massey's terminology is crucial, as it keys into the advantage of seeing space as changeable and dynamic, open and unfinished (11), and it thereby emphasizes "the genuine openness of the future" (Massey 11): geographies can change and be changed by the stories that constitute them.

This quality of openness therefore enables the possibility of political change through interrogation of and intervention into the "stories-so-far" that make up the contemporary world. In other words, by analyzing and tending to the stories we tell about space, we can move toward more just geographies and relations. As Soja writes, "justice...has a consequential geography, a spatial expression that is more than just a background reflection or a set of physical attributes to be descriptively mapped" (Soja, *Seeking* 1). And if stories have a reciprocal, co-constitutive relationship to the geographies they describe, as scholars like Said and McKittrick would suggest, then justice might begin in uncovering and scrutinizing the "unthought" (Massey 7) patterns within the stories individuals and groups tell about place, stories circulated by the public spatial imagination. A studied "[a]ttention to implicit conceptualisations of space," like those which tacitly inform literary depictions, Massey writes, "is crucial . . . in practices of resistance and of building alternatives" (99). Closely scrutinizing tacit understandings of the places around us is especially important given that the overwhelming "struggle over geography" that Said names in his work on the cultural spread of imperialism is, after all, textual as well as material, literary as well as bodily; it is "not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (*Culture* 7). In other words, as Gregory declares, in order "to 'unmaster our narratives,'" we must first "examine our textual strategies" (217).

One reason studying these textual strategies is necessary, then, is that stories can be dangerous. They can construct places in ways that are harmful, sometimes even entirely destructive, to those who inhabit them. This is the central thesis of Said's foundational work *Orientalism* (1978). In that publication, Said methodically analyzes how the East is detrimentally characterized by Western representations such as cartoons (285), film and television (286), books and articles (287), and academic scholarship, which he does not excuse from its role in reducing the East, since as he recognizes, "a learned perspective can support the caricatures propagated in

the popular culture” (*Orientalism* 290). Nearly thirty years after Said’s important publication, McKittrick develops the vital notion that “racism and sexism are also spatial acts” (xviii) and that “how we know, write, and document space and place can contribute to processes of discriminatory, class-based racialization” (13). She writes, in her monograph’s powerful and repeated refrain, that “ideas are turned into spaces” (McKittrick 13). These words underscore the continued urgency of analyzing the stories that circulate about place, and that thereby produce place. After all, as Simon Springer writes, “the fear of ‘Other’ spaces is not based on abstract geometry. Rather, such apprehension is embedded in the meanings that have been attached to those spaces” (Springer 94). These meanings can have great impact on actual humans who inhabit space, as “our attitudes towards particular geographies,” influenced by the stories we tell, “frequently fold back onto the people who comprise them” (Springer 94).

On the other hand, however, stories also have the contrasting ability to be incredibly valuable and empowering to the communities that shape or are shaped by them. Stories can help deliver us from perpetuating real-world harms and from sustaining unjust geographies. Scholars working from decolonizing perspectives, such as Said, have keenly observed this tension between the *problems* and *possibilities* of stories in the context of place-making. Stories, as Said writes, are integral to both the process of colonization *and* resistance to it (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). Real-world change, of the good kind or the bad, starts with ideas, language, narrative. Just as the “accumulation of imperial territories world-wide” (Said, *Culture* 58) relies on *imagining* space in a particular way, so too does Said argue that decolonization begins in this very realm of language and culture: the “recovery of *geographical* territory which is at the heart of decolonization is preceded . . . by the charting of *cultural* territory” (209, emphasis added). This less tangible but still powerful “ideological resistance” is, for him, a central step toward “literally fighting against outside intrusion” (209). The stakes are high, it seems, when it comes to the stories we tell about place. Their dangerous capabilities, on one hand, combined with their radical potential, on the other, mean that stories can destroy, annihilate, demolish, but they can also regenerate, heal, and build anew. For Springer, this tension between the problems and possibilities of stories as place-making tools ultimately and optimistically means that stories can be that first step toward peace: “If so much of the world’s violence is made possible through virulent imaginings, then perhaps the first step towards peace is a collective imagining of nonviolence” (Springer 97)—an imagining of spatial justice.

## **Dominant and Popular Geographies: In Conversation with Coupland's Work**

Coupland's complicated geographies, as I show in the pages to follow, reflect this described reality: stories can produce space in ways that both promote and prevent justice. The ability stories have, as Said, McKittrick, Springer, and others have identified, to create spatial problems as well as possibilities provides the focus for my study of Coupland's narrative contributions to space. The running thread that joins the geographies, and chapters, together is how Coupland discursively constructs North American spaces in ways that are troubling and require critique, but also in ways that have potential and require us to parse the viable spatial alternatives they present. Each chapter identifies the "stories-so-far" (Massey 9) that make up, and circumscribe, the individual spaces I study, while putting those identified stories into conversation with Coupland's own re-mapping of open, dynamic, and ongoing space. I therefore read Coupland's works against what McKittrick calls the "dominant geographies" (49), or what Gregory terms the "popular geographies" (12), of North America and, more specifically, of the five spaces in question. If these popular geographies include, as Gregory writes, the "commonplace, taken-for-granted assumptions" about space, the "ordinary meanings that are embedded in the day-to-day negotiations of lifeworlds" (12), then my work will unpack these assumptions and meanings, these "unthought" patterns (Massey 7), by undertaking a reading of Coupland's works in the context of the "stories-so-far" that constitute North American space. Each chapter thus takes into account how popular geographies—or dominant ways that the public conceives of and constructs space—are produced by scholarly and non-scholarly outputs *together*. For that reason, I necessarily reference a variety of cultural forms, including films, television, other literature, tourist and exploration documents, and also other scholarship. Recognizing, as Said does, that "both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions, and intentions" (*Orientalism* 201-02), I show how any hidden assumptions structuring popular geographies are not a result of "popular" thinking alone. In many cases—for instance, in the chapters on suburbia and the road—scholarly discourse corroborates non-scholarly discourse in their shared creation of problematic or overused views of space.

To begin this process, I focus in Chapter 1 on the troubling and troubled view of the desert as *blank* or as *tabula rasa* in order to contrast the way the American Southwest desert

region is depicted in Coupland's novel *Generation X* and short story "In the Desert" from the collection *Life After God*. While my analysis of the former text highlights the problems and possibilities in Coupland's depiction of the desert surrounding Palm Springs as a blank space and spiritual sanctuary, my analysis of the latter text explores the complicated ways that the desert signifies, textually, as a wasteland and post-spiritual "land after God." Drawing on theories of desert space forwarded by scholars such as Jean Baudrillard and Mike Davis, in addition to particular histories of the desert as studied by Lindsey Banco, James Goehring, and Andrew Menard, the chapter reflects on how representations of spaces such as the desert can significantly influence how those spaces are actually occupied, for better or for worse. The chapter concludes that investigating literary and cultural texts is a vital step toward justly inhabiting environments.

In Chapter 2, I examine depictions of suburbia from the short story "1,000 Years (Life After God)" and the novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, analyzing those depictions alongside what I call the sense of *lack* that has long characterized dominant geographies of suburbia, as seen in literature, film, and scholarship. Drawing on this scholarly history of suburban studies in particular, I argue that while Coupland's texts do exemplify some of the typical trends of the "symbolology of suburbia" (Beuka 136), including a sense of lack, they also contribute to a more complex, nuanced picture of suburbia in how they depict the place as wild, as spiritual, as transformative, as fostering connection and intimacy, and as populated not by passive, apathetic suburbanites but by characters with agency. Coupland's work thus re-maps suburbia's popular geographies in ways that trouble the conventional sense of lack.

Chapter 3 studies depictions of wilderness in Coupland's non-fiction, especially in light of the civilization vs. wilderness binary expressed in popular geographies. Grounded in works of ecocriticism, particularly William Cronon's theorization of wilderness, the chapter looks first at the *Souvenir of Canada* series to show how survival against the wild is established and then troubled as a key characteristic, or "enduring stereotype" (Soper and Bradley xvi), of Canadian identity. *Souvenir of Canada*, I argue, refuses to stereotype Canadians on account of their real-or-imagined relationships with the wild, but it also seems to powerfully (even didactically) try to shape what being a Canadian citizen means through its focus on environmental stewardship. The problems with the representation of wilderness in the *Souvenir* series, such as how it engages in the colonial rhetoric of "blinking out" the wild as the *nothing* to civilization's *something*, continue in *City of Glass* and *Polaroids from the Dead*, which are examined in the latter half of

the chapter. Focusing on the depiction of Vancouver wilderness in those works, I show how Coupland's use of sublime language and imagery "others" the wilderness, blanks it out, while it also contributes to the master narrative of Vancouver as an ideal place to live.

In Chapter 4, I take a macro- and then micro-approach to reading the representation of Mexico in Coupland's works. Drawing on research about Canadian-Mexican relations undertaken by scholars such as Albert Braz and Christine Boyanowski, I use digital text-search methods to scan Coupland's oeuvre for references to Mexico, and I show how the country most often comes up in discussions of food, drugs, and travel. In the first section, I discuss a collection of instances in which Mexico is mentioned across Coupland's works, arguing that Mexico's ties to food and drugs, in his writing, demonstrate the Anglo-Canadian and -American characters' "hunger" for Mexico, at the same time that this writing critiques that very fascination with the exotic and that unthinking consumption of Mexico. In the second section, I focus on *Generation X* and, in particular, on the protagonists' move to San Felipe. Contextualizing the novel within real-world tourism histories of Mexico, I suggest that the characters' impulse to move there mimics the same desire for blank space that catalyzes their move to Palm Springs (discussed in Chapter 1), but with settler colonial impulses to occupy and monetize Mexican land. Closely reading the scene in which one character, Andy, crosses the U.S.-Mexico border, I argue that the persistent use of language related to food and cannibalism reflects the novel's "othering" of Mexico, while it also suggests that Andy is cognizant of himself being a kind of "cannibal" in his trip to Mexico, travelling there to consume the country.

Finally, in the conclusion, I consider one last key space in Coupland's textual map of North America: the road. Looking at short and long fiction, including, most notably, the stories "In the Desert" and "Gettysburg" from *Life After God*, as well as the novel *Miss Wyoming*, I show how Coupland's work figures the road as a place of escape. I interrogate the relationship between this figuration and dominant geographies of the road, such as those seen in car commercials and in the critical work of American literary scholar Ronald Primeau. The chapter argues, though, that Coupland's work ultimately overturns the road-as-escape narrative and critiques the privileges and processes behind characters' choices to abandon their former lives for some imagined sense of freedom "on the open road." His writing therefore deflates romanticized views of road travel, suggesting that there is no inherent or "natural" function of the road whereby its travellers are transformed merely by their ability to drive along it. Like the

other chapters in this project, the conclusion shows how Coupland's depiction of the road is animated by conflicting and complex meanings that draw readers' attention to established conventions about space, and the consumption of space, that demand consideration and critique.



## Chapter 1

### Desert Space in *Generation X* and “In the Desert”

#### Introduction: Dominant Geographies of the American Southwest Deserts

Despite their ecological and geographical variety, deserts have come to occupy a singular place in the North American popular imagination—a place characterized visually by flat, brown land interspersed with wide, rolling sand dunes, and a lack of greenery or vegetation, save for the presence of scattered cacti and shrubbery. Deserts are thus often seen as aesthetically monotonous and topographically barren or blank. This perceived blankness has furnished particular ways of thinking about and using the desert, demonstrated in part by representational tropes and archetypes that are frequently associated with desert space. For the American Southwest desert region, which is the focus of this chapter, these tropes include: the crossing of the American frontier; the “clash of cultures” narrative that pits Indigenous peoples against the quintessential “cowboys” of the West; the wilderness survival story; and the figures of the mystical desert wanderer and the psychologically unstable desert-recluse, among others. These tropes are widely employed within the cultural canon of the American Southwest desert region, from Google image search results, to films like *Gerry* (2002) and *The Book of Eli* (2010), and they tend to share the same conceptual reliance on desert space as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate.<sup>1</sup> This conceptualization, bound tightly to colonialist discourses about land, imagines the desert primarily as *wild* space, naturally opposed to the comparatively *civilized* life of the city, frequently unoccupied or even uninhabitable, and somehow lacking in history and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Eli* uses stereotypical American Southwest desert aesthetics—rolling sand dunes, dusty trails, big, blue-and-cloudy skies, and rocky, bare terrain—to hyperbolize the sense of destitution, emptiness, and destruction in its post-apocalyptic world. Further, the film’s protagonist is compelled to move across space by his desire to “go West,” rehearsing early exploration movements across the Southwest deserts. *Gerry* uses similar aesthetics to construct a dire survival scenario in which two men are lost in the desert for days without food or water. Their trajectory ultimately ends with one man killing the other, an action that resonates with the many other cultural tales of desert dwellers going “crazy.”

Deborah Bird Rose would suggest this perspective accords with “standard European and American-derived concepts of wilderness,” which often “involve the peculiar notion that if one cannot see traces or signs of one’s own culture in the land, then the land must be ‘natural’ or empty of culture” (17). This conceptual *blanking*, as I call it, emphasizes emptiness or absence in the land and culture of the desert, while ignoring the abounding presence deserts contain—ecological, historical, social, or otherwise. The blanking can be perceived on many representative and discursive levels, from the language commonly used to describe desert space (“barren,” “empty,” “parched”), to the predominating, though reductive, visual representation of desert land as blank space, to the rhetoric of desert writing and theory, especially as it tends to understate the complexity of desert spaces in contrast to urban centres and other communities and regions. The prevalence and variety of discourses that exhibit this very impulse speak to how frequently-harmful colonialist thinking, along the lines Bird Rose describes above, has influenced the dominant geography of the desert.

Consider, as a significant example of that influence, how the visual-conceptual trope of blankness has been central to the history and development of the American Southwest desert region. According to Andrew Menard, early exploration reports of the area formerly known as the Great American Desert, covering the arid regions in Southwest America and Northwest Mexico, deterred people from settling there or even crossing the desert frontier to settle in Western coastal regions of the country (268-69). These reports, written by explorers such as Zebulon Pike and Edwin James, described a landscape that was topographically blank, singular in appearance, and thus boring to the explorers’ eyes (Menard 268-69). While the reports, in the fashion of the times, invoked the rhetoric of the sublime, drawing on the desert’s largeness, they only did so to emphasize the land’s “vast and uniform sterility” (Menard 269). These sorts of descriptions naturally made settlers hesitant about moving Westward and concerned about the lack of agricultural and economic opportunities afforded by such apparently blank land. This hesitance began to change when John Frémont was tasked with drafting another exploration report of the region in 1842. Partly because of the earlier explorers’ investigations, the Southwest desert land came to be “a natural barrier to the nation” (Menard 268). Knowing this, Frémont understood he must make the desert space seem more appealing to settlers, by “showing that it was not a desert at all” (Menard 268). To do so, Frémont broke the tradition of American Southwest desert-explorer discourse, focussing not on the vast, seemingly unchanging landscape,

but instead on the variations and subtleties in the terrain, rocks, flora, and fauna he observed in his explorations (Menard 270-72). This shift in focus is what leads Menard to declare that Frémont's report may be "the single most important reason for the sudden spike in western emigration which occurred a little more than two months after it was published" (268). Frémont's investigations meant that settlers now saw the desert not as empty, uninteresting space, but as socially and economically fertile terrain to occupy. His orchestration of the space through text had significant effects for the Westward colonial takeover of land.

This piece of the history of the American Southwest desert region underscores an important reality regarding the connections between representation and space, one that is central to the goals and purpose of this chapter and the dissertation more generally: how space is described—in reports, newspapers, films, books, and so on—has a profound influence on how space is occupied. It was only when Frémont strategically foregrounded the variety of the desert landscape that Westward emigration accelerated. His discursive strategies laid the groundwork for actual, material changes in the means by which the region was settled; this causality is what Menard refers to when he argues that the Great American Desert was as much a "rhetorical horizon" that needed to be crossed as a geographical or material one (268). This small example demonstrates how the dominant representations of the desert, representations which have not changed drastically in the approximately one hundred and fifty years since Frémont's report, greatly affect how humans "consume" the desert or, in other words, inhabit, use, or travel through it.

This causality comes to the fore, again, later on in the history of the Southwest deserts, particularly in the case of America's atomic bomb testing of the mid-1900s. It was the imagined and experienced *emptiness* of the desert—its "evocation of lack," as Lindsey Banco calls it—that drew developers of the atomic bomb project to the American Southwest, with the desert terrain of Los Alamos, New Mexico, central to the Manhattan Project (502). The perception of the desert's blankness suggested it was a viable and alluring setting for bomb testing around the time of the Second World War because that bareness, like a "vast blank canvas" (Banco 498), can give the impression of a land waiting to be filled or covered up. The "wasteland of the desert," Banco writes, "contains the potential for strange creation or provision despite"—and, I would also add, because of—"its apparent emptiness" (495). And this emptiness also makes it a viable spot for *dangerous*, rather than just strange, creation, such as atomic bomb testing, because any

risks can be justified under the seeming reality that there is no way to harm already empty space. These perceived qualities have influenced how the American Southwest desert region continues to be seen as a “fitting” site for other, more recent military testing stations, such as the Southern Californian Edwards Air Force Base (for aircraft testing) and the Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS) China Lake, in the Mojave Desert. Moreover, the experimental potential forged by the conception of desert land as blank, manipulatable space means that the American Southwest has accordingly become home to “the world’s largest scientific and engineering community,” especially in and around the deserts of Los Angeles (Davis 23). So powerful and recognizable has this community become that it has created what Jon Hunner calls a “westward tilt” to the history of American science and technology, particularly in the postwar period influenced by theoretical physicist and “father of the atomic bomb” J. Robert Oppenheimer (241).

This techno-scientific side of the American desert’s history reminds us that, contrary to popular assertions that the desert is purely wilderness, or is a natural counter-*space* to the constructed *place* of the city, the desert has long been tied up in the technological, scientific, political, and social history of the nation and the globe, and thus it embodies that elusive concept of *civilization* nearly as much as any other community or land. Mike Davis famously proclaimed this underacknowledged reality in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990). At his time of writing, around thirty years ago, Davis perceived that the American desert had come to be a locus for commercial/technological development and capital-P Progress as much as it was also a piece of wilderness or a sanctuary from city life. Moreover, Davis points out, it is also a militarized space, the Mojave in particular having served “for the last fifty years” as “the Pentagon’s playground” (4). In addition, the American desert region is notably home to “an immense Culture Industry,” with a growing film and television community based largely in Los Angeles but with reverberations throughout the entire Southwest (Davis 17). Davis’s re-working of the conceptual terrain of the American Southwest invites us to consider the desert as markedly *not* blank space, particularly as it constitutes a site for massive military, scientific, and cultural endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although Davis deals primarily with Los Angeles and surrounding area, calling it the city “which ate the desert” (12), his examination applies to the American Southwest more broadly conceived. I therefore use Davis’s work not to discuss, specifically, the desert surrounding Los Angeles (his chief locale), but to comment on a matrix of meanings (e.g. blank space, wasteland, sanctuary, etc.) that are so often fastened to desert space across the American Southwest.

Standing in apparent opposition to the emerging idea of desert as technospace is the longstanding, and perhaps more widely recognized, notion of the desert as vital spiritual and religious sanctuary. This notion transcends the boundaries of time and space in that it is not uniquely applied to the American Southwest but is used more generally to describe deserts globally and across history. Andrew Palmer explains that for “the Old Testament prophets, the desert figures as a place of harsh journeying that purifies the spirit” (312). As David Jasper reminds us, the desert famously provides the setting for a whole host of significant biblical happenings, including Jesus’s walks at the beginning and end of his ministry, John the Baptist’s speeches, the first meeting between God and Moses, and the forty-year journey of the Israelites (which, Palmer importantly adds, was meant to “purify the Israelites and prepare them for entry into the Holy Land” [313]), among other important events (16). Apart from its biblical significance, the desert is also traditionally understood as a place for spiritual isolation and practice, including acts of asceticism. James E. Goehring explains that for (ascetic) Christians of the fourth century, the Egyptian desert came to represent goodness and truth, while the city represented falsehoods and evil (73). This “distinction between desert and city” was conceived of symbolically rather than literally, becoming “a literary device, a metaphor clear in its simplicity and powerful in its impact” on Christians of the day (73): “The city, the product of human achievement and the locus of human habitation, has become symbolically the center of evil. Truth has left the city, and presumably only falsehood remains. Truth now resides alone in the desert” (73). This increasingly accepted distinction between spaces meant “ascetic Christians embraced a life which demanded spatial withdrawal...from the social world of the villages and towns to the isolation of the desert” (73); desert retreat became more and more popular. Goehring elaborates that it was only once this spatial withdrawal gained traction—only once more Christians came to practice desert isolation—that the “literature of early Egyptian monasticism” began to be produced (88): “It was in fact this final expansion [of ascetic practice] into the desert that brought [asceticism] literary fame, since the desert supplied the metaphor (the spatial image of renunciation) necessary for literary production” (88). In other words, the withdrawal to desert space ultimately fostered literary production and storytelling in this Christian society: out of the desert emerged story.

This premise, which ties the desert to utterance, fittingly embodies the essential desert paradox that Edward Abbey, Lindsey Banco, Jean Baudrillard, Mike Davis, and others have

identified, which is that the desert is both a place of absence and one that furnishes creation, manipulation, intrusion, development, and presence. This “fundamental reality of the desert,” Banco writes, can be summarized by the assertion that the desert is “not merely ‘about’ stark absence but also ‘about’ lush presence” (499). For the fourth-century Christian practitioners, this means that the imagined or real blankness of the desert is what ultimately fostered the literatures they created, and these literatures come to represent the first cultural productions that emerged from the desert’s capacity for creation out of ostensible nothingness. The imagined blank space of the desert thus lends itself, in historical and current understandings of the space, to *storytelling*, a significant affordance that I will revisit later in this chapter.

In the following explorations into the imaginative terrain of the desert, it is important to keep one significant reality in mind: the desert is complex and multifaceted, and while its representations may sometimes reduce that complexity (consider the archetypal deserts listed in the opening of this chapter), it is the job of spatial scholarship of the kind this project undertakes to maintain that sense of complexity and dismantle previously held notions of space being fixed in meaning. For Banco, the desert constitutes “a multivalent space whose meaning is never stable” (496); he writes that literally and representationally, desert terrain is “loaded with exoticist and threatening connotations, tabula rasa assumptions, and deceptively complex ecologies and tropologies that lend themselves to multivalent readings” (510). The American Southwest desert in particular is at once a place of science, nature, religion, technology, government, and military, and simultaneously a “place of romance,” as Jasper reminds us: “Physically the harshest places on earth, deserts also defy our sense of reality, its proportions and the boundaries we set on our lives and experience. Even when desecrated by oil pipelines and the detritus of human folly, they are places of dreams and fantasy” (71). Any claims to a spatial narrative of the American Southwest desert region must necessarily take into account these intersections. This is especially important given the ongoing urbanization of the desert, the apex of which can be observed in desert cities such as Las Vegas (in the Mojave Desert), Phoenix (in the Sonoran Desert), and those growing communities in the Coachella Valley, including Palm Desert and Palm Springs (also in the Sonoran Desert), the last of which occupies much of this chapter’s discussion. The popular imagination might not immediately gravitate toward images of industrial, techno-cultural urban centres when given the prompt *desert space*, yet these are as much a part of the American Southwest desert as the more conventionally acknowledged

flatlands, sand dunes, and other natural formations and landscapes. Intellectually exploring the desert, in all its representational iterations, means acknowledging and incorporating this spatial multiplicity and recognizing that the urban centres populating the region inform the more conventional desert space around them, just as that desert space informs the urban centres. When I write of desert space in the American Southwest, then, I refer together to both kinds of space—the “urbanized” and the “natural”—as well as other kinds of space within and outside of that imagined dichotomy that exists in the region. In discussions of desert space, it is not necessary, or wise, to draw sharp distinctions between some imagined pure or traditional desert—the one frequently represented by visually empty, wild terrain with occasional shrubbery—and an “urbanized” desert. Such distinctions would bolster ideological assumptions that see one space as artificial while the other is natural. To consider these together is to attend to what Jean Baudrillard calls the desert’s “violent, electric juxtaposition,” writing about the inseparability of so-called natural desert space from the urbanized centres it contains: “there is nothing more beautiful than artificial coolness in the midst of heat, artificial speed in the middle of a natural expanse, electric light under a blazing sun, or the artificial practice of gambling in lost casinos. . . . Death Valley and Las Vegas are inseparable; you have to accept everything at once, an unchanging timelessness and the wildest instantaneity” (66-67).

With an eye toward maintaining and acknowledging this spatial complexity, the sections that follow will chart the development of desert space in Coupland’s breakout novel *Generation X* and his illustrated short story collection *Life After God*. While the former text deals with a desert experience that is taken up largely within and around Palm Springs (and thus the Sonoran Desert), the latter regards the desert as it is experienced by a traveller on the road from Las Vegas (the Mojave Desert) to Palm Springs. While I will not address in detail the geological, ecological, or cultural differences between the Mojave and the Sonoran, or between Las Vegas and Palm Springs, I will keep such differences in mind as I focus in this chapter on the larger patterns that dictate the presentation of desert spaces in the texts. These patterns include the notions of the desert as *tabula rasa*, as wasteland, and as spiritual sanctuary versus post-spiritual “land after God.” In what follows, I explore how the main characters in *Generation X* topographically, culturally, and historically construct the desert, including Palm Springs, as a *tabula rasa*, and I explain and explore the implications of such a construction. In that section, I also revisit the idea of the desert as sanctuary, as exemplified by the fourth-century desert

dwellers who contributed so powerfully to the desert's resonances in the contemporary period, and I investigate how that idea is taken up by the novel's protagonists in ways that reveal a startling conformity despite the characters' claims to a counter-cultural removal from society at large. Then, in my work on "In the Desert" from *Life After God*, I revisit again the presented landscape of the Mojave Desert as empty, blank, or barren, and I show how this presentation is tempered in the story by a construction of the desert as wasteland, in the more literal sense of a land filled with waste and debris. The section also extends this chapter's discussion of desert spirituality by showing how "In the Desert" at first seems to suggest readers see the desert as an artificial, post-spiritual landscape, but actually concludes that desert land can furnish new spiritualities and personal transformations of belief. In juxtaposing these readings of Coupland's work alongside the popular geographies of the desert—as forged by its cultural and material histories, for example, through the practices of the desert monks and the military-scientific initiatives that have shaped the space—I critique overused narratives of desert absence while making room for new ways of conceptualizing desert presence.

### ***Generation X: Encounters with the Desert as Tabula Rasa***

With the publication of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), Douglas Coupland textualized the collective voice of a generation. Initially conceived of as a non-fiction guide or how-to manual for post-Boomer existence, the book evolved into a novel documenting the seemingly directionless escapades of that elusive X generation, which, for Coupland, consists of people born around 1957-1967, according to early drafts of *Generation X* (Doody 27). In the forms of Andrew (Andy) Palmer, Dagmar (Dag) Bellinghausen, and Claire Baxter, the novel's three protagonists, Coupland offers the "every(wo)men" of his proposed generation. Andy, Dag, and Claire—from Portland, Toronto, and Los Angeles, respectively—each move to Palm Springs, California, prior to the novel's events. There, they adopt a pseudo-bohemian lifestyle, spending their days drinking by the pool, telling "bedtime stories" to one another, and taking up what they see as low-pressure employment in dive bars and department stores. The novel does not present a conventional plot. Instead, in the manner of such canonical literary texts as Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (c. 1351) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1345-1400), it concerns itself most with the personal, reflective, imaginative, and sometimes apocalyptic stories the protagonists share with one another, stories that the text interweaves



within the larger context of the Xers' life in the desert. Complementing the main text is a series of comics, images, and neologisms occupying the marginal space of nearly every page in the novel. From the definition "MENTAL GROUND ZERO: The location where one visualizes oneself during the dropping of the atomic bomb; frequently, a shopping mall" (63), to the stamp-like print pronouncing "SOIL ISN'T A DOCUMENT" (14), these paratexts flesh out the portrait of the distracted, unimpressed, but imaginative "slacker" generation Coupland presents, offering visual and discursive snippets of the behavioural and cognitive trends of Generation X.

Scholarship on *Generation X* has yet to draw out the subtleties and implications of the Xers's travels across the continent and into (and then out of) Palm Springs. When studies do touch on the novel's cartography, they tend to emphasize the more explicit reasons given for Andy, Dag, and Claire's move to the desert: their desire to escape the tedium of middle-class life in North America, and to turn their lives into stories. This critical foregrounding is not surprising given that the characters repeatedly complain about the lives they led in their hometowns, citing the related evils of technological development, rampant consumerism, widespread capitalism, and middle-class banality as reasons for their departure. Moreover, the characters continually insist that, as Claire succinctly remarks, "[e]ither our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them." Andy, as the narrator of the book, adds, "this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert—to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process" (8). In Mary McCampbell's assessment, their move signifies how "they refuse to allow the corporate world to absorb and manipulate their individual stories," their choice being to forge new stories in a place where they feel they can "flee from an engrossing consumer culture" (120). Relatedly, Wing-chi Ki sees Andy, Dag, and Claire as "followers of the romantic tradition" who reject urbanity in a style "not unlike Rousseau's hatred against the way people practice deception, consumption and luxury in the city" (16). Focusing on their professed need for an overarching story, Sally Dalton-Brown concludes that Coupland's characters "seek new metanarratives with which to combat their world of cultural pastiche" (241), a sentiment echoed by Andrew Tate, who writes that the "characters...mourn the lack of a defining story or mythology," and it is this lack that "inspired [Andy and] his friends to take refuge in the desert" ("Now" 329).

While there is no doubt that these readings are supported by the text, I would argue that to focus on the more obvious motivations for the characters' change in locale is to neglect the

myriad of other telling and important, if subtle, reasons why Palm Springs initially appeals to the Xers. It is true that Andy, Dag, and Claire make explicit that they see Palm Springs as “a quiet sanctuary from the bulk of middle-class life” (10), and it is also true that they—and Coupland’s characters more generally—wish their lives to be stories, travelling in ways that accord with this desire. Yet, when one actually measures these desires for storied lives and escape from middle-class North America against the locations they choose—the desert or, more pointedly, Palm Springs, as Coupland represents them—their movements seem less to follow those explicitly stated desires than to exemplify more conventional, and even colonial, desires. They want their lives to be stories, seeking a place that provides a different kind of story than their former homes, yet they move to Palm Springs, which, in Coupland’s representation, is neither storied nor diverse enough to facilitate lifestyles that are any different from what they experienced previously. They want to move somewhere that (impossibly) recreates for them a previous time, yet they choose Palm Springs, a community that for many people represents the spatial reification of a particularly current North American middle-class luxury and hyperconsumerism. They want a clean slate, so they move to the desert, which they see as blank or empty, yet they ignore and even overwrite all of its spatial, cultural, and historical layers, rehearsing colonial impulses in the process. In the end, the Xers discover that Coupland’s Palm Springs is just as embedded in the patterns and logic of modern-day capitalism as most other places in North America, and this reality ultimately leaves them unfulfilled and pointed toward the next stop on their seemingly lifelong itinerary: San Felipe, Mexico.

Very early in the text, the reader perceives that Palm Springs initially attracts Andy, Dag, and Claire because they see the place as somehow existing in a previous era or a simpler time, a kind of pre-technological sanctuary, separate from contemporary North American technoculture. Andy remarks that “[t]here is no weather in Palm Springs—just like TV. There is also no middle class, and in that sense the place is medieval” (10). According to him, it is the perceived appeal of living in a technological and socio-cultural lag that ultimately draws the trio to desert life:

We arrived here speckled in sores and zits, our colons so tied in knots that we never thought we’d have a bowel movement again. Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video

on a Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, *much* better. (11)

Here, Andy imagines the trio's pre-desert lives as saturated by the consumerist minutiae of North American office culture—lives determined by the material logic of office supplies and the pseudo-somnambulism of mindless employment, the effects of which, according to this passage, manifest both physically and psychologically within the Gen Xers. Before, entertainment meant *consuming*. Now, in Andy's mind, he and his friends have moved away from these habits, the desert offering a way of life that they feel rejects these patterns of technology-driven consumer capitalism. In the same way that Palmer perceives, in his article on the Australian desert pseudo-travel writing of Bruce Chatwin, that Chatwin “romanticizes the [desert] landscape as a curative antithesis to European space,” so too do I perceive an exaggeration in the Xers' spatial imaginings, as they somehow believe the desert land of Palm Springs will provide them with a cure for the disenchantment of middle-class Americana (326).<sup>3</sup> This exaggeration—the superlatively bad terms in which their former lives are conveyed and the trend toward dramatic language (“endless” and “pointless” and “never . . . again”)—reveals how the Xers have impossible expectations for this new place. Even Andy's repetition, in saying that Palm Springs made them “much, *much* better,” smacks of one who doth protest too much. Already, the text shows the instability of the belief that one *can* escape to a simpler time to find a sanctuary from modernity.

Yet, nostalgia for a simple past continues, in large part, to fuel Andy, Dag, and Claire's movements from their homes across North America to the desert. They long for a time before “the world” became “too big—way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it” (5). They seek a place that seems conceptually smaller, one that can support the narrative truths dismantled in the ushering in of the globalized, postmodern age. Greenberg calls this search part of the characters' nostalgia for a particularly “suburban past” (68), commenting that Andy “and his friends . . . pine for that impossible return to the certainties of the past” (71). In moving to Palm Springs, the Xers attempt to manifest a conceptual movement back in time. Of course, Palm Springs is widely known—in the novel's world and ours—as a retirement community, or as Andy describes it, a

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<sup>3</sup> A point of clarification: Andrew Palmer, real-world scholar of literary deserts, is not to be confused with the fictional Andrew Palmer, *Generation X* desert dweller who resides in, of all places, *Palm Springs*.

“small town where old people are trying to buy back their youth and a few rungs on the social ladder” (10). Coupland’s Palm Springs is the kind of town in which “two paramedics and their trolley” are “a familiar sight” (38) and in which “a twinkle in the glass means a broken scotch bottle or a colostomy bag that has avoided the trashman’s gloved clutch” (10), observations that point toward the wealthy, elderly demographic of the place. Claire reiterates the suggestion that the town is primarily designed for and occupied by seniors, with Andy first paraphrasing and then quoting her remarks that “anyone under the age of thirty living in a resort community was on the make somehow: ‘pimping, dealing, hooking, detoxing, escaping, scamming, or what have you’” (36). It is in this way that the Gen Xers enact their desire to live in a previous era and satisfy their nostalgic impulses: by inhabiting a place in which they are surrounded by older people living the lifestyles of previous decades the Xers want to recreate. Moreover, that they are part of a minority of twentysomethings in a town populated by seniors means that their generational self-exile and removal from the rest of society is all the more pronounced.

Aside from seeking a movement back in time, the Gen Xers also seek a kind of spatial blank slate—a *tabula rasa*—and this propels them to the desert. When Dag describes how he quit his job back home and came under hard times, he says, “I needed a clean slate with no one to read it. I needed to drop out even further. . . . So I split to where the weather is hot and dry and where the cigarettes are cheap” (31). Similarly, Andy tells Claire that he moved to Palm Springs because “I was merely trying to erase all traces of history from my past” (36). And when Claire, not yet living in town, expresses similar dissatisfaction with her life, Andy encourages her to move to Palm Springs: “Clean your slate. Think life out. Lose your unwanted momentums” (36). The trio view Palm Springs as “a quiet sanctuary from the bulk of middle-class life” (10) in part because of what they see as its ostensible *blankness*, its lack of spatial and cultural particularities, including a lack of cultural signifiers frequently associated with the middle class. In particular, this view surfaces when they emphasize the emptiness or barrenness of their surroundings, as in their visit to West Palm Springs Village just outside of town: Andy describes “a land that is barren—the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter—and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony” (16). Andy, Dag, and Claire rehearse the same topographical blanking that explorers such as Edwin James and Zebulon Pike employed in their early reports on the American desert: they neglect to see variety in the landscape, or even to note the spatial *presence* within the perceived absence. Banco calls this a

“linguistic voiding of the landscape,” which can have the effect of presenting the land as something to be moulded, manipulated by human interaction and intervention (498). This blanking out is more pronounced for the Gen Xers than it would have been for the explorers, as the Xers here look out into a semi-recently vacated “ghost town” (West Palm Springs Village) whose landscape presumably still holds remnants of social and cultural life (vacated buildings, roads, signs, and so on). That Andy draws attention not to these remnants but to the barren land surrounding them suggests a sustained effort on his part to conceptually create a *tabula rasa* out of the space he observes, even if the physical evidence surrounding him defies such conception. As Ki notes, Andy’s “ideal world is a ‘barren’ zone without signs (TV, money, music, good looks),” and this might be most prominent in his desire to see the space of Palm Springs and West Palm Springs Village as blank slates, ignoring the signs that actually do saturate those spaces (22).

There are understandable reasons why the Xers might desire a spatial *tabula rasa*, and as I alluded to earlier, these reasons have a lot to do with the relationship between the desert and story. David Jasper locates the paradox of desert space in the way we “fear wide open spaces, yet at the same time we long for them” (65). For some individuals, blank spaces are desirable because they can “write” onto them their own histories and narratives; this is the fundamental allure of the *tabula rasa*, and it is one Coupland’s characters give into as they move around the continent. Andy, Dag, and Claire, obsessive storytellers, seek a place where their stories will more easily be heard, and where they can be separated and distinguished from the masses of their generation. And while readers may fairly judge the motivations for and implications of intentionally seeking out blank space, it is important to remember the complicated reality that, as Robert Kaplan writes, lands which *seem* to be “encumbered by relatively little history often give the inhabitants the illusion that human beings face no spiritual or economic limits” (80). There *is* something freeing about the desire for a blank historical and cultural slate, but that desire is bound up in the privilege to access that slate and the problematics of investing in the idea of blank space, such as the violent ideological erasure involved in casting land that has long been occupied by Indigenous communities as having “relatively little history” (80).

In terms of this history and culture of the region, Andy, Dag, and Claire maintain the desert as a *tabula rasa*. Even as early as the novel’s paratexts—in particular, the inside flap of the front cover—the Xers are positioned as “[r]efugees from history” who apparently come to the

desert because it is a place where they need not concern themselves with the weight of the past. And, indeed, when Andy tells the story of his return to Portland after a stint at a magazine office in Japan, he echoes this same willing erasure: “I was back in Oregon, back in the New World, breathing less crowded airs, but I knew even then that there was still too much history there for me. That I needed less in life. Less past. . . . So I came down here, to breathe dust and walk with the dogs—to look at a rock or a cactus and know that I am the first person to see that cactus and that rock” (59). Andy moves from continent to continent, and then from city to town, seeking a place that is essentially *historyless*, one that is both silent (wordless, storyless) and unmarked by previous inhabitants (topographically, historically, and culturally empty): “We wanted silence and we have that silence now” (11). For Baudrillard, the quality Andy desires, this spatial silence, is a core characteristic of America’s deserts: they contain and foster within them “a silence that exists nowhere else,” a silence that is expressed visually, too, he ventures, as a “product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it” (6). In this figuration, of Baudrillard’s as well as the Xers, this “silence” comes to connote an absence of history, or of story more generally; the desert becomes a space free of human utterance, nothing but the ostensibly blank land looking back on the one who views it. This reduction of the qualities of desert space recalls popular desires to see the desert as blank even when it clearly is not, as the realities of residential, commercial, technological, and scientific presence show us, and as Davis and Abbey, decades before, remind us in showing the American Southwest as a space used deliberately in human endeavour rather than as “natural” sanctuary.

In line with this elision of the histories and stories of the region, the novel’s representation of the desert is fittingly one in which even the smallest remnants of history have been all but erased, leaving a town—Palm Springs—that is essentially indistinctive and uniform in its sense of artificiality. When signs of culture or history do appear there, they are valued only for their aesthetic worth as commodities, such as the “native Indian arrowhead display” decorating Larry’s Bar (18), or the “inexpensive low-grade Navajo Indian blankets” Andy arranges in his bungalow (6). When Andy describes Palm Springs as a “car culture town,” he signals that, in the text, this is a place whose culture is entirely dependent on *commodity* and *consumption* (115). Those historically and culturally significant artefacts seem to be used only ornamentally by individuals who desire the cultural capital associated with such items. That the previous passages form the novel’s only mention of Indigenous communities of the region

(specifically eliding the centuries-old presence of the Cahuilla people in the Sonoran Desert, in particular the Agua Caliente Band that still resides and holds land within and outside of Palm Springs) reflects a superficial, commodity-based engagement with the place's history. Davis writes about a similar elision that characterizes the cultural history of L.A.: "Los Angeles is usually seen as peculiarly infertile cultural soil, unable to produce, to this day, any homegrown intelligentsia. . . . Los Angeles's truly indigenous intellectual history seems a barren shelf" (17). Here, Davis identifies (using the symbol of the "barren shelf") a troubled history in which Western public thinkers metaphorically blank out the real-world, Indigenous intellectual and cultural history of the Tongva nation, which historically occupied the L.A. region, and other Indigenous peoples of the American Southwest.

Davis's remarks, and the Palm Springs of Coupland's novel, together point to a tendency to whitewash this region and see it as devoid of any culture but that which comes from the more capitalistic, Hollywood-driven Culture Industry. This whitewashing is seen particularly in the demographic of Coupland's Palm Springs, which appears to be a markedly white, affluent, elderly space. I have already explicated the ways Coupland constructs Palm Springs as a particularly elderly locale, but there are also recurring signs of the cultural and economic singularity of the population. When Andy sees a "black Buick sedan filled with young Japanese tourists" driving in West Palm Springs Village, he notes it as "a rarity in a valley visited mainly by Canadians and West Germans" (53). And while citizens' racial and cultural identities are not made explicit in the novel, the Palm Springs locals are coded within the spectrum of whiteness. Andy describes these locals as "a depressing froth of failed Zsa Zsa [Gabor] types, low-grade bikers who brew cauldrons of acid up in the mountains, and their biker-bitch chicks with pale-green gang tattoos on their knuckles and faces bearing the appalling complexions of abandoned and rained-on showroom dummies" (18). "It's still a car culture town here," Andy remarks, "and on a busy night it can feel, as Dag so aptly phrases it, 'like a Daytona, big tits, burger-and-shake kind of place where kids in go-go boots and asbestos jackets eat Death Fries in orange vinyl restaurant booths shaped like a whitewall GT tire'" (115). The whiteness of the town is further implied by the description of the town's "main drag," which, Andy and Dag note, includes a "few ambisexual blondes from Orange County [who] float vacuously back and forth in high-end Volkswagens, while skinhead marines in dented El Caminos make cruising, hustler's screeches but never stop" (115). Further, Andy's comment that there is no middle class in Palm Springs

suggests another kind of singularity, one grounded in class rather than ethnicity. I have already noted the class-based significance of scotch bottles tossed around town, but there are similar signs of the town's wealth, including bumper stickers that proclaim "WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE" (5), and the fact that Claire's job is portrayed as "peddling five-thousand-dollar purses to old bags" (67).

In reality, of course, Palm Springs is far more diverse than Coupland's representation would suggest: according to the United States Census Bureau, the Coachella Valley region is a prominent home to various Latino/a communities in particular, but also to Indigenous, African-American, and Asian communities, among others. And also according to the census data, fifteen to twenty percent of Palm Springs residents have lived below the poverty line from the 1990s onward, suggesting that while its reputation as a resort town might project a certain level of affluence, that projection is entirely dependent on a substantial working class population that is not really accounted for in the novel or in other popular representations of Palm Springs. Of course, it is not entirely the job of literature to represent accurately the socio-cultural nuances of any given location, and there are reasons why a novel might purposefully not do so.<sup>4</sup> I simply use the differences between real-world Palm Springs and Coupland's Palm Springs here to discuss the conceptual blanking of space that is so frequent in discussions of the American Southwest desert: it is common to read and represent this space as a *tabula rasa* despite the obvious and important cultural, geographical, and social layers being omitted in that representation of space.

Drawing attention to the consequences of omitting—or remaining wilfully ignorant of—the complex layers and stories that make up space, Coupland has the desert turn out to be a disappointment for Andy, Dag, and Claire, just one of their many "stops on the remote control, the channel-changer of location" that G. P. Lainsbury suggests is a product of there being no "transcendence of place" in the modern age, and thus no true escape from the existence the Xers leave behind for the desert. While Andy initially pronounces that life in the desert is "much, *much* better," he and his friends soon learn that this is not the silent, calming desert sanctuary

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<sup>4</sup> In Coupland's case, focalizing the novel through these relatively superficial Gen Xers may indeed elide the real-world complexities of the region, such as in terms of demographics, but that may be the point: in order to interrogate the very act of representing Palm Springs as superficial, and therefore to draw awareness to the problems with accepted attitudes about space, Coupland must handle a tricky tension in the text between accuracy and exaggeration, sincere representation and playful critique.



evoked by religious tradition (11). The novel's landscape is instead filled with places such as the Betty Ford Clinic for addictions recovery and the Eisenhower medical facility (87); its residents include a "Vegas housewife on chemotherapy" (89) and "an elderly failed Zsa Zsa [Gabor] who vomited a storm of Sidecars" on the floor at Larry's Bar (111); and it produces artefacts such as the aforementioned "broken scotch bottle" and "colostomy bag" sprawled along the lawns and alleys (10). Together, these features suggest not a desert sanctuary for healing, reflection, and refuge, but a sickly place whose aging binge-and-purge culture is revealed even in the litter that surrounds the Xers' homes.

Moreover, the Xers' eventual disappointment is not really a surprise, as Tate writes, given that the "paradox of their particular form of disenchantment is that it results not in radicalism but in a strange kind of conformity," one that is manifested spatially in their movement to Palm Springs, a resort city ("Now" 328). Palm Springs, Tate argues, is a "rather ironic refuge," with its "shopping malls and cosmetic surgery clinics" (*Douglas Coupland* 125). While I understand this reading, I also think it reveals a trendy assumption that spirituality can only be fostered in certain "natural" landscapes, and not in a mall or a resort town. But the larger problem, in the Xers' perpetually dissatisfying quest, might be simply be that, as Ryan Moore writes, they are "unable to adhere to or even locate an alternative" to contemporary middle-class consumerist culture "because, quite frankly, they've seen it all" (255). Their ultimate lack of fulfilment exemplifies one of the terms Coupland defines marginally in the novel: "EXPATRIATE SOLIPSISM: When arriving in a foreign travel destination one had hoped was undiscovered, only to find many people just like oneself; the peeved refusal to talk to said people because they have ruined one's elitist travel fantasy" (172). While Palm Springs can hardly be considered a "foreign travel destination" for the North American Xers, it initially embodies, for them, a sense of difference and newness that they later discover is largely illusory. The Palm Springs of the novel is governed by the same socio-economic machinery—namely, consumerism and capitalism—that sustains the rest of North America, and so the Xers' "elitist travel fantasy" of hiding out in some undiscovered, blank, historyless locale is effectively dismantled as they tune into this reality. The presence of this definition of the term "expatriate solipsism," which seems to cast subtle judgement on the Xers' travels, suggests that, as McCampbell argues, "Coupland doesn't 'buy' the privileged bohemianism of his characters. We know he is not absorbed in this idealist escapism as he ironically undercuts the lifestyle choices of his characters

by sarcastically creating comic definitions for them within the page margins of Generation X” (135). She adds, “Just as his characters attempt to knowingly stand on the outside of their capitalist cultures sarcastically laughing, the privileged author ultimately stands on the outside of their story having what appears to be the last laugh” (135).

Eventual disappointment aside, it is clear that Andy, Dag, and Claire view the move to Palm Springs as an act of counter-cultural resistance, as something that places them on the margins of society rather than at the centre, even if reader and author may both doubt the validity of this view. The characters’ perspective positions them as marginalized subjects who have somehow been forgotten or overlooked by the rest of society, “imperceptible to the culture at large” (Tate, *Douglas Coupland* 3), even though they *form* the culture at large (3). Take, for instance, when Andy proclaims, “[w]e live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there’s a great deal in which we choose not to participate” (11). Similarly, when Andy describes Claire and Claire’s friend Elvissa, he comments that in “their similar quest to find a personal truth, they willingly put themselves on the margins of society” (88). These sentiments are essentially summarized by Andy’s later reflection that “when you’re middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you” (147). Such reflections obscure, in the service of claims to a counter-cultural capital or a unique marginality, the reality that the characters are actually remarkably privileged, and their marginalization is largely self-fashioned. In general, this tension between privilege and constructed marginalization is common for Coupland’s characters, who are described by Greenberg as “questing, middle-class, young, white, North American West Coast suburbanites” whose (imagined or real) travels from “centre” to “periphery” are entirely made possible because of their privileged identities (68). When they do choose to escape, at least to their fantasies of the periphery, “the luxury of this choice re-emphasizes their privileged position in the middle-class” (McCampbell 129). That they are likely to fit in easily wherever they go in North America is an added luxury of their backgrounds. Thus, the Xers have the ability to reject middle-class North American society in favour of, as Tate puts it, “something at once more risky yet strangely more secure” (“Now” 331). More conventional than subversive, the trajectory of privileged, middle-class dissatisfaction plays out exactly as expected in the course of Andy, Dag, and Claire’s travels.

Yet, it is not only the bare fact of this trajectory that makes the Gen Xers’ actions seem more conventional than alternative; it is also that their spatial movements locate them within a

long-standing traditional (and therefore not unique or counter-cultural) narrative that sees disenchanted individuals escape to desert solitude in order to reclaim some sort of spiritual foothold. While Ki locates the Xers within the wider “legacy of the romantic tradition” (16), remarking that “they choose to quit the system and parody the romantic wanderers” (22), and while Tate similarly deems their “escape to the periphery of society” a “kind of unconscious Walden-style project” (*Douglas Coupland* 125), I argue that their wanderings can be traced much further back in narrative history to the literatures of the fourth-century Christian ascetics who inaugurated (or at least made popular) this spiritual pilgrimage into the desert. Thus, although Andy, Dag, and Claire articulate claims to a sort of uniqueness in secluding themselves in the desert—recall that they position themselves on the “periphery” of an imagined culture-at-large (11, 88, 147)—they actually incorporate themselves into a kind of master narrative of desert isolation, participating in a traditional and absolutely conventional migratory pattern. As Tate writes, in reference not to the Egyptian desert dwellers but to the Separatists and Puritans who abandoned England “to find a new land, one without the taint of history,” the characters’ “flight into the desert of California recreates the oldest European-American sacred story: the journey west by a group hoping to find sanctuary and sanctity or a new Canaan that might accommodate a persecuted people” (“Now” 330). Considering that Andy, Dag, and Claire tend to reveal their fears, thoughts, and desires through the stories they tell one another, this desire to fit themselves into a larger narrative makes even more sense, as Lainsbury argues: “[m]ost of the stories” the Xers share “concern alienated individuals who feel a profound need for integration into either a social or spiritual order; in other words, they all feel a need for their existence to be legitimated by reference to a narrative that would make sense of it,” such as the cultural narrative of the transformational desert pilgrimage. The very move that the Gen Xers make—their retreat to the desert—has its foundations in long-held, sacred, religious movements from centuries ago, and this connects them directly to a larger history even if, in their travels, they have been attempting to avoid history, to discover a spatial-cultural blank slate.

Importantly, much like the “privileged bohemianism” (McC Campbell 135) enjoyed by Coupland’s characters, the desert monasticism practiced by individuals in fourth-century Egypt was similarly appealing to the more privileged, urban, literate populations of the time, a fact that demonstrates how tightly such self-determined “retreat” is tied to issues of access and privilege (3). Defying and separating themselves from the church under Constantine, these early desert

practitioners were “choosing instead to live on the margins of society under the direct guidance of the Spirit and the Word of God” (Burton-Christie 3). This “desert spirituality,” as Douglas Burton-Christie calls it, primarily involved living in solitude and reflecting on Scripture, thus removing oneself from the broader culture (8). Like the claim “that the early monastic movement was antisocial and anticultural, thereby contributing notably to the decay of humane culture and civilization in late antiquity” (Burton-Christie 11), the obvious criticism of the Gen Xers’ attempt to remove themselves from society at large is that it spatially manifests apathy, a refusal to work to change the direction of society while critiquing it from the outside. It is not surprising that Palm Springs ends up *not* being a sufficient retreat for them—not because of the way the town is characterized, although that does play a part, but because the Xers do very little to actively build an alternative life in the desert, partaking in the very same activities as the people they criticize. They make no attempts to form a truly transformative new spirituality or counter-culture; instead, they abandon Palm Springs when it does not fulfill them and choose to move to San Felipe, a process which will be interrogated in more detail in Chapter 4. For now, I will turn the focus to Coupland’s *Life After God*, to continue parsing similar issues about the relation of desert experience to spirituality, and about the quality of blankness in light of the desert-as-wasteland discourse.

### **“In the Desert”: Engaging the Desert as Post-Spiritual Wasteland**

The cover of the 2005 Washington Square Press trade paperback edition of *Life After God* visually asserts a narrative about the American Southwest desert that is echoed and revised within the text. For the most part, the cover offers a stereotypical depiction of desert landscape: a wide flat of sand and dirt in the foreground with fatigued-looking green-brown shrubbery peppered here and there in the middleground; looming sand dunes in the distance; and a vast, blue sky featuring rolling white clouds occupying the rest of the cover’s space. Strikingly, in the midst of this landscape there is a large and obtrusive, somewhat dilapidated billboard that reads: “Life after God.”<sup>5</sup> The stark juxtaposition of the billboard—quintessential material embodiment

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<sup>5</sup> Notable covers of other editions of the collection include one in which a child floats in a pool, leaning on a floatation device with his eyes closed, face turned upward to the sun (Simon & Schuster, 1994). This image is likely meant to represent the protagonists of the story “1,000 Years (Life After God),” who float as youths in the swimming pool of their suburban neighbourhood (a scenario I discuss in detail in Chapter 2). The tension created in the

of the machinery of capitalism—against the sand-and-shrubbery scene surrounding it evokes a central duality of the American Southwest desert that I have already discussed: it is seen as a natural space or wilderness, yet it is also a locus for massive initiatives in technological development and the manipulation of nature, and it is home of the so-called Culture Industry. Visually intruding on the ostensibly “natural” landscape surrounding it, the billboard makes legible this duality as it also seems to proclaim, through its obtrusion as commercial signpost and in bearing the evocative title of the collection, that this apparently empty land combined with advertising vessel represents a land *after* God.

For a collection that only includes one story set in the American Southwest, “In the Desert,” it seems especially important that the desert was selected to feature so prominently on the cover of this edition of *Life After God*. Most of the stories are set in and around Vancouver and other parts of British Columbia, a region with far different landscapes than the one the cover presents, and while many of the stories feature similar themes—wandering in search of personal meaning, or finding connection with other people despite the difficulties of doing so in the distancing relations engendered by a globalizing world—they do not document any type of desert landscape.<sup>6</sup> But putting aside the network of considerations that informs paratexts, including publisher control and collaborative design, there is undoubtedly something about the combination of the desert landscape cover with “Life After God” imposed on it, and the included desert story itself, especially with its first epigraph—“You are the first generation raised without religion” (161)—that characterizes the desert as a post-spiritual landscape. This reading is not unlike the one encouraged by *Generation X*, as both proclaim that the desert landscape is somehow blank, whether in spiritual, geographic, or other senses. However, in its diversion from constructing the desert as a spiritual sanctuary, as *Generation X* does, “In the Desert” instead presents a vision of the desert as site of artificiality, and then as wasteland, inviting ecocritical

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intersection of this particular cover image with the title of the collection is different from that of the cover image with the desert billboard, since the image introduces connotations of baptism and rebirth that would suggest this “life after God” still carries ritualistic remnants from life *with* God, even in the suburban world of pool toys and chlorine. I discuss these issues of spirituality, suburbia, and the collection (and story) title more thoroughly in Chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> I focus in this chapter on one story from the collection because it is the only one that prominently features the American Southwest desert landscape, but I will return to this collection in substantive ways through the rest of the dissertation, including in Chapter 2, where I analyze the depiction of suburbia in “1,000 Years (Life After God),” and the Conclusion, where I discuss the road narrative that unfolds in “Gettysburg.”

readings of the landscape within this vision. While the desert as wasteland aligns the story with the cover's apparent declaration that this is a post-spiritual landscape—devoid of religion, spiritual signifiers, and any connection with the land that is not mediated by its use in commercial, capitalistic endeavour—the final stretch of the story complicates this declaration, suggesting that, indeed, the desert can invite and foster transformative spiritual encounters.

“In the Desert” begins in the midst of the unnamed, first-person narrator's road trip from Las Vegas to deliver a stash of stolen syringes and steroids to a celebrity fitness trainer in Palm Springs (172). This delivery provides the core premise for the story, which follows the narrator as he drives, observing the passing desert landscape, and later decides to get rid of his stolen cargo (after getting word that the trainer has come into trouble with the police). In doing so, he ends up stranded in the Mojave, his car having broken down near the spot where he decides to bury the syringes. Within this premise, the desert, importantly, becomes a conduit for an ultimately superficial transaction: the narrator attempts to deliver goods (steroids) whose purpose relates to outward appearance (the promise of a particular kind of muscled body) in exchange for money. The action thus boils down to the exchange of drugs for cash in the pursuit of wealth and beauty, all against a noted background of a culture obsessed with appearances and invested in the façades of Hollywood (consider that the narrator delivers the goods not simply to a regular trainer, but to one who services celebrities). It is an exchange seemingly deprived of all spiritual significance and invested with only the most earthly, shallow importance. This sense of superficiality is mirrored in the desert landscape by the passing sights the narrator recounts as he drives. He observes the privileged superficiality of his fellow travellers, watching “an old woman apply lipstick inside a Lincoln Town Car while a man at the wheel coughed up oysters” (167), and later judges the “gaudy casinoplex” on Interstate 15 (169). In the beginning of the story, this is not a desert that invites feelings of spiritual refuge or welcome withdrawal. For the narrator, this desert is better characterized by, for example, the region east of the San Andreas fault, which he describes as a place where “citizens kited checks and drove in cars in which windows had been lost long ago and replaced with plastic bags,” images that suggest a sense of deception or façade, plastic standing in for windows and fraudulent checks standing in for legitimate economic exchange, as well as physical and financial decrepitude (188). When the narrator's car will not start and he worries about being stuck in the desert, he imagines some telling “scenarios one might encounter in the desert—rampaging bikers cartooned on angel dust; snuff movies in

progress, being filmed with shotguns pointed at unwanted visitors; rattlers slithering over abandoned heatless murdered bodies” (195). Vastly different from the peaceful sanctuary envisioned by the Xers, the desert here becomes threatening, dangerous, but also cheap, the location of snuff movie production and of the “cartooned” (therefore exaggerated, reduced, low-brow) escapades of biker culture. The narrator’s articulation of desert space, combined with his observations and own experience of the land, suggest what this “land after God” looks like, and also provide a glimpse into the nature of Coupland’s “first generation raised without religion.” The desert, in this way, indexes and amplifies the culture that surrounds it.

The desert space articulated by “In the Desert” comes closer to matching that in *Generation X* in its construction as an ostensible blank slate, a dimension that contributes to the reading of the desert as a post-spiritual landscape. The narrator calls this blank-slate quality the capital-N “Nothingness” of the land, remarking that he “kept on being surprised by the bigness of the landscape—just how far *nothing* can extend to” (167, emphasis added). “Outside the car,” he reflects, “there were no trees or billboards or plants or animals or buildings—not even fences—just radio waves and the Mojave’s volcanic granite, experienced at seventy-seven miles per hour” (169). The line drawings that accompany the story likewise emphasize blankness as a defining feature of the landscape. Bare and minimalist in style, the drawings that appear in “In the Desert” include one in which a single, isolated vehicle, most likely the narrator’s car, drives along an empty stretch of road with a likewise empty landscape in the background (188). A few wispy clouds and one slightly darkened hill or sand dune are the only prominent features in this otherwise blank scene. The same visual indicators of *tabula rasa* emerge in other drawings throughout the story, such as one in which a panoramic scene of barely textured land, perhaps sand, is framed only by a couple of just-visible hills in the distance (210). The sky above appears big and empty, the sun tiny in comparison, and the three pictured clouds so thin that they are barely there. The only prominent feature of this scene, besides its utter emptiness, is what looks to be the skull of a cow placed in the foreground of the drawing. Even in the notable presence of the skull, though, the illustration conveys much the same perspective on the desert as the narrator’s: this is a land of Nothingness—a land in which even former signs of movement and life, such as the presence of cattle, are long gone. Only the bones remain.

Visually, then, the story corroborates the narrator’s repeated comments about driving through the “middle of nowhere” (170) and, later, the “center of nowhere” (189). These

comments may at first seem like simple spatial demarcations—many say “middle of nowhere” when they mean that they are a long way from community or urban centres—but the comments importantly attest to the fact that individuals often participate in a discursive coding of desert space as the “nowhere” to city space’s “somewhere,” revealing a subtly expressed hierarchy of vested spatial importance. It does not matter what we do or how we use and inhabit space when we are nowhere, this hierarchy suggests. But when we are somewhere, we imagine ourselves subject to conventions of proper spatial use.

This hierarchy—between the nowhere and the somewhere—is embedded in one relevant theorization of the desert, forwarded by Baudrillard. He postulates that the desert embodies “an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance” (5), such that it becomes, essentially, “the negative of the earth’s surface and of our civilized humours” (6), the absence to our human presence: deserts “denote the *emptiness*, the radical *nudity* that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum” (63, emphasis added). In essence, Baudrillard theorizes, the “natural deserts tell me what I need to know about the deserts of the sign. . . . They create a vision expurgated of all the rest: cities, relationships, events, media. They induce in me an exalting vision of the desertification of signs and men” (63). Deserts, in Baudrillard’s view and my terms, are the *nowhere* that tell us about the *somewhere*.

If a reader temporarily adopts the view of the landscape exhibited by the narrator of “In the Desert” and agrees that the land embodies this Nothingness, that it is nowhere, what might that be saying about the somewhere of the culture surrounding it? To explore this question, consider that the story’s desert is essentially (and literally) a wasteland, a vessel for the remnants of a rampant and destructive consumerism, and a site for material ruin, deterioration, and abandonment. This is a desert whose roads divide “shoulders littered with shotgun shell casings and smashed beer bottles” and “occasional desiccated mattresses, broken couches and refrigerators” (190). There is something about the Nothingness of this desert that invites waste; people go there, the narrator reflects, with “notions of disposal” (190), and he is no different, ultimately finding a “dumping spot” that is “ugly and barren” to bury his contraband (191).

On the one hand, the narrator’s continued attention to the material scraps ornamenting the desert landscape seems to oppose his claims that the desert is blank Nothingness. This tension



embodies a larger pattern Tate has identified in Coupland's writing, one based in a "distinctively New World desire for originality and its anticipation of the cool, clean smoothness of the future as a blank slate—or as desert space," a desire that is then "continually problematized by the novelist's crowded, debris-strewn narratives" (*Douglas Coupland* 94-95). Even in the metaphor of the desert-as-wasteland, there is a conceptual refusal to see the space as blank, and instead an assertion of the space as humanly cultivated (through travel, disposal, the byproducts of hyper-consumerism, and so on) just like any other place. The passing observations of the narrator, which highlight this material layering of space even as the narrator seems outwardly oblivious to such things, thus function as a subtle critique of the blanking the narrator practices when he foregrounds the desert's Nothingness. Coupland's construction of the desert as a dumping ground for consumerist garbage attains an ecocritical side in this regard: the landscape is shown not to be empty, but in fact infested by human-made waste, a representational readjustment that contributes to a wider critique, in Coupland's work, of what Dan Geddes calls the "all-pervasive consumerist ethic" dictating modern society. This ecocritical reading of the text is perhaps surprising since, as Jenny Kerber rightly notes, Coupland is not necessarily known for his "ecological earnestness" (317). Yet, as she also observes, *Generation X* contains a "vague sense of eco-anxiety" that becomes full-fledged in Coupland's 2009 *Generation A*, a novel featuring a futuristic world in which bees have gone extinct. It is possible that "In the Desert," too, develops this anxiety in ways particular to the desert (317). That the narrator himself contributes to the desert's layers of waste by burying the syringes perhaps complicates this ecocritical interpretation; after all, the reader comes to sympathize and align with the cause of the narrator, and the text does not encourage readers to pass judgment on the means of his waste disposal. What seems more likely, though, is that the narrator's actions, combined with the presentation of the desert as wasteland, are simply meant to reflect realistically the conditions of life "after God" within a post-spiritual landscape. This landscape is one where the spiritual significances of the desert have been all but overwritten, leaving only attachments to the land based in artificial exchange and material purging. As Baudrillard writes, the absence within the desert, as it is represented here, only serves to amplify the significance of the garbage that contaminates it; the bareness of the land means that the byproducts of consumer culture are made to stand out more starkly. The desert thus reminds readers of the ultimately flimsy, illusory significances attached to material items, by pointing to their wasteful presence amongst all the absence.

What can be salvaged from the wastelands of the desert, aside from broken appliances, buried contraband, and other debris of consumer culture? The story eventually seems to suggest that, indeed, a newfound, transformative spirituality can be found there, and the narrator's happenstance interaction with a rundown desert wanderer manifests this spirituality. Not long after his car breaks down in an uninhabited, unvisited part of the Mojave, the narrator realizes that there is a person walking behind him. He is soon able to make the person out, describing him as "a drifter—a desert rat—like the ones who occasionally haunt the Desert Fashion Plaza, visibly, frighteningly suntanned even in the dark of three-quarter moonlight, with skin like beef jerky, pores like a salt and pepper shaker and milky hints of cataracts in both eyes" (200). The food imagery here might signal that the narrator is hungry, but it could also signify that the narrator sees the desert dweller, and the desert more generally, as a consumable "other." As the two men walk together for some time, this othering is emphasized as the narrator distances himself further from the desert dweller, assessing that the man is "crazy" (207). However, importantly, it is ultimately the desert wanderer who saves the narrator, giving him proper directions to the road back to community, as it turns out that the narrator was walking the wrong way. Despite this act of kindness, and despite the desert wanderer even giving the narrator food for the walk, another act of rescue, the narrator codes the man as "a very far-gone desert rat," remarking, "I felt naïve and middle-class for having hoped—even briefly—that I could bond with the unbondable, for thinking that all it takes to make crazy people uncrazy is a little bit of hearty attention and good sense" (207).

It is not until a few years later, the narrator informs us, that he finally realizes the importance of his interaction with the desert dweller. The significance he attaches to their meeting is twofold: first, as I mentioned, the interaction seems ultimately to lead the narrator to a new, transformative spirituality, one that did not seem possible to foster within the empty, artificial confines of the story's desert. These few years down the road, the narrator asks: "how often is it we are rescued by a stranger, if ever at all? And how is it that our lives can become drained of the possibility of forgiveness and kindness—so drained that even one small act of mercy becomes a potent lifelong memory?" (212). He continues to reflect, "It is with these thoughts in mind that I see the drifter's windburned face when I now consider my world—his face that reminds me that there is still something left to believe in after there is nothing left to believe in. A face for people like me—who were pushed to the edge of loneliness and who

maybe fell off and who when we climbed back on, our world never looked the same” (213). The interaction with the desert dweller provides the catalyst for the narrator’s resurgence in *belief*. And while it is not made explicit whether this articulated belief is tied to any God or higher power (the narrator once reveals, “I believe there is a God,” but the reader does not know whether this belief is new or a longstanding one for him [210]), the transformation of viewpoint and the verbal testament to a lingering or returned object of belief suggests that this is a kind of new spirituality for the narrator, one that emerges directly from the desert dweller and the land he wanders. In reading the desert and its resident figure as catalysts for replenished spirituality in what is supposedly a land and life after God, I am identifying this story as part of a larger pattern wherein Coupland’s fiction offers new ways into wonder, spirituality, and belief in this postmodern age. Tate has grappled with this very matter throughout much of his scholarship on the author. He argues that Coupland’s work, with its opening of new avenues through which the spiritual can be reached in contemporary times, “represents a serious attempt to read an apparently godless world in spiritual terms” (“Now” 327). The narrator of “In the Desert” partakes in this attempted interpretation, ultimately comprehending the landscape of the desert and the figure of the desert dweller in spiritual terms, despite the story and collection’s surface suggestion that these are post-spiritual phenomena. The contours of his particular belief are not made clear, but that they are articulated at the end of the story, and with reference to the narrator’s experience in the desert, suggests that the reader should chart the story as a kind of conversion narrative of the modern era.

The other significance the narrator attaches to his exchange with the wandering man is ecocritical in nature. By that I mean that the exchange leads the narrator not just to a new spirituality, vaguely defined, but also to a new, keen, critical awareness of the particular environmental conditions plaguing this land after God. Consider the narrator’s reflections:

Since [meeting the drifter] I have seen more of this world—I have lived in Los Angeles and seen the fires burn there; I have seen the glaciers in Alaska fall apart and float away into the sea; I have seen an eclipse of the sun from a yacht floating on an ocean thick with crude oil. And with each of these sights I have thought of the damaged face of the drifter in the desert, gone, untraceable, vanished into the wastes outside Indio, Scottsdale, Las Vegas—his own private planets in his own private universe. (212)

What the narrator describes here are essentially sights of environmental mini-apocalypses. That he thinks of the desert dweller at these times of environmental uncertainty and crisis attests to the conceptual linkage the narrator, and Coupland on a broader level, make between the desert dweller and a lifestyle lived close to and in harmony with the land and nature. As he envisions the fires, glaciers melting, and soiled oceans, he also envisions the land-scarred desert wanderer drifting away, vanishing, into the wastes. While there are certainly problems with this linkage—it conceptually partakes of a kind of othering that simultaneously sees the exotic man and the wild land he represents as vanishing—it ultimately contributes to the story’s wider ecocritical project. The environmentally unfriendly debris that the narrator skimmed over—or blanked out—as he drove down the desert roads just a few years before, now reappears in the form of environmental crises the narrator envisions, only this time he is cognizant of their heft. In this way, too, the story unfolds as a kind of conversion narrative, with an ecologically oblivious narrator transforming, by the end of the text, into a serious critic of environmental catastrophe, all because of his experience in the desert. The proposed land after God, then, as embodied by the story’s desert landscape, ultimately becomes a space for hopeful transformation, not simply a material wasteland but a conduit for profound personal revelation and change.

### **Conclusion: The Trouble with Blank Space**

The spatial turn in scholarship of the last few decades has, as I have discussed, continued to theorize space in accumulatively complex and nuanced ways, in particular by installing manners of thinking that transcend the idea that space is simply a fixed background or a vessel to be filled, and by fostering ideas that take into account the full production of space (Lefebvre) materially, imaginatively, and socially. Yet, despite this movement toward spatial complexity, many scholars continue in the habit of reducing space to easy narratives or token descriptors. In the case of the American Southwest deserts, these reductions often involve a heavy reliance on the visual-discursive trope of blankness, as I have shown in this chapter. In the specific body of Coupland scholarship, it is surprising how few scholars seek to trouble this association between desert and blank space, and also surprising how many tend to reproduce this same process of blanking out desert space in their studies of Coupland’s work. Writing about “In the Desert,” McCampbell sees the narrator struggle to situate himself within the “awe-inspiring amount of barren space” (136-37). Regarding the same story, Tate writes that the narrator becomes “lost in

the scorched American wilderness” (*Douglas Coupland* 1). Referring to the protagonists of *Generation X*, Ki proclaims that they “remain lonely and disturbed in their barren desert” (16), and Tate extends that blanking of space, pointing out the Xers’s “proximity to the scorched, barren, abandoned land of the desert” (*Douglas Coupland* 125). Notably, Tate compares this blank land to the “highly artificial environment of Palm Springs” (*Douglas Coupland* 3), claiming that Andy, Dag, and Claire live “on the border between the hyperreal space of Californian civilization and the wastes of the desert” (*Douglas Coupland* 125), establishing a largely illusory distinction between the core of Palm Springs and the land surrounding it, a distinction that also overwrites Mike Davis’s positing of the desert *as* a site of commercial development and technological innovation (quintessential processes of “civilization” and even the “hyperreal”). These lingual patterns in scholarship demonstrate a sustained tendency to reduce the complexity of desert space to just one of its many (simultaneous, contradictory, multifaceted) features: its emptiness. Coupland scholarship seems to have internalized the same language that the characters use to conceptualize the desert without always recognizing, as I have tried to in my reading, how that very language is called into question by the texts themselves. In mimicking that blanking impulse, scholarship has implicitly endorsed the characters’ troubling views of the desert, while it has eclipsed the more complicated desert geography Coupland constructs when one zooms out from individual characters’ perceptions. A geography of contradictions and complexities, Coupland’s desert is godless wasteland conjoined with spiritual sanctuary, a richly storied place at the same time that it may appear to the characters a *tabula rasa*.

Reading Coupland’s multifaceted construction of the desert in relation to the blank space pattern found in the language of studies of Coupland’s writing introduces a central question about the relevance of the work this chapter, and this project, seeks to do: why should anyone care whether the desert is imagined as blank space, as barren, as a *tabula rasa*? After all, there are material, visual, and literal reasons why the trope of blank space tends to anchor discussions of the desert: uninhabited desert land can and often does look empty to the eye, at least to a viewer whose gaze is trained in the sights of more populated centres, replete with buildings, landmarks, networks of roads, and other spatial signifiers that suggest community. Yet, even so, where one person sees blank space, another may see abundance and variety, and these judgments—whether they are inscribed in literature or simply made in the casual reflections of

everyday parlance—have real-world effects, as in the examples of Frémont, the other early American explorers, and the history of military development in the American Southwest. The discursive apparatus that has historically “blanked out” desert space legitimates just one way of viewing such landscapes, and thus promotes use of that land based on the illusion of emptiness, to often violent effects, as exemplified by the historical and ongoing displacement of Indigenous communities who occupy the “empty” spaces that colonial endeavour then seeks to “fill.”

Blankness is not an empirical or objective feature of space; it is a constructed spatial quality bestowed on sites that match criteria that can and do change, almost arbitrarily, at any time: are there few buildings? do very many people regularly inhabit the space? is the space filled with trees and other large geographical features, or only with smaller-scale features like rocks and shrubs? These are the kinds of questions that inevitably lead to individuals and communities determining that a space is empty or full, lacking or rich, thin or layered, and they point to a hierarchy in spatial discourse that sees buildings, roads, and homes as signs of space that is effectively filled, while space that has not experienced a certain degree of human manipulation is deemed empty. This perspective will appear in the chapters that follow, as Coupland’s characters grapple with notions of absence—blank space, suburban lack, empty wilderness, plunderable Mexico, and open road—in the complicated geographies they traverse.

## Chapter 2

### Suburban Space in “1,000 Years (Life After God)” and *Girlfriend in a Coma*

#### Introduction: Locating Suburbia

There is some confusion about what constitutes a suburb. While geographers and planners identify suburban space through specific, measurable criteria such as distance from the city centre, housing type, journey-to-work data, political boundaries, and neighbourhood density (Gordon and Janzen 197-99), these criteria are not typically known or used by people who inhabit these places. The contours of suburbia are infamously hard to describe, even while the space seems easy to recognize.<sup>1</sup> Large numbers of people now live in suburban neighbourhoods, yet for those who experience suburban space regularly, it can be difficult to articulate the qualities of that space. This tension between suburbia’s omnipresence and its unplaceability has been on the minds of scholars throughout the ambiguous history of the space. Part of the trouble, Dominic Head writes, is that “suburbia constantly relocates itself” (71). Old developments are eventually enveloped by radiating metropolitan cores; new neighbourhoods on the peripheries are not always aesthetically or conceptually consonant with former versions of suburbia, even if they meet the technical standards. Put another way, Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese note that “what a suburb is depends in large part on how and where one looks—and when” (8). Like many vital geographies of current time, suburbia is difficult to define, hard to place, contextual, contingent.

Colloquially, a suburb is often described as a community on the outskirts or within commuting distance of a metropolitan hub.<sup>2</sup> This definition is undeniably broad; thinking of

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<sup>1</sup> A similar predicament regarding difficulty of definition characterizes discourse on the many shapes of wilderness, as I will discuss in Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while “[t]here is currently no standard definition” of a suburb in Canada (Gordon and Janzen 200), Richard Harris’s study shows that, historically, the most important quality in defining the Canadian suburb has been location at or near a metropolitan fringe (24). Definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, and *Cambridge Dictionary* echo Harris’s report in their chief focus on the urban-peripheral location of suburbs.

suburbs as “peripheral communities” leaves room for all sorts of spatial organizations, including rural environments. Possibly, this descriptive broadness is a product of the way mainstream spatial discourse treats suburbia as something akin to a *feeling* more than a specific, mappable site. The sense is that we’ll know a suburb when we see it; it’s a matter of gut instinct. There remains a tacit belief that, as Rupa Huq explains, “suburbia is metaphorical rather than a literal or geographic term, a mindset as opposed to a term of strict definition” (6). Just as the desert is produced in part through ideas and discourse, as discussed in Chapter 1, so too has the framework of suburb-as-idea been foundational to mainstream understandings of the space. Robert Beuka writes, for instance, that suburbia is “[a]lways as much an *idea* as a reality” (4); it is a “culturally constructed environment” (229). Likewise, Roger Silverstone’s collection *Visions of Suburbia* (1997) begins with the statement that “[s]uburbia is a state of mind” (13)—one, perhaps, “characterised by narrow middle-class aspirations,” as Head would add (71). From numerous perspectives, the suburb has come to connote certain attitudes and ideals, types of citizens or aesthetic forms, more than it denotes specific geographic conditions.

The preceding discussion raises the question: for such an *unplaceable* place, how might we come to understand it? Geographic measures do not appear to circumscribe this space meaningfully for us, as with an island, a river, or a province with politically defined boundaries. Thus, in the absence of more precise public knowledge, the cultural lexicon of suburbia has developed, in large part, through literature, film, and art. The contours of suburban space, its dominant geography, are shaped through the circulation of what Beuka calls “the symbology of suburbia” (136). This symbology is comprised of widely disseminated images, aesthetics, and ideologies that, through curation by cultural expressions, have become closely tied to suburbia. The swimming pools; the plush, green, manicured lawns; the ritual and culture of backyard barbecuing—these are just a few elements Beuka names (136). But there are others: the aesthetic sameness, the houses upon houses mirroring the same architecture and design; the curvilinear roads and repeated cul-de-sacs; the picture windows and white picket fences. Intangible concepts also become attached to suburbia through the symbology—for example, the heteronormative nuclear family; economic and social conservatism; the pursuit of financial prosperity and material excess alongside the corresponding entrenchment of consumer-capitalist logic. Common across many of these associations is the underlying tie between suburbia and whiteness or social privilege, but it is important to remember that the symbology of suburbia, like the space itself, is



complex and dynamic. Its circulation and interpretation depend largely on context and delivery. A television sitcom might draw from the symbology differently than, say, promotional materials for a new housing development. Culturally manufactured, if sometimes authentic to real life, the symbology of suburbia holds great sway over colloquial imaginings of suburban environments and therefore over how the public interacts with those environments.

The symbology of suburbia is taken up in a range of ways within spatial discourse, but there remains within its usage a pattern that stereotypes the suburb as a space of *lack*. This pattern, too, manifests variously, but it tends to reduce to this: suburbia lacks culture, history, authenticity. Not unique, it is standardized; not meaningful, it is superficial; not diverse, it is uniform; not creative, it is commercial. Lacking the capacity to generate community and social connection, lacking attachments to the spiritual, the suburb is regarded as a parched landscape—a landscape of absences, much like the deserts discussed in Chapter 1. This sense of absence is, often times, derived from how suburbia’s dominant geography ties the space to whiteness, resulting in what Catherine Jurca describes as the notion of “white lack” in perceptions of the suburb (17). Even formal definitions of the suburb, such as the one provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, document the sense of lack frequently joined with the place: “In modern use [the term ‘suburb’ is] often depreciative, implying a homogeneity, monotony, and dull ordinariness within such areas.” More informally, I would say the suburb is seen to lack a kind of *placeishness*. This coinage is admittedly vague, but I use it to convey that, indeed, indictments of suburbia’s lack are often just that: unclear, broad, and grounded in conjecture rather than real-world data.<sup>3</sup> Few of the suburb’s critics—even the most damning ones—use statistics or demographics to evidence the lack, focusing, again, on the *ideas* of the suburb that have publicly forged its dominant geography. So while *placeishness* or a “sense of place” are nebulous concepts in and of themselves, somehow their absence is what most persistently and powerfully seems to have defined suburban space in the public imagination. Through this phenomenon, a suburban neighbourhood becomes, broadly, one that lacks an identifiable, recognizable sense of place—even though, as Lawrence Buell vitally reminds us, “sense of place is necessarily always a social product and not simply what is ‘there’” (77).

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<sup>3</sup> Gill notes how this vagueness has been used, for example, to make judgments about taste: “The charge against the suburbs, and suburbanites[,] was that they lacked taste howsoever this may be defined” (58).

This chapter contributes to alternative models of thinking about suburban space by situating a specific literary study of Douglas Coupland's work within the broader politics of suburban discourse and, more narrowly, within the trope of suburbia's lack, which I identify above. Coupland's body of work can be seen as both an iteration and a revision of this pattern of lack that has characterized North American scholarship, fiction, and film about suburbs from the early years of suburban development. Suburbia features prominently in Coupland's work, from the suburbs of Metro Vancouver, to Brentwood, Los Angeles, to the American Midwest. Moreover, Coupland's writing productively allows me to dive into the rarely swum pool that contains depictions of Canadian suburban space in Canadian literature. Historical studies of suburban development in Canada and, separately, literature that features Canada's suburbs are both extant, but scholarship that joins the two is only beginning to develop. Finally, Coupland's is a literary body in which suburbs feature both conventionally and radically, predictably and surprisingly. Coupland's suburbs are charged with sometimes contradictory and complex meanings which furnish an equally complex analysis. His depictions are transformative in some instances but normative in others, drawing, as they sometimes do, from his own experiences of suburban life as a white, middle-class person who grew up in the British Properties, a neighbourhood in West Vancouver with a history of enforcing a "whites-only policy" on the purchase of residential housing (Hopper). On this latter side, consider his film *Souvenir of Canada* (2005), which I discuss in detail in the next chapter. In the film, Coupland draws on the language of suburbia's lack when he says that "to fly over [Kluane National Park] was to apprehend God or the next world, or something altogether richer than the suburbs back home." Likewise, in *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996), Coupland instructs his reader to picture a deficient suburbia: "Imagine that the houses lived in by you and your friends are all built by contractors and furnished with dreams provided by *Life* magazine. Imagine that you inhabit a world with no history and no ideology" (121-22). Given that the typical site of Coupland's constructed suburbia, Metro Vancouver, is on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories, territories with a rich history of Indigenous peoples reaching back far beyond the history of suburban contractors, this is a telling and troubling statement. Clearly, readers must approach Coupland's works with the knowledge that they sometimes inhabit the colonialist discourse that refuses to recognize the land claims of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh and thus reproduce the pattern of suburban lack ("no history and no ideology") that obscures important

spatial histories. However, just as the previous chapter demonstrates the ways in which Coupland's representation of desert space both echoes and challenges dominant thinking—conceptions of the desert as blank tempered with those of the desert as spiritual sanctuary or wasteland—so too will this chapter confront the reiterative or problematic facets of Coupland's suburbias alongside the more subversive or transformational facets.

In the next section of this chapter, I will explain in more detail how I see the sense of lack manifesting in cultural expressions and scholarship. Then, I will turn to Coupland's work, first discussing his short story "1,000 Years (Life After God)," in particular its bringing together of wilderness and suburban space. While the text occasionally draws on stereotype, I argue that it ultimately widens discourses of suburbia by presenting it as a space that can be both wild and spiritual and by foregrounding its connectedness to other spaces. In the subsequent discussion, I likewise illustrate how *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998) both replicates and revises conventional tropes of suburban writing. I evaluate the ways in which the novel asks us to incorporate, again, the wild and the spiritual into imaginations of suburban space, and I read the text as a reclamation of the agency of the suburban subject. This section will also explore the novel's indictment of consumer capitalism and will argue that the novel's refusal to implicate the suburbs in this global phenomenon draws attention to the practice of using suburbia as a scapegoat for social ills. In the final section of the chapter, I address why reconceptualizing suburbia is so vital and reflect on the real-world implications of the way suburbia is expressed.

### **Perceptions of Suburbia's Lack**

In North America, from the earliest years of suburban development onward, the works of writers and filmmakers have frequently expressed the belief that the suburb is, indeed, lacking. From the array of suburb texts that have populated my own book- and movie-shelves, I think of Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), or Sam Mendes's film adaptation (2008), in which a Connecticut suburb becomes backdrop and catalyst for the dissolution of a marriage, both partners pushed into a debilitating apathy by their participation in what they believe is a cultureless environment. I also think of Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972), and its film adaptations directed by Bryan Forbes (1975) and Frank Oz (2004), in which the "homogenized" suburban community reaches its apparent logical conclusion as Stepford's female residents are murdered and replaced by robots designed to please their husbands, a narrative that powerfully

literalizes the cultural fear of suburbia coercively de-individualizing its residents (particularly women). To draw from examples more temporally proximate to the Coupland texts this chapter will discuss, *The Virgin Suicides*, both Jeffrey Eugenides' novel (1993) and Sofia Coppola's film (1999), depicts a stiflingly conservative suburban context, a place in which neither sex nor rock music are tolerated and in which unbearable pressures to adhere to normative behaviour prey on the subjectivities of inhabitants, reaching a climax in the suicides of the teenaged Lisbon daughters at the end of book and film. The intolerance to diversity represented in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999) sends similar messages about suburbia's underlying spatial lack, as the outsider protagonist of the former film is, by turns, cast out of and welcomed into the film's groupthink suburban community in accordance with their every whim, and as the inner turmoil between expressed homophobia and (largely) unexpressed homoerotic desire sparks murderous rage in a community member in the latter film. An established pattern in cultural expressions is thus that suburbia lacks and, in turn, produces lack in its inhabitants.

Likewise, suspicions about an elusive lack have anchored social criticism and scholarship on suburbia from at least the postwar period onward. The beliefs of suburbia's earliest detractors remain fixtures in contemporary scholarship and in the dominant geography of suburbia more broadly; these thinkers' warnings about lack thus continue to be highly influential in shaping responses to this space.<sup>4</sup> One of the most influential examples of scholarship that expresses the belief in lack as a feature of the suburb is Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and*

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<sup>4</sup> Of these early thinkers, some of the most frequently cited are Lewis Mumford, whose study *The City in History* (1961) damns urban sprawl while it also posits a culturelessness within suburban environments; William H. Whyte, whose book *The Organization Man* (1956) took the emerging corporate logic of the United States to task for stifling individuality and fostering uniformity alongside a suburbanizing landscape that was thought to be doing the same; and Betty Friedan, whose *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) expressed, among other ideas, a correlation between the landscape of suburbia and the felt lack within its female residents. In an article that outlines twentieth-century critiques of suburbia, fittingly entitled "How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community," Becky Nicolaides reports that, from critics' perspectives, "[i]t wasn't enough that people knew their neighbors, joined groups, and socialized regularly" in suburban environments—"something deeper, more civically-minded, and more inclusive had to be present for it to count as authentic community" (94). Nicolaides identifies the running thread of these cultural concerns: an anxiety that some deeper quality is absent from suburban space, whether that absence be perceived as one of culture, diversity, "authenticity," or otherwise.

*Fall of Suburbia* (1987).<sup>5</sup> His work begins as a diplomatic history of suburbia, but it ultimately forwards the same old view of suburban placelessness and culturelessness. Fishman is particularly disturbed by new forms of suburban development, which he regards as threatening to the *culture* of the city. While he offers some legitimate critiques, his language reveals latent assumptions about culture and authenticity, even embedded within his concerns about how suburbanization affects wealth distribution: “The wealth that postindustrial America has generated has been used to create an ugly and wasteful pseudo-city, too spread out to be efficient, too superficial to create a *true* culture” (199, emphasis added). Fishman’s use of the word “true” signals to readers that they are not supposed to regard the suburb as properly cultural.<sup>6</sup> The critic tries to solidify this point when he declares that “we must acknowledge the essential truth that the new city will probably never be able to compete culturally with the old centers”; there is a “cultural excitement that can only be found in the center” and not in the peripheries (202).

Fishman’s version of suburbia’s perceived lack provides a significant point with which to conclude this section: one of the potential explanations for this perception is that suburbia is continually understood as a function of its absences, particularly in comparison to the *presences* other spaces are believed to have—for example, a diverse population, a thriving art scene, or an established apparatus for community building. Jo Gill writes that the “assignments ‘no place,’ ‘Nowhere’ and... ‘a suburb and nothing else’ typify readings of the suburbs as the inverse or ‘other’ of the dominant metropolis” (54). We know what a suburb is *not*, and what it is *not* is the

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<sup>5</sup> I focus on Fishman’s work in my critique because his study is popular and continues to be used as a formative piece of suburb scholarship. Although his monograph is somewhat dated, the notion of suburban lack that it helped to authorize continues in more recent cultural and scholarly criticism, including James Howard Kunstler’s *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993); Richard Harris’s *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960* (2004); and Douglas E. Morris’s *It’s a Sprawl World After All: The Human Cost of Unplanned Growth and Visions of a Better Future* (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Fishman leans on the word *true* to demarcate what he sees as a real, authentic suburb from those environments that are *called* suburbs but do not share the appropriate features: “A true suburb. . . is more than the edge of a city inhabited largely by the middle class. It must embody in its design a ‘marriage of town and country’” (117). For Fishman, post-WWII spatial developments fed “the creation of a new kind of city, with principles that are directly opposed to the true suburb” (183). Fishman’s invocation of *trueness* reveals his investment in a scale of authenticity that tacitly organizes geography into value hierarchies, and these hierarchies can (through circulation) have real-world effects on the treatment and government of communities.

city. This comparison falls into what Carolyn Whitzman calls a “simplistic dichotomy” in which observers misguidedly weigh “densely populated, multicultural, and vibrant central cities” against “sprawling, boring, car-dependent suburbs” (7).<sup>7</sup> Given the symbolic value usually attached to each environment, suburban residents typically come up short in these kinds of comparisons because “[l]iving in the central city connotes progress, moral and physical health, and social responsibility” (Whitzman 2). Simply because of an individual’s built environment, then, they can be seen to lack progressive or morally “good” convictions or to lack an investment in public welfare. This dichotomy not only facilitates definitions of each space by negation of the other but also hinders us from moving beyond the perception of lack that plagues suburban discourse, just as it forecloses interrogative thinking about the ambivalences of urban living. In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how suburbia’s perceived absences, its perceived lack, inflect depictions of the space in a Canadian context and in Coupland’s work more specifically.

### **“1,000 Years (Life After God)”: A Tale of Two Pools**

Coupland has been a significant documentarian of suburban life since his earliest publications, with *Life After God* (1994) marking his first sustained foray into the geography of suburbia. Vancouver’s suburbs in particular figure prominently in Coupland’s writing, from *Life After God*, to *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *JPod* (2006), to non-fiction works such as *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland’s Vancouver* (2000), *Souvenir of Canada* (both the original book, 2002, and the film that came from it, 2005), and *Polaroids from the Dead*. This chapter focuses on two works from this body of writing: “1,000 Years (Life After God),” a short story from the collection *Life After God*, and the novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*. These two texts form the basis of this analysis for a few reasons. In both texts, suburban space is not just a neutral backdrop to the main action; it is engaged with by both author and character. The works tap into *and* loosen fixtures in the symbology of suburbia, making them ideal texts to demonstrate the ambivalences that texture the suburbs. Further, very little scholarship has been published about “1,000 Years.” This chapter therefore begins to mine, more thoroughly, this understudied text. *Girlfriend in a*

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<sup>7</sup> Mumford, perhaps the most famous of suburb-haters, engaged wholeheartedly in this dichotomous thinking. Nicolaidis paraphrases his characterization of suburban space: “In their dull and dreary designs, their dormitory nature, and their rejection of urban culture, suburbs were a negation of everything that was good about cities” (87).

*Coma*, by comparison, has received critical attention, but here I situate it newly within the discourse of lack that contextualizes its central geography: suburbia. In the vein of literary scholars Tim Foster, who argues that in *Microserfs* (1995), Coupland posits an expansive, complex “postsuburban spatiality” (302), and Andrew Tate, whose brief attention to this topic concludes that Coupland is “generating an ambivalent poetics of the North American suburbs” (*Douglas Coupland* 116), I will demonstrate, in readings that enrich the dialogues around Coupland’s complicated geographies, how each of these works offers a more imaginative and nuanced way of narrating the suburbs.

The Vancouver-based texts on which I have chosen to centre in this chapter also provide me with the opportunity to discuss, in the context of this dissertation on a Canadian author, the valuable question: *what does suburbia mean in Canada?* This question has been asked with surprising infrequency, and even then, usually not by literary or cultural scholars.<sup>8</sup> Suburban development is as central to Canada’s history and to current Canadian geography as it is to that of the United States. In 2013, around two-thirds of Canadians lived in the “here” that is suburban space (Gordon and Janzen 198), and yet it seems that Northrop Frye’s famous, nation-defining question “*Where is here?*” has not registered in the context of this significant national geography.<sup>9</sup> The United States has been the focal point of suburb scholarship, which has

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<sup>8</sup> Of the scholarship that attends to the question of Canadian suburbs, the majority comes from geography, history, and urban planning. See *The Second City Book: Studies of Urban and Suburban Canada* (1977), edited by James Lorimer and Evelyn Ross; *The Developers* (1978) by James Lorimer; *The Changing Social Geography of Canadian Cities* (1993), edited by Larry S. Bourne and David F. Ley; *(Re)Development at the Urban Edges: Reflections on the Canadian Experience* (2000), edited by Heather Nicol and Greg Halseth; and *The Rural-Urban Fringe in Canada: Conflict and Controversy* (2010), edited by Kenneth B. Beesley. Works that focus on individual case studies include: Harris’s *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900-1950* (1996); Carolyn Whitzman’s *Suburb, Slum, Urban Village: Transformations in Toronto’s Parkdale Neighbourhood, 1875-2002* (2009); and Alison L. Bain’s *Creative Margins: Cultural Production in Canadian Suburbs* (2013).

<sup>9</sup> This disproportion in the body of suburb research could stem from the assumption that Canadian suburbs are too similar to suburbs in the United States to make separate study worthwhile. However, scholarship shows there are marked differences between Canadian and American cities and suburbs (for examples, see Bourne and Ley 14-15; Gordon and Janzen 199; Harris 22). The disproportion could also be explained by how Canadian cultural identity has been so closely tied to wilderness and rural space. Canada as a suburban nation might not register as strongly, in the country’s spatial imaginary, as other spatial fixtures. Perhaps the fact that Canadian publics consume so much American content also contributes to the dearth in analysis of Canadian suburban narratives, given the popularity of works featuring American

engendered a latent association between suburban space and the United States, even when historical studies pinpoint the roots of suburban development in Europe, and even when the suburban experience is now widespread across the globe.<sup>10</sup> The association of the United States with suburbs is prominent in the immensely popular work of Robert Beuka, who characterizes suburbia as an expression, reflection, and shaping force of the culture of the U.S.A. Similar to Beuka, Jon C. Teaford reads the suburbs as a concretization of an American desire for freedom and the right to pursue one's own destiny—indeed, this is one of his book's three basic tenets (219). Even in a study that adopts a more transnational approach to suburbia, such as Huq's *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture*, cultural expressions from the United States are arguably given the most attention. And, indeed, many of the cornerstone studies in suburb scholarship deal almost unilaterally with the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, even in the inconsistent terrain of scholarship on Canadian suburbs, the sense of suburbia's inherent lack surfaces rather prominently. Well-regarded and widely cited, Richard Harris's *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban. 1900-1960* (2004) tells a story of the nation's suburbanization and attempts to debunk myths about how that suburbanization happened. Harris shows that Canadian citizens themselves, and not just commercial developers, participated actively in the creation of early suburban communities (5); that these suburbs were socially diverse, including working-class, blue-collar, and immigrant inhabitants (5); and that historical records indicate the "conservative lifestyle of domestic consumerism" was not always or even usually a part of suburban living (5). Harris's

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suburbs: novels by Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, television shows like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) and *Weeds* (2005-2012).

<sup>10</sup> Of the studies that name Europe as the origin point for contemporary suburbia, the most frequently cited is Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias*. Fishman posits Anglo-American suburban space of the 1980s (his time of writing) as a product of bourgeois society that can be traced back to spatial developments in England's history, from the weekend villas (40) and English gardens (48) of the eighteenth century, to the flight of the bourgeoisie, during industrialization, from crowded city centres toward more peaceful and healthful peripheral environments (82).

<sup>11</sup> Most notably: Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985); Joel Garreau's *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (1991); James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (1993); Catherine Jurca's *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (2001); Lynn Spigel's *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (2001); Delores Hayden's *Building Suburbia Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (2003); and Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue's (eds.) *The New Suburban History* (2006).



investigations constitute useful moves away from stereotype and misinformation, but, as the title of his monograph suggests, his argumentative arc ultimately asserts that the early diversity of Canadian suburbs is later supplanted by a “creeping conformity” or a sense of sameness (17). After 1960, he contends, suburban development in Canada ceases to experience significant changes (10). Thus, while he is cognizant of the misrepresentations that anchor histories of suburban Canada, Harris threatens to repeat them. To express current suburbia in terms of “conformity” is to prop up the perception of lack that hinders participation in the urgent re-conceptualizations this vital space needs.<sup>12</sup>

Coupland’s writing, as I have mentioned, is not immune from reproducing some of these typical features of suburbia’s perceived lack. Like the other stories in *Life After God*, including “In the Desert,” examined in the previous chapter, Coupland’s “1,000 Years (Life After God)” involves a time, a place, and a generation that, the book asks us to consider, are fundamentally defined by a *lack of deep spiritual attachments*. Coming at the end of the collection, “1,000 Years (Life After God)” constitutes the final flourish in Coupland’s orchestration of notes on a world that has left God behind for other pursuits. It seems meaningful that the story that most profoundly engages with suburban space is that which shares the collection’s titular phrase “Life After God,” as if Coupland is nominally signalling that suburbia is *the* post-spiritual landscape of our times.<sup>13</sup> *Life After God*, the title and story suggest, is a suburban life. Indeed, what room is there for spiritual impulses in secular suburbia? Contrary to the implications of this question, the

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<sup>12</sup> I do not seek to fill this gap in work on suburban Canada with my own claims about what suburbia means nationally. In Canada, as elsewhere, there are vast differences between suburbs across the country. A suburb situated within Metro Vancouver, for example, will be different in scale, economy, policy, culture, and demographics from the suburban neighbourhoods of Saskatoon or Regina. Therefore, in this chapter, I try to prioritize the local, by which I mean Metro Vancouver’s geography as represented in Coupland’s work, while staying attuned to how Coupland’s works help us reach nuanced understandings of suburban space more broadly conceived.

<sup>13</sup> I made a similar argument in the last chapter about the desert being the post-spiritual landscape in *Life After God*. By giving the desert story discussed in the last chapter (“In the Desert”) privileged space on the front cover of one major edition of the text, and by giving the suburbia story discussed here (“1,000 Years [Life After God]”) a privileged position as the titular and final story in the collection, as well through a visual parallel in the cover image of another edition of the text, Coupland seems to be bringing the two spaces together to emphasize their powerful similarities under the banner of a post-spiritual geography, or a life after God. Meanwhile, as my two chapters show, the stories themselves complicate the very notion of these spaces being somehow post-God.

story does not cast judgment on any perceived secularism in suburban living. In fact, I argue that the idea of suburbia being a land after God is overturned in deeper excavations of the text's ideas. "1,000 Years" minimizes the perceived differences between suburban and ostensibly "natural" space, and in so doing, it refuses to diminish the possibility that individuals can create spiritual, fulfilling, and socially connective moments as they dwell in the likes of suburbia. In my reading, the text allows us to see how meaning can be derived from the cul-de-sacs and lawns, the swimming pools and architectures of the lands called suburbia.

"1,000 Years" begins as the narrator, Scout, recounts his youth in a Vancouver suburb.<sup>14</sup> Starting with his adolescence, about fifteen years prior to the time of narration, Scout describes in often whimsical terms the life he lived alongside his close group of friends. As the story continues, Scout updates the reader on each of his friend's adult lives. Among them, one has contracted HIV and worries about "becoming nothing" (280)—the fear of being absent (itself a fear of lack); another is a divorced fitness instructor who uses alcohol to connect to the "magic" of her youth (281); and another drops out of university to take up tree-planting in Northern British Columbia (299). Scout now lives, the reader learns, in a Kitsilano apartment (328), unhappy with his life: "I have an unsecure and vaguely crappy job with an amoral corporation so that I don't have to worry about money. . . I have lost the ability to recapture the purer feelings of my younger years in exchange for a streamlined narrow-mindedness that I assumed would propel me to 'the top'" (309). He feels, it seems, as if the pursuit of wealth has sinisterly steered his life in unwanted directions. Interestingly, though, this pursuit of wealth is aligned with the period *after* Scout's suburban youth and not with, as is so often the case, the suburb itself. For most of the friend group, suspicions about living an unfulfilled life begin only after they have left their childhood neighbourhood.<sup>15</sup> It is in other spaces—bars, post-secondary institutions, offices,

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<sup>14</sup> Scout shares his name with the main character of a novel that could be seen as a significant intertext for this story: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Both texts are coming-of-age narratives featuring aptly-(nick)named main characters who search (or "scout") for meaning in a world where accepted beliefs, such as in God (as with Coupland's story), or in "natural" hierarchies of race and class (as with Harper's novel), are regularly shaken.

<sup>15</sup> Note, however, that Scout's friend Julie resides in a different suburb as an adult. The story takes care to note that she has a nice husband, two kids, and beautiful rhododendrons adorning her driveway (290), yet there is still a moment at which Julie tells Scout, as he drops her off at home, "Wish I could come along with you" (back to his city apartment) (291). To this, Scout replies: "No you don't. I'd give a million dollars to be able to stay here at this house with you—to be Simon for a day" (290). The exchange highlights, in short form, the range of emotions

Vancouver's urban landscape—that the characters most explicitly experience senses of *lack*. Consider, as another example, how “non-place”—a term often used to articulate suburban space—is used by Scout to instead describe his friends' current, adult lives, outside of suburbia (279). The term “non-place,” as theorized by Marc Augé in order to describe contemporary spaces of transit and consumerism, is directed unusually here toward quotidian spaces of their adult lives. This means that the suburb of their youth remains, in contrast, a site of deeply felt emotion (or “purer feelings,” in Scout's words) and, as I will discuss, social connection.

The opening scene of the story establishes these qualities and depicts a complex vision of suburban space:

As suburban children we floated at night in swimming pools the temperature of blood; pools the color of Earth as seen from outer space. We would skinny-dip, my friends and me. . . . We would float and be naked—pretending to be embryos, pretending to be fetuses—all of us silent save for the hum of the pool filter. Our minds would be blank and our eyes closed as we floated in warm waters, the distinction between our bodies and our brains reduced to nothing—bathed in chlorine and lit by pure blue lights installed underneath diving boards. Sometimes we would join hands and form a ring like astronauts in space; sometimes when we felt more isolated in our fetal stupor we would bump into each other in the deep end, like twins with whom we didn't even know we shared a womb. (271-72)

On the one hand, this passage includes brief references to materials—the pool filter, chlorine, blue lights (not even white lights, implying further distance from the “natural”)—that evoke suburbia's conventional representation as artificial and emphasize the built nature of the space. On the other hand, though, Coupland takes one of the most prominent and prolific images in the symbology of suburbia—the swimming pool—and invests the space with unusual meanings. The blood-temperature pool suggests not cold artificiality but, perhaps, comfort and warmth, as if the water is the same temperature as the blood inside the characters.<sup>16</sup> Here, landscape is body, body

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Coupland's characters express about suburban life and the resulting complexity with which the space is imagined.

<sup>16</sup> The reference to blood could also imply that something sinister is underway, right underneath the bodies of the children, collecting there like literal pools of blood. Blood, of course, can suggest danger or violence, or it can suggest that there has already been harm done, the injuries of suburbia encoded in the very word itself. Certainly, this sense of underlying violence is one of

is landscape, with no abrupt disconnection between the two. This expressed warmth is consonant with the peaceful sense evoked by still “innocent” youths cradled by warm pool water, the meaning corroborated by references to embryos, fetuses, fetal stupor, and the image of twins in a womb.<sup>17</sup> Suburbia—via its swimming pools—is nurturing its inhabitants, and it is shown to do so in a particularly maternal way, as the trajectory of the language maps the children’s metaphorical “growth” from embryos to fetuses and then twins in a womb.<sup>18</sup> The word “womb” is suggestive here, as it is elsewhere in literature, pointing to “home”; after all, the womb is the first physical home humans inhabit. That Coupland connects this womb imagery to suburbia is especially important because it pushes back against that strain of discourse in which suburban “homeowners” are seen as being “plagued by the problem of ‘homelessness’” (Jurca 4). There is a persistent belief that suburbanites, naturally, occupy houses, buildings that lack “emotional texture” (Jurca 5), while other people make homes, with all the emotional resonances that word has. Coupland’s passage turns suburbia from financial investment or property into nurturing womb or protective home.

The opening scene might also be read in terms of its spiritual or religious connotations. In what Tate calls an “almost sacred memory” (“Now—Here is My Secret” 333), the characters float upon water, they are naked, they are silent, they clear their minds, they close their eyes, they join hands. The nakedness recalls and suggests birth (or, given that they are teenagers on the cusp of adulthood, perhaps rebirth) in addition to symbolizing the baring of the body or soul, removed of material artefacts. Their silence, closed eyes, and clear minds evoke the rituals of prayer or meditation; the joining of hands magnifies this ritualism but also signals that this is not a solitary experience. These characters are meaningfully connected to one another, like astronauts who are dependent upon each other for survival. That the characters are described not

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the cultural anchors in expressions of suburban space: the concealed, bloody underbelly of suburbia, or the serial killer hidden amidst the neighbourly façade. However, since the rest of the passage emphasizes other, less foreboding readings of the space (the comfort implied in the womb image, the social connection signalled by the joining of hands, and so on), this darker reading is minimized in comparison.

<sup>17</sup> Notably, Scout continues to refer to his friends as “fellow fetuses” (279), at one point referring to “the other three fetuses who shared the swimming pools of my youth” (292). In this language, it is clear that the swimming pool looms large in Scout’s spatial imaginary.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, the gendering of suburban space here is not to be ignored: cold, consumer-capitalism, developer-style notions of suburbia are associated with the masculine, while these warm, domestic, family-style notions of suburbia are associated with the feminine.

just as fetuses but as *twins* in a womb, twins who can, in moments of isolation, seek comfort in one another, contributes to the insinuation of a blood-deep connection between kindred spirits: family, or close community. This passage thus works toward “filling” suburbia’s perceived lack insofar as it cultivates this meaningful, spiritual moment in something as seemingly bland and benign as an installed outdoor swimming pool, thereby exposing the arbitrariness in thinking that, for whatever reasons, suburban living is divorced from emotional texture, from meaningful social connection, from spiritual experience, or from the feeling of home.

It is true that the usual suspects in Beuka’s symbology of suburbia are also apparent in “1,000 Years.” At one point, Scout’s friend Julie, who lives as an adult in Pemberton Heights, a neighbourhood Scout explains is “about as suburban as suburban gets” (286), expresses sentiments that are entirely consonant with the fictional tradition of the stifled suburban housewife (*à la* Richard Yates’s seminal *Revolutionary Road*). She remarks, “[y]ou know, it’s a good life, Scout—but I get lonely here, too—inside the house. Don’t fool yourself” (291). Scout seems already to be aware of this duality. He characterizes his youth as “a life lived in paradise,” yet he adds that this paradisiacal quality “rendered any discussions of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics . . . existed elsewhere in a televised non-paradise; death was something similar to recycling” (273). Here, Scout expresses that his removal from political and social concerns defined his youth, a removal that seems to stem from the privileged social positions he and his suburban compatriots share.<sup>19</sup> These characters are not active political agents, as they experience politics only through their television—that quintessential symbol of suburban consumption and complacency. Even something as potentially momentous and profound as death is dulled within the language of more quotidian waste reduction practices. Any thoughts of the transcendental are cast away in what is again understood as a “life after God,” “charmed but without politics or religion” (273). Scout considers this: “I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God” (273). Here reverberates the belief that these individuals experience life in *muted* ways; something close to apathy is what Scout seems to perceive here. Their environment not only deprives them of God, of spirituality,

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<sup>19</sup> The fact that Scout and his friends grow up with access to private, home swimming pools further suggests that their version of suburban “paradise” emerges from their privileged social positions.

but of sincere feeling. Love is replaced by irony. Scout motions more precisely to this deprivation, this lack, again: “It is as though the coolness that marked our youth is itself a type of retrovirus that can only leave you feeling empty. Full of holes” (280). Ultimately, these moments come together to map, in part, a stereotypical narrative of lack onto Scout’s tale. That time of life that Scout describes elsewhere as a paradise, a charmed life, a golden life (273) is also subject to his soft critique. He worries about how the environment of his youth might have shaped his friend group, but even in that wondering there is self-reflexivity, an agency, a feeling of *being invested* that suggests something other than unthinking apathy is fostered by that very environment.

As the story goes on, the reader increasingly infers a sense of the complexity with which Scout—and, by extension, Coupland—imagines suburbia. Perhaps the way in which “1,000 Years” most strikingly nuances suburban space is by bringing it into relation with the wilderness Scout inhabits in the present day. Within a half-dozen pages of the story’s opening, the reader is told that Scout relates his personal history from a tent in “the wilds of Vancouver Island” (277). Scout comes to Vancouver Island only after flying home from a spontaneous trip to see the presidential inauguration in Washington, D.C. His reasons for going on both trips are similar. For him, the inauguration symbolizes a time of change, “of the world somehow becoming new again in the process” (317).<sup>20</sup> When he returns, he explains that he went to Washington because “there was something there [he] needed to see—evidence of a person or a thing larger than a human being” (338). Similarly, Scout is drawn to the forests of Vancouver Island because he wants to reclaim some larger feeling—the wonder of his youth and, in particular, of the fishing trips he used to take with his family in Northern British Columbia (343). In essence, this trip out to the woods compels Scout to narrate suburbia. Perhaps the same quest for meaning that motivates him to venture deep into the forest and to observe, in person, the inauguration also drives him to reflect on his suburban youth and to see if he can derive some larger logic from those reflections.

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<sup>20</sup> When Scout figures this political changeover in the United States as engendering a broader sense of change, he enacts the perceived slippage of U.S.-based cultural contexts into other geographies that I described with regard to suburb scholarship. Even though Scout is a Vancouverite, somehow the U.S. presidential inauguration feels to him like a (global) time of change. Likewise, even though suburb scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on U.S. geography, the principle behind that vast majority seems to have been that the effects of U.S.-based scholarship will resonate out to Canadian and other national contexts in ways that are assumed to be apparent.

In contrast to the comfort of his youth—“a life lived in paradise,” “a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven,” “our golden life,” as Scout variously describes it (and all in the span of one page, no less) (273)—present-day Scout perches on the dampened floor of his old Boy Scout tent. His “plastic ground sheet stinks vaguely of a fridge filled with time-expired yogurt” (277), and he attempts to keep warm and dry with an old army blanket (277) and a garbage bag wrapped around his clothes (350), despite the rain that persistently leaks into the tent and despite the cooling nightfall temperatures (277). Close to his body, he guards from the dampness his last pack of cigarettes, his one remaining comfort (277).<sup>21</sup>

It may appear that Scout’s present-day context is vastly different from the atmosphere of his suburban youth. Importantly, though, the story itself does not suggest that these two places—wilderness and suburbia—are irreconcilable, or that they are even all that different from one another, despite what might seem like obvious variances. In terms of suburbia’s reputation as a highly built, thoroughly manicured, consumer-capitalist environment, wilderness and suburbia might read like oppositional environments, depending on the onlooker. But Coupland brings the spaces together, I contend, in ways that relieve suburbia from the simplistic narratives that frequently circumscribe it, opening up the “wild” possibilities in suburbia’s bland façade.

Consider this example: waking in the morning, after a troubled, wet night in his forested tent, Scout hears the “sounds of birds,” sees “the sky is now clear and blue,” eats some Ritz crackers and a chocolate bar, and drinks water from a nearby stream (354-55). From this vantage point, he reflects: “I see the sun shining in the sky—a spinning ball of fire, like a burning basketball atop a finger. This is the same sun—the same burning orb of flame that shone over my youth—over swimming pools and Lego and Kraft dinner and malls and suburbia and TV and books about Andy Warhol” (355). Scout’s reflections demonstrate an awareness of the connectedness of seemingly disparate spaces, even across time. The malls and television and swimming pools of his suburban youth, the sunshine and streams and birdsongs of the Vancouver Island forest—in his reflections, these spaces are joined, even interdependent, since they rely on the same sun. That he likens this sun to a finger-spun basketball suggests, too, a

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<sup>21</sup> Given the conditions of Scout’s present-day situation, his construction of suburban youth, in the opening swimming pool scene, may be influenced by his physical discomfort in the wild. In other words, the dampened, cold, isolated deprivation Scout experiences in the forest may compel him to see his suburban youth, by comparison, as warm, comforting, and nurturing (physically and socially) because that is the kind of environment he most desires right now.

latent awareness that humans (or other agents and forces) are partly in *control* of what happens to these environments. The precariousness implied within that image suggests a similar precariousness in the relationship of these forces to the environment at large. At any time, with each subtle movement, the ball could drop. Scout's observations, even in this most seemingly minor of moments, demonstrate a nuanced understanding that suburbia and wilderness, cul-de-sacs and forest floors, are intimately connected—both in a symbolic, philosophical way *and* in a more logistical, ecological way.<sup>22</sup> Minimizing the difference between the two environments, the suburb is no longer that which paves over wild space but that which experiences the same pressures and problems, or is part of the same contexts, as wild space. In particular, this figuration transforms suburbia from its status in stereotyped portrayals as an insular environment—whose inhabitants are believed to have escaped societal attachments, gated themselves off from the ills of other communities, and secured themselves socially, financially, and physically through NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) attitudes—into a space understood *by its connections* to other environments. Frankly, discourse on suburban space lacks this understanding. The contemporary moment may be one that acknowledges transnational *cities*, but suburbia is not often viewed through the lens of those same global networks and connections—regarded, so often, as a national geography of the United States.<sup>23</sup>

The swimming scenes bookending the story foreground this connection between suburbia and wild space. As noted earlier, Scout begins his narration by offering an image of the characters floating like “embryos” in warm suburban womb-pools. Interestingly, his narration ends in much the same way. Now in present day, Scout comes to a nearby stream in the forest: “I peel my clothes and step into the pool beside the burbling stream, onto polished rocks, and water

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<sup>22</sup> The sense that seemingly disparate places are actually connected also comes out in the story's tacit and explicit references to American politics and culture, such as in Scout's trip to Washington for the U.S. presidential inauguration, or in the way Scout becomes a Thoreauvian figure, deliberately taking to the Walden-like space of a Vancouver Island forest as a kind of practice in self-reliance. By invoking these U.S.-American settings and canonical texts within this story about Vancouver suburbia, “1,000 Years” expresses a complicated, holistic spatial awareness of places (and people) being linked to and shaped by other places.

<sup>23</sup> Here, I must acknowledge the work of Keith Wilhite, who has made the original call for scholarship and the public to think of suburbs as regions, or to theorize them within the framework of regionalism. Wilhite still falls back to a national standpoint, however, when he urges that readers should be “reading the suburbs and suburban narratives for what they truly are: the endgame and final outpost of US regionalism” (618).



so clear that it seems it might not even be really there. . . . [T]he water from the stream above me roars. Oh, does it roar!” (357). He continues: “I submerge myself in the pool completely. I grab my knees and I forget gravity and I float within the pool and yet, even here, I hear the roar of water, the roar of clapping hands” (360). Like the opening memory, this swimming scene—which also involves Scout disrobing and submerging himself in what is tellingly called a “pool”—is tied up in the imagery of (re)birth through Scout’s nakedness and his baptismal submersion into the “roaring” water likened to clapping hands. When Scout later compares the sound of the roaring water to “the cheers of the citizens upon the coronation of the king, the crowds of the inauguration” (358), he connects this moment to other symbolic “births” that, with the submersion of an individual into a roaring crowd (like a roaring pool), mark the beginning of new eras. Tate reads this scene, too, as evoking how “Scout undergoes a baptism-like ritual; the narrative ends with an echo of its opening memory of the swimming pool” (“Now—Here is My Secret” 333). However, rather than highlighting the similarities in Scout’s story-opening and -closing experiences, Tate highlights the differences: “instead of a warm, suburban pool, accompanied by his friends, Scout plunges himself naked into a freezing and roaring stream, observed by no one but the reader” (334). That initial “suburban space of play,” Tate argues, is thusly “replaced with one of a painful rebirth in the unruly peace of nature” (334). While it is true that Scout confesses feeling coldness or pain—“I walk deeper and deeper into the rushing water. My testicles pull up into myself. The water enters my belly button and it freezes my chest, my arms, my ears and the roar is so loud” (360)—these feelings are, for me, overridden by the comparatively serene image of Scout floating in a fetal position, forgetting gravity’s pull, through water he compares metaphorically to celebratory clapping hands, and ultimately to “hands that heal,” “hands that hold,” and “hands that care” (360).

Ultimately, the paralleled scenes draw attention to rarely-heard-of possibilities within the space of the suburb, which is too frequently read as a place that lacks rather than provokes the suburban subject’s meaningful or spiritual encounters with her everyday surroundings—surroundings that may appear as artificial or terrestrial as pools. Because the narrator has these similar experiences in both locations—the suburb of his youth, the wilds of Vancouver Island—the story implicitly minimizes the commonly perceived differences between the two spaces. Thus, while suburbia has long been characterized by lack, defined almost by *absences* of

experience, “1,000 Years” suggests that, like any other significant space of present time, suburbia is home to huge varieties of experience, from the spiritual to the wild and beyond.

### ***Girlfriend in a Coma: A Tale of Suburban Apocalypse***

Much like “1,000 Years,” Coupland’s apocalyptic novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998) follows the lives of some friends growing up in the suburbs of Metro Vancouver and also invites a reading of suburbia that pushes beyond the pattern of lack. The novel is told from the perspectives of Jared, a member of the friend group who has died and is narrating from beyond, and of Richard, a main character who struggles to achieve contentment on Earth, as well as from a third-person omniscient narrator focalized through different characters at different times. The novel spans two decades, beginning around 1979, when the friends are still in high school. Their lives at this time are characterized by football games and trips to the nearby ski hill along with partying and doing what they call a “booze-and-cruise” (19) through local neighbourhoods. This carefree lifestyle comes to an end once Jared dies and another character, Karen, falls into a coma after what appears to be complications from taking Valium—though, all along, there is a sense that something more mysterious and fated is determining the characters’ lives, as Jared’s ghostly narration-from-beyond suggests from the start. Richard, Karen’s boyfriend, soon learns that Karen is carrying their baby. The baby is eventually delivered while Karen remains in her coma. Much of the novel thereafter follows Richard’s life as he negotiates being a satellite parent to their child, Megan, with Karen’s mother acting as Megan’s primary caregiver. Richard, like the rest of his friends—Linus, Pam, Wendy, and Hamilton—experiences some turbulence in his life. He is deeply unsatisfied working a stock exchange job he characterizes as “so dull that words to describe it escape” him (65). He starts drinking more heavily and, simultaneously, seeing his daughter less and less frequently (70). Along with his friends, Richard ends up living back in their old suburban neighbourhood around the time Karen miraculously awakens from her coma after nearly twenty years. The joy from that event does not last long, as within a couple of years of Karen’s awakening, people across the globe begin falling into comas of their own, from which they ultimately die. The suburban friends are the only ones left alive for one year. During that period, their time is spent rather frivolously, throwing gold off bridges (232) and having money fights (211), burning paper airplanes formed out of Warhol and Lichtenstein prints (211-12), and mindlessly watching video tape after video tape (211). This continues until Jared, the classmate

who now serves as a kind of messenger from the afterlife, instructs the friends about what they need to do to reverse the apocalypse comas and turn the world back around again, a resolution discussed later in this chapter.

First, let's consider the more conventional elements of Coupland's complicated geography: contributive as it is to a literary tradition of suburban writing, *Girlfriend* takes, from the conveyor belt of suburban tropes, a few familiar items. There are still plenty of references to lawns (203, 226, 247) and to "basements, stereos, and streetlights" (54) in and around "generic home[s]" (20); there is still familial barbecuing (41) practiced ritualistically before the sight of "trimmed hedges" (24); and there are still the same "roads and subdivisions" (121) whose patterns shape the stereotypical vision of suburban communities.<sup>24</sup> The oft-invoked sense of lack, too, rears its head in brief moments of description, such as when Jared calls his childhood neighbourhood a "sober, sterile Mountain suburb" (15), or when Richard characterizes the same neighbourhood as "cool and dry and quiet as a vault" (24) and then as "middle-class dull to the point of scientific measurability" (41). Likewise, Richard describes the homes in a nearby community as ones which "imbued their teen occupants with rigid sameness and predictability while offering no alternative" (20). And in another instance, as Richard walks toward the Cleveland Dam, he points out the "sterile, suburban tracts above, the driveways and flowers and dishwashers and bird feeders" (107).

These moments might speak to some of the landmarks within the symbology of suburbia, but they constitute nothing more than blips of passing scenery along the novel's twisty geographical route. Certainly, *Girlfriend* makes clear that the characters are not really confined nor stifled by their suburban environments, much as they might occasionally complain about the perceived dullness, sterility, or predictability of their surroundings. For instance, recalling the

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<sup>24</sup> It is telling that the characters seem best able to comprehend the landscape of the apocalypse by observing the unkempt appearances of lawns—lawns being, in their more manicured conditions, quintessential images of suburbia. For example, the day after the mass sleeping begins, Richard and Megan note that a "car is parked in the middle of a lawn" (203). Later, when Megan visits the house of a now-dead friend, she observes: "Its lawn, like all lawns, has turned into a scraggly meadow" (226). Likewise, Jared visits his old house and reflects: "My old front lawn is knee-high; all of the ornamental shrubs have browned and withered. Green ivy has persisted, overgrowing onto the front door, which is unlocked" (247). This repeated pattern suggests that the realities of the apocalypse register with the characters through images of unkempt suburbia. The apocalypse thus becomes the visual images of an unmown lawn; some overgrown ivy; a strangely parked car; an unlocked door.

constructed parallels between suburbia and the wild in “1,000 Years,” the wilderness beyond becomes a regular facet incorporated into the lives of the suburbanites in *Girlfriend*.<sup>25</sup> Growing up, the friends enjoy “traipsing through wilderness whenever [they] wanted” (57). Lois, Karen’s mother, even characterizes the group as “the children who grew up so wild inside the forest” (184). She recalls “what the realtor had said when [she] bought the Rabbit Lane house in 1966. [Her husband] had asked him if there were any community centers for the kids to go to. The Realtor laughed and pointed to the forest. ‘That’s all you need’” (184).<sup>26</sup> For Richard and his friends, it seems, there is no felt boundary separating their suburban homes from the forests beyond. They traverse and move between the two spaces as if the environments were congruent. In their younger years, the characters’ favourite activities include exploring “around the train tracks above Eagle Harbour,” as Richard’s first-person narration explains: “Track-walking was an activity we all enjoyed, as it combined the thrill of law-breaking with the beauty of the natural ocean views around us. An added bonus was the possible pulp-fiction thrill of finding a corpse hidden in the bordering shrubs” (58). These characters grow up as much in what some would call “the wild” as they do in “suburbia” (though even figuring those as separate spatial categories seeks futilely to stabilize them). Perhaps more importantly, the characters’ movements in and out of wilderness show how *mobility* replaces *fixity* as a felt quality of suburban living.<sup>27</sup> This is

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, part of the logistics of this incorporation of wilderness into suburban experience is that the characters grow up in West Vancouver and later inhabit places around North Vancouver, both of which have somewhat unique access to forested land. It is therefore important to keep in mind the local particularities, geographic or otherwise, that necessarily contextualize the evident nuance in Coupland’s expression of suburban space.

<sup>26</sup> That Karen and other characters live on Rabbit Lane is significant for at least two reasons: first, Rabbit Lane is an actual street in the suburb of West Vancouver, which means that one can reasonably read *Girlfriend* through its locatedness in real-world geography. Second, the word “Rabbit” invokes the quintessential American suburb novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960) (and its sequels) by John Updike, a novel that helped popularize the narrative of the unfulfilled-but-materially-privileged suburbanite. Thus, the home community of the characters in *Girlfriend* nominally connotes a linkage to the history of suburban literature while also contributing to that history in a way that plays with, rather than just reproduces, tradition and stereotype.

<sup>27</sup> This kind of voluntary mobility, in contrast to forced mobilities and mobility under pressure, is of course a product of privilege, and privilege (economic and cultural) is something that Coupland’s characters frequently have. Jared calls out this privilege in terms of mobility near the end of the novel when he tells his friends, “[W]e were all so lucky living when and where we did. . . . If we wanted to hop a jet to fly anywhere on Earth, we could. We could believe in anything we wanted. . . . I remember running through the neighbourhood in little more than a jockstrap. . . . I remember being in a car and thinking of a road map of North America and

especially significant for the female characters, Wendy and Pam (and Karen, pre-coma), since this mobility runs against the ongoing cultural fear that, as Beuka writes, “somehow the women of suburbia had become so enveloped within a stifling domestic sphere as to have lost. . .access to the world beyond the walls of the home” (150).

If *Girlfriend* and “1,000 Years” are connected by how Coupland utilizes wild space to inflect their portrayals of suburban life, then the texts might also be joined in terms of how they engage the notion of the suburb as a land after God, a post-spiritual wasteland. Within pages of *Girlfriend*’s opening, for example, Jared describes himself and his suburban compatriots as “empty pagan teenagers” (7). In another instance, Richard’s mother calls the neighbourhood “the land that God forgot” (41). Not long after that, Richard characterizes suburban houses as “homes for the prayerless” (20). And when Richard gets a job working on a television show about the paranormal, he reflects on his beliefs growing up: “Like most people I’d known, I was unconcerned with what happens to ‘me’ after I die. Implicit was a vague notion that I would somehow continue in another form and that was that” (91-92). In his construction, his childhood suburb is not the kind of place where “most people” would care to ruminate on the possibilities of the afterlife. There is an expressed lack in the spiritual or religious desires, motivations, and reflections of suburbia’s inhabitants. Hamilton, somewhat differently, believes that religious belief *used* to be an accessible reality, but is no longer viable to people of their generation (155). In other words, God was here before, but departed as the world re-emerged, suburban.

However, like “1,000 Years,” and in keeping with Coupland’s tendency to oscillate between troublingly conventional depictions of space and ones containing subversive possibilities, *Girlfriend* ultimately destabilizes the construction of the suburban neighbourhood as spiritual wasteland. In the novel’s case, it does this by explicitly inserting characters and forces from “the afterworld” (217) into the narrative, asking the reader (and, eventually, the characters) to invest in them as seriously as the reader might invest in the more straightforwardly realistic (or earthly) facets of the novel. Consider, for instance, that the first words of the novel are: “I’m Jared, a ghost” (3). From the beginning, then, using this ghostly narrative perspective, Coupland makes explicit that there are forces at work beyond the characters in the story-world, forces that surveil them and perhaps have influence over their goings-on, unbeknownst to the

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knowing that if I chose, I could drive anywhere. All of that time and all of that tranquility, freedom and abundance. Amazing” (267).

characters. When the characters complain that they lack attachments to some more profound meaning, to some spiritual logic, Jared's narrative perspective reminds readers that meaning has simply not been made available to the earthbound characters at those points in the novel. Richard and his friends may think that God has departed from suburbia, but in fact, the novel reveals that, as Karen says to Richard not long before falling into her coma, "God may be watching" even now (19). In short, the acknowledged existence of another force beyond the characters' earthly lives encourages an interpretation of their feelings of lack as temporary, fixable, and, to some extent, fated. That Ghost Jared begins the story, even when the narrative perspective moves away from him and to Earth Human Richard within a few pages, compels the reader to interpret the novel's landscape and narrative within the framework of an encompassing spiritual logic. Thus, the reader intuits that whatever suggestions of lack might structure the earthbound characters' expressions and lives ought to be regarded as blips on a route toward profound transformation rather than indications of a truly godless environment.

Often linked to the perceived lack of spiritual attachment in suburban space, consumer capitalism becomes, more precisely, the object of *Girlfriend's* indictment. The novel's project, shared with so many other works of suburban critique before it, seems to be to condemn the world's obsession with material artefacts, work, and efficiency. Scrutinized at different junctures in the novel is the American Dream, so long bound up in the imagery and discourse of suburbia, and likewise recognizable in the ideologies of meritocracy, industriousness, and success that characterize Canada's settler-colonial history. Pam once asks, "Where do we fit in, Richard? We're all working. We all have jobs but. . . there's something missing" (79). The belief that there must be something more than material security surfaces again in Hamilton's explanation of why he and Pam start using heroin again: "All of us—look at our lives. We have an acceptable level of affluence. We have entertainment. We have a relative freedom from fear. But there's nothing else" (95). Importantly, these moments come *after* the reader learns that Hamilton, Pam, Linus, and Richard have begun to enjoy some measure of material and reputational success in the film industry. They land stable jobs doing location scouting, makeup, and special effects. That they articulate this desire for *more* meaning beyond this material success, then, is exemplary of the novel's critique of the capitalist "fulfillment" that is so often associated with suburban living.

But there is no aspect of the novel where this critique comes through more strikingly than in Karen's trajectory from '70s teenager to comatose patient to observer of the contemporary

('90s) world. At one point, now out of her coma, Karen asks Pam if she is happy or fulfilled, and Pam responds in the negative to both questions (137). This does not come as a surprise to Karen; having missed nearly two decades, she senses that her friends are missing *something* from their adult lives. Focalized through Karen, the third-person narrative perspective gives the reader access to Karen's judgment about her friends: "They're stunted; lacking something. And they all seem to be working too hard. The whole *world* seems to be working too hard. Karen seems to remember leisure and free time as being important aspects of life, but these qualities seem utterly absent from the world she now sees in both real life and on TV. Work work work work work work work work" (143). Elsewhere, Karen herself voices this as "a *hardness* [she is] seeing in modern people" (154). This hardness is, to her, defined by a lack of hobbies; a desire to outsource child-rearing to other forces, such as video games and the educational system; an inability to be by oneself matched with a growing sense of isolation; a robotic schedule which cycles through patterns of work, television, and sleep; and an overdependence on technology (154). Karen predicts this state of the world long before; on the night she falls into her coma, she tells Richard her vision of the future: in this future, "'meaning' had vanished. And yet we didn't know it. We were meaningless" (12). When Jared eventually asks Karen, point blank, "What is the main thing you noticed—the major difference between the world you left and the world you woke up into?" (215), Karen replies, simply, a "lack" (215). Prompted further, she explains: "A lack of convictions—of beliefs, of wisdom, or even of good old badness. No sorrow; no nothing. People—the people I knew—when I came back they only, well, *existed*. It was so sad" (215). With efficiency being the name of the game in the modern world, Karen is compelled to wonder, "what's the point of being efficient if you're only leading an efficiently blank life?" (217). Through Karen, the novel puts forth the possibility that the characters truly *are* experiencing (perhaps unprecedented) feelings of lack. The novel asks us to see Karen's observations about work, efficiency, apathy, and the troubles of the consumer-capitalist system as legitimate because of her outsider's perspective on the world to which she awakens.

However, in terms of my argument that Coupland's work also *troubles* the perception of lack so often entrenched in writings about suburbia, it is important to keep in mind two qualifications: first, internally, Karen wakes up as essentially the same age as when she fell into the coma, her body having aged but her mind having stayed largely the same. Thus, she understandably views the world through the eyes of a teenager, and one whose comprehension is

circumscribed by the time she left behind. There is reason to be skeptical that her view of the world is more accurate than, for instance, the other characters'. Further, the fact that Karen is never the novel's first-person narrator, only a focalizing character through which the third-person narrative is sometimes told, also means that the reader does not get a reliable or thorough sense of her interiority, including of her assessments of the world around. The second qualification is that the novel does not explicitly connect suburbia to the consumer-capitalist practices it damns. The suburb is not implicated in the novel's judgments about the contemporary world; the space does not, as it so often does, become the scapegoat for the spread of perceived social ills. This tendency to "scapegoat" suburbia, Fishman writes, can be traced back to the 1950s, a time, he writes, that "saw a remarkable outpouring of polemics on the so-called 'suburban problem,'" polemics that were actually just "critiques of American culture in general, which focused on suburbia as a relatively safe target" (200). If a significant context for Coupland's novel is the history of suburban writing, then, by way of its difference from that body of work, *Girlfriend* becomes even more vital for its refusal to use suburban space as a scapegoat for the societal problems it condemns. Indeed, by *not* doing so, *Girlfriend* illuminates the very practice of scapegoating suburbia and shifts the focus, instead, to what seems like the actual problems of the consumer-capitalist system.

These problems—the tireless focus on work, the prioritization of superficial gain over meaningful social matters, the isolation and the challenges to community-building—are shown to be global, or at least not spatially circumscribed. Coupland is indicting something larger and more systemic in *Girlfriend*, something that is often ascribed solely (and mistakenly) to suburbia. While the novel is set in the suburbs of Vancouver, and in this sense its commentary can be assessed within a suburban framework, there are numerous moments within the text that expose similar social issues in other locales. For instance, one of the first sites implicated in Karen's observations about the transformations of the previous twenty years is not the characters' suburban homeland but the urban landscape of Vancouver itself. Karen observes that she "has seen the changes progress has wreaked. She's seen the city of Vancouver multiply and bathe itself in freighter loads of off-shore money. Blue glass towers through which Canada geese fly in V-formation, traffic jams of Range Rovers, Chinese road signs, and children with cell phones"



(153).<sup>28</sup> While the image of Vancouver bathing *itself* suggests some degree of self-destruction, it is “progress” that is most obviously blamed: the system of commerce and business, buying and profiting, building and development that catalyzes change across social and geographic landscapes, urban or otherwise. Likewise, when the reader receives glimpses of the apocalypse through Jared’s initial descriptions, it is not only suburban streets that are singled out (4), but also urban geographies across the globe: “In cities the snow sits unplowed; jukeboxes sit silent; chalkboards stand forever unerased. Computer databases lie untapped while power cables float from aluminum towers like long thin hairs” (4-5). The suburban cul-de-sacs, the unplowed city streets: there is a sense that space dwellers of all kinds are in this together, and no one space is more or less to blame for the “progress” (jukeboxes and chalkboards, on the seemingly benign end, but also, more suggestively, computer databases, power cables, and aluminum towers) that befell the world in the decades before this apocalyptic moment.

It would be remiss to forward a discussion of this sort without addressing this apocalyptic moment—without confronting the bare fact that *Girlfriend in a Coma* is a tale of suburban apocalypse. This fact might reasonably lead us to see the text within what Beuka calls the “reductive, two-dimensional vision of suburbia” (4) that characterizes the space as either utopian or dystopian (7). Paraphrasing Samuel Freedman, Beuka observes that the dark, nightmarish, or dystopian view of suburbia is old news, “yet another ‘clichéd’ vision of suburban life” (10). But, as noted in the discussion above, while Vancouver’s suburbia constitutes the setting for this apocalyptic narrative, suburban living is no more nor less implicated in the cause of the apocalypse as is city living. Even more importantly, the novel is actually a reversed apocalyptic tale, and the climactic moment of resolution occurs in suburban Vancouver. At this time, Jared instructs the characters that they must each go back to exactly where they were when Karen

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<sup>28</sup> Karen’s inclusion of Chinese road signs in her list of changes “wreaked” upon Vancouver exposes her investment in an Anglo, whitewashed vision of “ideal” Vancouver. She seems to associate this form of Vancouver with the past, even though the city has been home to Chinese inhabitants since its “official” inception. Karen being particularly bothered by Chinese influences on public space—she mentions road signs rather than, say, people—suggests also that she endorses the assimilation view of immigration, but it is ambiguous whether the text is asking readers to be critical of her or to take her words seriously; after all, with the road signs being put in the same company as “children with cell phones,” it is possible that the reader is meant to see this as a list of Objectively Bad Things. Of course, Karen also indicts “freighter loads of off-shore money,” and so the reader might interpret the passage as an indictment of transnational capitalism and an elegy for the old ways and flows that transnational capitalism forcibly altered.

woke from her coma in order for the apocalypse to reverse itself and for the world to go back to normal. Of course, he also asks that Karen re-enter and remain in her coma as a sort of sacrifice for this reversal (a request sanctioned, apparently, by forces beyond Jared's reach). In any case, these instructions necessitate a final return to suburbia—more specifically, Cleveland Dam, which is technically in North Vancouver but occupies a transitional space leading to the characters' West Vancouver childhood neighbourhood, and the Lions Gate Hospital, also in North Vancouver. More than a plot device, this requirement that the characters return to specific (suburban) sites in order for the world to be renewed also "locates" suburbia as the site of the solution to the novel's problem. This reversed apocalypse tale thus makes space in the narrative of suburbia for optimism and agency.

Because Jared also gives the characters instructions about how they must act going forward, agency becomes an integral part of the implied societal renewal at novel's end. A condition of their return to the world-before-apocalypse is that the characters must reject apathy, fly in the face of tradition and entrenched values, and constantly interrogate what they see around them. Jared explains, "Grind questions onto the glass on photocopiers. Scrape challenges onto old auto parts and throw them off bridges so that future people digging in the mud will question the world, too. . . . You can't even throw away a piece of litter unless it has a question stamped on it—a demand for people to reach a finer place" (272). When Wendy wonders what kind of questions, Jared tells her to "[a]sk whatever challenges dead and thoughtless beliefs," such as, "*Having become human, what is it that we are now doing or creating that will transform us into whatever it is that we are slated to next become?*" (273). This reversed apocalypse depends entirely on the agency and the motivation of the suburban subject. "If you're not spending every waking moment of your life radically rethinking the nature of the world—if you're not plotting every moment boiling the carcass of the old order," Jared tells the others, "then you're wasting your day" (274).

Suburbanites turned radicals, the cast of characters involved in *Girlfriend's* powerful conclusion put into practice how individuals can and ought to be the makers, or unmakers, of space. The novel thereby puts forth the promise of a world changeable and changed by the hands of people who assume the agency and the will to do transformative work. On a smaller scale, this promise points crucially to individuals' ability to furnish and refurnish suburban space in particular. This ability is especially vital in the context of troubling beliefs engendered by

suburbia's critics, who have historically, as Nicolaidis reports, "shared certain assumptions about the relationship of community to place" and have "generally embraced the concept of environmental determinism, that is, the notion that spatial form had a direct impact on social relations" (81). By foregrounding the possibilities for individual subjects to produce space, the novel puts into practice the power of the social factor in the trialectics of space developed by Lefebvre and Soja (outlined in the introduction to this project). So great has been the conceptual sway of a particularly elitist version of environmental determinist thinking on discourses of suburbia that Coupland's conclusion, here, serves as a refreshing counterpoint that argues for and privileges the agency of the suburban subject. In short, if the suburb is a space of lack—and, of course, the novel does much to trouble this stereotype—*Girlfriend in a Coma* argues that this lack is fillable by those who occupy and create the meanings of that space.

### **Conclusion: Why Suburbia Matters**

While it is virtually inarguable that the tale of suburbia's lack persists in cultural expressions, scholarship, and elsewhere, it is now productively offset by a strain of criticism that calls for more expansive, nuanced, and dynamic approaches to the space. Termed "new suburban history," this field includes a host of scholars who challenge long-held myths and rectify unsupported claims that have plagued suburbia's reputation since its earliest years.<sup>29</sup> The field constitutes an important first step in work that seeks to problematize longstanding orthodoxies within suburban discourse. Few of those who contribute to this field frame their efforts in terms of redressing the suburb's perceived *lack*, as I have done here. Even fewer use a literary or cultural studies approach. Many, like myself, strive to contribute to the field in ways that are attuned to the lived consequences of discourse on the suburb. Thus, just as the previous chapter

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<sup>29</sup> For examples of this work, see *The New Suburban History* (2006), edited by Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, or Webster's collection *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (2000). For an approach geared toward suburbia's architectures, see John Archer's scholarship, which demonstrates that "individual dwellings . . . [are] far from the monotonous monocultural constructs that they are often said to be" (359). For a feminist perspective, see Lynn Spiegel's damnation of the "century-long aversion to suburbia by social theorists who valorize urban life as all that is male, productive, participatory, and rational, while at the same time pathologizing suburbia as all that is feminine, consumer-oriented, passive, and irrational" (7). And for more on artistic endeavour and creative communities in the suburbs, see Alison L. Bain's *Creative Margins: Cultural Production in Canadian Suburbs* (2013).

argued that popular geographies in part determine how individuals use and occupy desert space (consider again, for example, the exploration reports authored by John Frémont that enticed huge numbers of people to settle in parts of the American Southwest), so too does this chapter conclude that the way the public imagines suburban space correlates with what happens in that space. And the ways we talk about the suburbs can also impact how *other* spaces are treated and experienced. The idea here, explored earlier in this chapter, is that all spaces are connected: what individuals do in one locale necessarily affects another. This is perhaps an easy-to-perceive phenomenon in the context of a crisis such as climate change, in which individuals intuit or come to learn that their collective actions in homes, public venues, and so on have consequences for rain forests, animal populations, and other phenomena across the world. A little more unusual, however, is to think of this connectedness in the context of suburban environments: why does it matter to other spaces that the suburbs are so commonly seen as lacking?

To answer this question, I turn briefly to “Harolding in West Vancouver,” a semi-autobiographical essay authored by Coupland from his collection *Polaroids from the Dead*. The piece is about Coupland’s youthful practice of “Harolding”—essentially, hanging out at cemeteries for fun. But the essay also includes moments that help to explicate the idea that the welfare of other spaces might be, in part, subject to the reverberations of how suburbia is publicly perceived. “Harolding” describes Coupland’s childhood suburb as having been “spawned, *ex nihilo*, from the West Coast rain forests mid-century” (101). The Capilano View Cemetery, located in the suburb, is described as “flanked, to the north and east, by a great West Coast rain forest” (102), which aligns with Coupland’s later reference to “the rain forest enclosing the graveyard” (103). These are brief, passing moments in a text that otherwise forwards a different agenda. However, the diction in these snippets is nevertheless telling. Specifically, the language speaks of Coupland’s tendency to conceptually link wilderness with Vancouver’s suburbia: *spawned, flanked, enclosed*. The forest breeds suburbia, is itself reproduced within it. The forest flanks the suburban cemetery, thereby *pressing* on suburbia’s sites of history, of death and memory. The forest encloses the graveyard, the suburb, as if wilderness were, indeed, developing or sprawling over suburbia. These verbs subtly form a kind of radical, ecocritical vision: the wilderness infringing on suburban development. Of course, this image runs contrary to the more conventional (and perhaps realistic) idea that development, often of the suburban type, paves over wilderness. Here, instead, Coupland’s wilderness is resiliently

and ominously present in and around development, and this presence is corroborated by the sheer physical force encoded in the verbs used. Coupland's diction suggests that the forest is there, under and around suburbia, enclosing even the suburban dead.

One could understandably read this part of Coupland's essay as a kind of speculative fiction. Much as the diction might suggest it, wilderness might not have such power over suburban development. The most useful analysis may be to read Coupland's language as an optimistic recalibration—along the lines of a fantasy—of the real and more contentious and violent relationship between Development and Wilderness. This analysis makes sense if one considers, as I do in the larger project here, that a unique capacity of literature, and cultural expressions more generally, is to speculate about what space could and should be, or to envision just environments and relations (in the vein of Soja's spatial justice, outlined in the dissertation's introduction). On that note, what does Coupland's language do, in these short snippets from "Harolding," to help move spatial thinking in the right direction—to move toward "producing" space (*à la* Lefebvre) in more ethically and environmentally sound ways? I argue that Coupland illuminates the possibilities of the following scenario: maybe if dominant geographies stop characterizing suburbia as something artificial (and therefore safe, controllable, secured from outside intrusions), and characterizing wilderness as something natural—something which is only ever "out there," and not also "in here," where humans live, in suburban and urban space and otherwise—then maybe real transformations toward spatial justice can occur.<sup>30</sup> Maybe then individuals will finally unclamp themselves from that "not-in-my-backyard" mentality that directs attention and resources, for example, to privileged urban and suburban space while other environments—wilderness, rural areas, and so on—are treated as minable, exploitable, even sacrificable because of their difference and distance from the "developed" communities in which so many of us live. The urgent reality is that public discourse (shaped through cultural expressions, scholarship, and so on) imparts often hierarchical values onto space. These values ultimately code which environments are worthy of protection, attention, care, and good government. To imagine a suburb flanked or enveloped by wilderness is therefore to shake up the manner in which these spaces are conventionally coded. This spatial fantasy is one of the most productive offerings of Coupland's work, and it is replicated within many of his other texts.

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<sup>30</sup> Here I gesture toward the scholarship of William Cronon, who will be discussed in the following chapter on wilderness.

Also at stake in the conceptualization of the suburbs is this troubling possibility: when the home-buying public comes to collectively perceive suburbia as an undesirable site of living, a site of lack (and earlier sections of this chapter demonstrates how this is a verifiable discourse in Canada and the U.S.), that same public starts to look elsewhere for more promising, “authentic” environments to inhabit. Even while individual suburbs have started to see a resurgence in popularity,<sup>31</sup> suburban living is still largely seen as passé in a cultural imaginary that no longer holds it up as the image of the American Dream. Potential home-buyers, renters, businesses, and developers have thus turned to colonize places in which they can secure more economic and cultural capital—a different, cooler version of the same Dream. This migration, of course, can fuel damaging strains of gentrification in which former suburbanites with relative economic privilege take up space in urban neighbourhoods that are often some of the only viable living possibilities for marginalized populations. In short, this example points to how collective feelings toward one space can have real and rippling effects on other, sometimes more vulnerable spaces. Because these feelings are so often mediated and shaped by texts, it is essential that cultural expressions are studied as part of the wider dialogue about space. My analyses in this chapter, I hope, enrich that dialogue, relieve suburbia from its reputational lack, and showcase the variety of suburban spaces. Encoding flexibility into conceptions of suburbia is vital, and as I have argued in this chapter, Coupland’s writing can help us with this task.

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<sup>31</sup> See PwC and the Urban Land Institute’s report on *Emerging Trends in Real Estate: United States and Canada 2020* for an explanation of “hipsturbia,” an emerging spatial phenomenon in which “‘cool’ suburbs,” most often “associated with metro areas having vibrant downtowns,” are increasingly populated by “‘hip’ residents” who are drawn to the suburbs’ combination of affordability with coffee shops, restaurants, bars, and other entertainment opportunities (15).

## Chapter 3

### **Wilderness in *Souvenir of Canada*, *City of Glass*, and *Polaroids from the Dead***

#### **Introduction: Ecocriticism and the Many Shapes of Wilderness**

Suburbia certainly looms large among the other features populating Coupland's imagined map of Canada, features that range from the more explicitly playful, like Capitaine Crouche (*Souvenir 1* 10), luggage as a grand prize (*Souvenir 1* 62), and piss and vinegar (*Souvenir 1* 86), to the more serious, such as Terry Fox (*Souvenir 2* 102) or war (*Souvenir 2* 122). But the space and concept that perhaps most characterizes Coupland's construction of Canada—its rural *and* urban spaces included—is wilderness. In this chapter, I take wilderness as my explicit focus but, in many ways, the preceding chapters were also about wilderness. Chapter 1 used Coupland's writing to discuss, in part, how the American Southwest desert region has been stereotypically figured as a “blank” wilderness, despite its history as a site for techno-scientific and military initiatives and despite Indigenous peoples having a long and vibrant history in the area. In Chapter 2, I explored how Coupland uses wilderness to nuance suburban space, particularly in the bookending scenes of “1,000 Years (Life After God),” in which the main character's experiences in suburban pool and forest water are paralleled, but also in *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), as the novel's characters experience wilderness as a typical element of their suburban existence. That those two chapters examine, respectively, desert land of the American Southwest and the suburban communities of Metro Vancouver suggests the breadth of ways in which wilderness can be represented, imagined, and interpreted, both in Coupland's writing specifically and in cultural expressions more broadly. Wilderness can call up visions as varied as the rolling sandscapes of the American Southwest; the National Parks beyond suburbia's backdoor; and the forests, mountains, and tundra of the Canadian North, to borrow a few of its recurring shapes from Coupland's oeuvre.

It is also the case that individuals, fields of study, nations, and interest groups often have different perceptions of what constitutes wilderness space; “the wild” is regarded differently by

governments, travellers, companies, activists, scholars, and so on. This makes wilderness an elastic, but also troubled, concept. In particular, as Sherene H. Razack writes, wilderness in settler colonial nation states, such as Canada, is troubled because it “is achieved [through] the eviction of Indigenous people” (“Colonization” 265). In material as well as conceptual ways, wilderness is a product of settler colonialism that relies on Indigenous dispossession and displacement: “Want a nice view?,” Razack asks, “A lovely hiking trail? A sustainable resource? Call a colonizer” (265). An awareness of the settler-colonial production of wilderness is not always, or even often, present in policies sanctioned by the governing bodies of these nation states, policies that tend to circumscribe what counts as “the wild” in colonially minded ways. Buell discusses an example of one “statutory definition” of wilderness in the context of the United States. This definition, he writes, is “codified in the US by the 1964 Wilderness Act” to “denote large parcels of basically undisturbed land without permanent human inhabitants,” “in order to create which [definition], aboriginal dwelling, hunting, and religious practices have often been abridged” (*Future* 149). This definition in the Wilderness Act, and Buell’s accompanying note about the overwriting of Indigenous presence through the agenda to stake out wilderness space, together show that wilderness’s many definitions are neither arbitrary nor harmless. Especially in the case of governments endorsing the use of space in specific ways, definitions (and therefore discourse, language, and literature) have real-world effects on actual humans and nonhumans whose lives, sometimes forcibly, are negotiated by words and concepts.

That wilderness is expressed and contested within these different arenas will not be surprising to those familiar with how the space has been theorized by literary and cultural scholars, historians, geographers, environmental scientists, and—centrally, for the purposes of this chapter—ecocritics. Ecocriticism is a field whose boundaries are difficult to identify. At its broadest articulation, ecocriticism is “the investigation of the many ways in which culture and the environment . . . are interrelated and conceptualized” (Soper and Bradley xv).<sup>1</sup> As the language “many ways” suggests, ecocritics come from many different disciplines. Sometimes their scholarship takes language, narrative, rhetoric, or metaphor as its focus, or the tangible

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<sup>1</sup> Soper and Bradley’s definition of ecocriticism is representative of many others’ in the field. Most notably, their definition recalls Cheryl Glotfelty’s in the introduction to the early, field-influencing collection *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996): “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii).



qualities of the physical environment, or a concept, a behaviour, a being, a phenomenon. While its history as a scholarly discipline has thus been open and dynamic, that same history has also been bound up in sometimes contradictory agendas. Among other competing aims, ecocriticism has sought to “celebrate nature” (Garrard, “Introduction” 1); to preserve nature for the purpose and desire of humans; to preserve nature for its own sake; to evaluate the meanings of nature; and to assess what futures might be viable within the conditions of nature that human and nonhuman forces construct, all the while “querying ‘nature’ as a concept” (Garrard, “Introduction” 1) and investigating how and if it is separate from “culture.”

In this chapter, I do the work of ecocriticism by bringing Coupland’s writing into relation with ongoing scholarship on and discussions of wilderness. Unsurprisingly, the wild is everywhere in ecocriticism. Perhaps this is because it is so often figured as that space humans can still protect, in opposition to those spaces seen as “already done for,” such as suburbs or densely developed industrial areas. Nevertheless, wilderness as a concept and a category has had a long history in environmental scholarship and thinking; Greg Garrard locates its popularization in the eighteenth century (*Ecocriticism* 66). From that time onward, wilderness has taken on many manifestations. It is, as Garrard notes, the most visually recognizable form of the sublime (as will be discussed later in this chapter) (*Ecocriticism* 70). In Cronon’s exploration, wilderness adopts multiple roles: as the last frontier, particularly from a settler-colonial perspective (69); as a “waste” (70), especially in this time of humans’ increasing subjugation to the pressures of ubiquitous capitalism; or as a “choice for elite tourists” (78) who want to experience, for leisure, the “dream of an unworked natural landscape” (80). And, perhaps most prominently, historically and now, wilderness has been figured as what influential ecocritic Lawrence Buell describes as a “*terra incognita* . . . the abode of beasts rather than humans: a place where civilized people supposedly do not (yet) dwell” (*Future* 149). On this last point, Buell explains, the terms “wild,” “wildness,” and “wilderness” have come to “share the sense of ‘undomesticated’” (*Future* 148) or, in more racially loaded terminology used harmfully to describe Indigenous peoples in colonial discourse, savage. In the context of settler-colonial nation states, Razack calls this association between the wild and the undomesticated a product of “Europeanization,” in which “spaces are created for modern man to know his modernity” (266): wilderness areas are forcibly constructed through white settlers’ desires to create spaces in which they are reminded that they are not wild, but civilized.

Importantly, this sense of wilderness as the undomesticated, messy counterpart to urbanity's civilized, ordered presence is not shared by or replicated in most contemporary ecocriticism. Ecocritics, contrastingly, often try to *relieve* wilderness from the recurring patterns that reduce the space to stereotype in the public's imagination, in part because the "trouble" with the concept of wilderness, as William Cronon famously argues, is it actually "poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism" (81) because it "embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural" (80). Thus, even if wilderness might historically signify the vision about which Cronon worries—the sublime, the frontier, the wasteland, the wild space of play, the unmapped terrain or *terra incognita*—ecocriticism, especially in recent years, has sought to show the inaccuracy, or at least the constructedness, of this very vision. One of the many aims of the field, then, has been to trouble the notion, in the vein of Cronon, that wilderness must always be "out there"—atop the sublime mountain, beyond that last frontier—and humans always "in here," in the built, quotidian world many of us inhabit (90).

In examining Coupland's production of the space, this chapter will interrogate those more stereotypical meanings attached to wilderness—meanings that have forged the popular or dominant geographies of wild space—and will join the efforts of Cronon's ecocriticism to assess how Coupland's texts might offer a more troubled view of the wild. Much like the other chapters in this dissertation, then, in this chapter I acknowledge that Coupland's work is not faultless in its portrayal of this space; certainly, his writing repeats some of the more reductive patterns of wilderness I list above, just as his employment of the sense of lack in suburbia, or of the blank space trope in representations of the American Southwest deserts, introduced similar reductions. Nevertheless, there are important nuances in the way wilderness emerges in his texts, nuances that render Coupland's a richly complicated geography of the wild.

An ecocritical perspective is fitting for this chapter not just because wilderness is frequently studied from that perspective, as a space that easily opens itself up to ecocritical approaches, but because it seems about time Coupland's works are brought more seriously into relation with the field of ecocriticism. A few critics have connected Coupland with ecocritical thought in the more recent years of Coupland scholarship, but his name is rarely seen in the same company as the "eco" prefix.<sup>2</sup> In other words, while Coupland is read within the context of other

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<sup>2</sup> David Dowling reads "Coupland's environmentalist aesthetics" in relation to the Thoreauvian impulse to see "beauty in postpristine nature" (235); Jenny Kerber's article on *Generation A*

writers who are more seriously regarded as “environmental,” such as Henry David Thoreau (Dowling 234-35, Tate 125) or Rachel Carson (Dowling 243, Kerber 324), he is infrequently deemed an explicitly environmental writer whose work merits being read as such on its own terms.<sup>3</sup> Kerber rightly notes that Coupland is not known for his “ecological earnestness” (317), despite, for example, the explicitly environmental agenda in his *Souvenir* series, or the “vague sense of eco-anxiety” throughout *Generation X* and some of his other works (Kerber 317), including *Girlfriend in a Coma*, or the more overt concern with Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) in *Generation A*. While there appears, to me, many conventionally wild settings in Coupland’s oeuvre, perhaps Coupland is not typically considered an environmental writer because of the prominence of urban space in his books. This kind of space, according to the popular but troubling vision Cronon identifies, might be written off as too human-made to warrant ecocritical endeavour. In this one can recognize the same wilderness/civilization binary that sees one kind of space (for example, a forest) as requiring ecocritical critique while another (for example, a city) is removed from the ecocritical lens, to the detriment of the field. However, this way of thinking does not align with Cronon’s brand of ecocriticism, which puts less stock in the separation of spaces and thus sees the value of ecocritical approaches used toward *all* kinds of space, from the “tree in the garden” (Cronon 88), to the suburban lawn (Morton 89, 114), to all the “wildness in our own backyards” (Cronon 86).

It is in this spirit that I read Coupland as an *eco*-writer. I hope positioning his work in this way will allow me, along with other critics, to avoid pigeon-holing his writing in ways that foreground only what readers might expect to find in a Coupland text and to move toward creative, generative interpretations of his spatial politics. Interpreting Coupland in this way, too, might open up the possibilities of what counts as eco-writing in Canadian literature and culture.

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(2009) wonders how the book’s form introduces the reader to new possibilities for imagining ecological solutions; and Cheryl Lousely’s chapter shows how *JPod* (2006) makes explicit ecocritical concerns in that it “highlights the market for imagining the destruction of the world” (156) through a piece of software the characters encounter that allows users to “play-destroy” the world by puppeteering ecological and other catastrophes.

<sup>3</sup> I am being consciously flexible by writing that these critics “connect” Coupland to other environmental writers. Sometimes these connections occur in peripheral, subtle ways, as in the case of Kerber’s article, which does not explicitly link Carson to Coupland so much as it uses Carson’s dedication of *Silent Spring* (1962) to Albert Schweitzer as context for an argument about the need to accurately imagine ecological consequences, an argument she brings into conversation with the form of *Generation A* (324).

Perhaps viewing Coupland's work as environmental writing can change the very nature of what that kind of writing can be, can represent, can put forth: a realistic, informed environmental consciousness, for instance, that may contain contradictions but at least is situated in both the quotidian lives of contemporary beings *and* aware of historic and enduring environmental concerns.

In the two sections following this introduction, I will turn my attention to the complexities in Coupland's versions of wild space. The first will take as its focus the two photo-essay books and one documentary film that comprise Coupland's *Souvenir of Canada* series, demonstrating how Coupland binds together wilderness and Canadian identity in the seeming service of ecological "good." I show how Coupland, on one end, reinforces the stereotype of wilderness survival being integral to Canadian culture, but on the other end, also participates in a revision of that popular, masculinist version of a wilderness-informed Canadian identity. This section also discusses how Coupland refigures Canadian citizenship so environmental stewardship becomes a necessary aspect of being a Good Canadian. Coupland compels his reader, I argue, to identify with his expressed ecological values by establishing "self" and "other" dynamics through his text. After widening the discussion to consider how Coupland's work illustrates and then problematizes the ways humans define themselves and their communities through wild encounters, I end this section of the chapter by considering how Coupland's bird's-eye perspective as a traveller-by-plane, throughout much of the *Souvenir* series, might explain why he constructs wilderness in the abstract and sometimes totalizing ways that he does.

The second major section of the chapter joins personalized travel guidebook *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* (2000) with short story and photo-essay collection *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996) to explore how Coupland uses wilderness to conceptualize Vancouver's urban landscape and to show how this conceptualization helps him bolster the master narrative of Vancouver as the ideal city. In the context of Vancouver wilderness, I contend, Coupland invokes the tradition of the sublime and uses hyperbolic language that sometimes suggests wilderness is incomprehensibly vast, infinite, and timeless, but is also comparable to empty space and reducible to the signifier "nothing." I assess the problems with such diction, focusing on how it treats nature as "other" in ways that risk establishing a civilization/wilderness binary that bolsters the Vancouver master narrative at the expense of the lands around. To end the section, I study important moments from the books in which these

reductive portrayals are called into question, unsettling the Vancouver master narrative that depends upon a simplified vision of the wild. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of apocalypse and some brief notes toward just ecological futures.

### **Wilderness and Canadian National Identity: The *Souvenir of Canada* Series**

Coupland's *Souvenir of Canada* series includes two books (*Souvenir of Canada* [2002] and *Souvenir of Canada 2* [2004]) and one film (*Souvenir of Canada* [2006]).<sup>4</sup> As one might expect, given the titles of each work, the series functions as a "souvenir" or a piece of cultural memorabilia encapsulating the spirit of Canada as Coupland sees it. The two books combine short essays on topics as varied as Sudbury, treeplanting, inuksuit, and the letter "zed," alongside anecdotes and memories from Coupland's life, still-life and landscape photographs, depictions of Canadian commercial products, and other forms of art. The film, too, is structured into titled sections akin to essays; it weaves these mini "video essays" together with Coupland's personal narrative in the style of a scrapbook (Lacey). While it is not within the scope of this project on literary and written depictions of space to do a comprehensive analysis of the images, or visual elements, of the *Souvenir* series, it is important to note that these visual elements are central to how all three texts mix different genres, drawing from the traditions of the travel guide or documentary as well as from autobiography, history, journalism, environmental writing, and other forms of creative non-fiction.

The mixture of autobiography with travel guide most obviously defines the series, as Coupland gives his reader and viewer a very specific glimpse into his version and vision of Canada. The *Souvenir* series includes numerous stories from Coupland's past and about his family, descriptions and pictures of his art projects, references to moments in history that are particularly significant to him or were important in his youth, and ruminations on topics that may not necessarily be recognized as staples of the nation but in which Coupland is interested, such as the Oookpik sealskin owl plushies from the '60s (*Souvenir 1* 83), the Robertson screwdriver (*Souvenir 2* 38), or the popularity of the name Doug in Canada (*Souvenir 1* 23). *Souvenir 1*'s dedication to Coupland's father, "a more Canadian man is harder to imagine," gestures toward the book's personal dimension even before the text proper begins. In the style of a story shared

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term "series" throughout the chapter to indicate that the three works are related and cover similar subject matter, and not to suggest they are intended to be consumed serially.

informally between friends, the *Souvenir* books feature disclaimers, asides, and other markers of casual and oral communication, such as seemingly on-the-fly revisions. Coupland qualifies recalled “facts,” for example, by adding the caveat “[a]t least that’s what I remember” (*Souvenir I* 71). This sense of personal disclosure is echoed in the *Souvenir* film. There are times when the camera lingers on Coupland and his parents speaking in what seem like candid ways about his writing and his art. At one point, Coupland’s father casually refers to something from Coupland’s book *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Interrupting his father’s remark, Coupland immediately expresses genuine surprise about the bare fact of his father having read the novel, suggesting, however truthfully, the two have never broached the topic of his writing, or at least this particular work, before. Trust us, this scene says: what happens here is *real* rather than contrived. These elements of the books and film establish the sense that the feelings, thoughts, and interactions Coupland presents throughout the series are genuine, thereby authorizing *Souvenir*’s autobiographical function.

Yet, ostensibly, these works are more about Canada than they are about Coupland; the title is not *Souvenir of Coupland*, after all. There lies the central duality of the series. *Souvenir* rides the line between Coupland and Canada, autobiography and travel guide, the individual and the national. While the first book is marketed as a “very personal X-Ray of Canada,” the very same sentence also touts it as a book Canadians can “hand to visitors and say, ‘Here. This is what makes us, us’” (*Souvenir I* inside front flap). On one hand, then, the series posits itself as “personal,” but on the other hand, it posits a national “us” to be articulated and disseminated through its scenes and pages.<sup>5</sup> These sides need not be irreconcilable, and together they contribute to how, as Ryan Melsom describes, Coupland “refuses to see the country as something independent from the personal experiences of it” (“A (Queer) Souvenir”). *Souvenir* is upfront

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, there is no Canadian “us” that the *Souvenir* series could fathom to encapsulate. Thus, while the language in the snippet included above might suggest otherwise, Coupland’s construction of Canada is obviously, and straightforwardly, not a comprehensive one. Coupland rightly maintains that comprehensiveness is not the goal: “you can’t sum up a whole country,” he says, “and any attempt to successfully pin Canada down would be like trying to grasp at water” (*Souvenir* film). This statement might register like a bit of an excuse to those critics who perceive omissions, problems, and, as Liam Lacey puts it, “coercive generalizations” within the series’ depiction of Canada. And yet, in my reading, the explicit presence of autobiography in the series contextualizes these generalizations or omissions by foregrounding the spirit of the particular and the individual—a spirit that energizes the series as much as, or perhaps even more than, the will to narrate a collective community.

about the perspective it takes—that is, Coupland’s—and it invests in the belief that the personal is integral to representing the communal.

At this juncture, the question becomes: where does wilderness fit into this core duality of Coupland’s *Souvenir* series? For those familiar with the cultural and literary history of Canada, it will not come as a surprise that wilderness is very much bound up in Coupland’s construction of national identity: “In Canada, you simply cannot ignore the wilderness—and all Canadians have a story of an encounter with it. The encounters are unique, yet they bind us together” (*Souvenir I* 130).<sup>6</sup> The tying together of so-called wild space and the Canadian subject extends back to the country’s political inception. At the cost of Indigenous peoples who often regarded and used land in a way that did not accord with settlers’ ideas of what “the wild” was and how humans should approach it, the colonial project in Canada saw the taming of wilderness, in particular, as fundamental to the spirit of the community that gradually came to form Canada. Donna Bennett and Russell Brown explain that early Canadian exploration literature disseminated stories of “extreme privation in what seemed to Europeans a virtually uninhabitable landscape” (101). Later, settlement narratives such as Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) took up the thematic torch of wilderness survival, often featuring “hardship and struggle against nature,” but with the difference that they were “narrative[s] of the ordinary” which told of “repetitious combat against the environment” (Bennett and Brown 101). In the 1970s, “Canadian cultural nationalism deployed wilderness as a mark of difference as well as an article of ecological faith” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 86), and, since then, much of Canadian literature has centralized the perceived relationship between Canada’s people and its wildernesses—so much so that Margaret Atwood famously posited the struggle against wilderness as one manifestation of the chief theme of

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, especially for a project on a writer who is so frequently situated in between Canadian and American bodies of literature, that wilderness has also long been regarded “as a touchstone of American cultural identity” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 74). “American criticism,” Buell notes, “has repeatedly stressed the historic importance of . . . wilderness themes to the American imagination” (*Environmental Imagination* 15). More broadly, Cronon explains, wilderness at one point became “the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be an American” (76); “[t]o protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect [America’s] most sacred myth of origin” (77). My discussion in this chapter necessarily focuses on the importance of wilderness to the specifically Canadian cultural imagination because the texts with which I work (*Souvenir of Canada*, *City of Glass*, and selections from *Polaroids from the Dead*) foreground settings in Canada.

survival in Canadian writing.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley have alternately named this theme the “enduring stereotype” of Canadian literature. They write that Canadian literature “revolves around descriptions of nature,” of “rugged mountains, whirling snowstorms, and desolate prairies” (xvi). Whether one sees it as a troubling stereotype, a theme of cultural expression, a lived reality experienced by explorers, settlers, and contemporary space dwellers alike, or however else it might be figured, the connection between Canadian identity and wilderness is a powerful and enduring one.

Even for Coupland, an author who self-professedly ignores the conventions of CanLit and who writes against the grain of national culture (see his “What is CanLit?”), the equation between wilderness and Canada surfaces in his work.<sup>8</sup> In *Souvenir of Canada*, it is mostly true that, as Liam Lacey describes, Coupland “adheres to the convention—a belief, held among anglo-writers from cottage-going families—that Canadians’ souls are tied to an identification with encounters with ‘the wild.’” But I give more credit to Coupland than to say he is merely adhering to a (privileged) writerly convention; with Ryan Melsom, I am wary of seeing the *Souvenir* series as primarily participating in a “reductive nationalism” that simply ties wilderness to national identity, because such a viewpoint “lumps Coupland in with Canadian critics from the fifties, sixties, and seventies, who imagined one’s relationship to wilderness as the quintessential Canadian producer of meaning.” However, it is true that Coupland’s association of the nation with its wildernesses is easy to find in the series, and might sometimes run the risk of being

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<sup>7</sup> In the new introduction to the 2004 edition of *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood holds up *Souvenir I* as a book that can “testify to [Canadians’] continuing interest in our own field markings” (13). This nod to Coupland is made more amusing by the fact that, just pages earlier in the same introduction, Atwood writes assuredly that what she “set out to prove [with the first edition of *Survival*] has been proven beyond a doubt: few would seriously argue, any more, that there is no Canadian literature” (11). Meanwhile, in a 2011 interview with Brenna Clarke Gray, Coupland remarks, “I feel sorry for young writers out there who think that CanLit still exists. Please tell me they don’t exist. Please tell me this. Because it doesn’t exist” (258). Atwood might think she has Coupland’s work down, that she can interpret him within the same patterns established by her foundational work of criticism, but Coupland’s remarks suggest his work, like Canadian literature itself, like Canadian identity itself, will continue to evade the assured critic’s grasp.

<sup>8</sup> Melsom explains, too, that Coupland has historically had “difficulties in his relationship with Canadian letters and institutions at large” (“A (Queer) Souvenir”). These difficulties, Melsom argues, play out microcosmically in the sometimes tense and bumpy family dynamics between Coupland and his family in the *Souvenir* film.



articulated too conventionally, or as sentimentally as Lacey's reference to "Canadian souls" implies.

Take, for instance, the stereotypical duality of wild space as it is summed up by Coupland's cautionary remark, "while the wilderness wants to enchant you, it also wants to kill you" (*Souvenir* film). Like Atwood's *Survival*, the *Souvenir* series figures the wild, at several points, as that which defines Canadians because they must endure it. Coupland tells stories of human defeat against ecological forces, such as one about a buried hiker in an avalanche (*Souvenir* 1 126) and another about a crashed flight on the mountains adjacent to North Vancouver, bodies only found years later buried in the land (*Souvenir* 1 126). "In Canada," Coupland writes, "the wilderness is out there—millions of square kilometres of it—and it likes to mess with your mind. . . . It seduces you with beauty and calm—that's the bait. You have to be careful with the wilderness, because one false step and you're a pile of blood, hair and bone. Or you're vanished" (*Souvenir* 1 130). Consider, too, how Coupland concludes powerfully that water "defines our nation" (*Souvenir* 1 122). He writes:

Water scours and pummels and licks and crushes and floods and buries Canada, and has done so for billions of years. Dealing with water's eccentricities in all its forms is the hallmark of Canadian history: canoeing in pursuit of pelts, seeking the Northwest Passage, building lakeside trading forts, constructing dams and canals—as well as enduring natural disasters like hail that flattens the crops, floods that obliterate towns, and in 1998, an ice storm of Biblical proportions that coated much of Ontario and Quebec in a glassy thick crust. (*Souvenir* 1 122)

It is a kind of *wild* water Coupland imagines here; that much is clear from his verb usage. The passage emphasizes water's power over the land and its people, thereby replicating the longstanding trope of survival in the face of nature as central to Canadian living. Water threatens Canadians' livelihoods, economies, movements, and homes, and that threat defines the citizens. In other words, the water Coupland describes is a force against which one has to survive—against which one is pummelled and crushed and obliterated. The drama of the language (billions of years, the hallmark of Canadian history, a storm of Biblical proportions) suggests how forcefully this equation between the wild and Canadians has taken hold in the minds of those who invest in it.

The essentialized Wild Canada appears elsewhere in the *Souvenir* series, too, and sometimes even just in passing. At one point, Coupland identifies blackflies as another defining reality of the nation (*Souvenir 1* 30). At another point, in a section on the Canadian landscape painters the Group of Seven, Coupland refers in particular to the artists' evocation of "Canada's rugged and often brutal wonder"—its wilderness (*Souvenir 1* 48). Even Canadian food, in Coupland's eyes, is compared to the outdoors, as Coupland likens it to "camping trip provisions" (*Souvenir 1* 10).

But there are two important pieces of the series that call into question any easy, totalizing equations between Canadian identity and wilderness. Both pieces are autobiographical in nature and have to do with how Coupland positions himself in relation to his family, the series' ostensible stand-in for the nation, and to representatives of the Canadian marketplace. In the first case, from the *Souvenir* film, Coupland recalls how hunting and fishing trips into the wild with his father and brother became a central part of his childhood. Perhaps these trips are meant to emblemize Canadian rites of passage, given that guns and ammo (*Souvenir 2* 28) and fish (*Souvenir 2* 24) are part and parcel of the version of Canadian identity Coupland's series describes. However, for Coupland, these trips "often felt like prison," and he eventually refrained from going on them (*Souvenir* film). In this way, Coupland distances himself from the trips to the wild that are so central to his father and to his brother's upbringing. It seems that Coupland might not connect to wilderness, might not feel drawn to it, in the way that his family does. Given that they represent Coupland's idea of the "token Canadian family," the distance established between Coupland and his family, in this aspect, positions Coupland as an outsider to the rituals of a nation that, now as in the past, is tied to the ethos of living off the land. This part of Coupland's narration recalls what Melsom sees as Coupland's "unease when it comes to situating his own biography within the nation"—hence, why Melsom argues that the works "embody complex attempts to negotiate the writer's own sense of self in the context of what he envisions to be truly Canadian and that this complexity poses a challenge to a conservative nationalism." Perhaps, then, these moments in the text suggest the potential inaccuracy of Lacey's belief that "Coupland offers his family stories as proof of the generalizations" he supposedly makes about Canadian identity.

Another moment of the film and the first *Souvenir* book has Coupland narrate a memory from his time working as an interning student for an advertising agency charged with developing

a beer to market to Canadians. Coupland remembers that the agency wanted the logo for the beer to look “[m]anly. Outdoorsy. Rugged” (*Souvenir 1 6*). They came up with a name and design for the beer that they thought matched those descriptors: Ryder, written in “carefree handwritten script” with a brown and yellow colour scheme (*Souvenir 1 6*). Coupland challenged them on their choices—“there was nothing Canadian about what I was seeing” (*Souvenir* film)—and, in telling us that he did so, reveals he is conscious that Canada cannot be distilled into a marketable, cheesy version of wilderness aesthetics or values. By also self-identifying, in the book, as a “little twerp from the suburbs” (*Souvenir 1 6*), Coupland distances himself from that masculinized, outdoorsy, reductive version of Canadiana on which the company relies.

Together, Coupland’s narration of childhood fishing and hunting trips and his recollection of the time he spent working at the advertising agency resist simplifying Canadian identity through stereotypical images of the wild. In one case, Coupland sets up what promises to be a typically Canadian scene, the ritualistic hunting or fishing trip with the family, only to indicate his eventual refusal to engage in that typicality. In the other case, Coupland shows himself to be critical of an insincere and expressly masculinized version of wilderness and Canadian identity. Thus, even when, in the same series, Coupland seems to make that too-easy association between Canadians and the wild—through his reflections on water and on blackflies, or through his descriptions of different facets of Canadiana—in the end, he shifts the dominant image of wilderness in relation to Canadian identity and foregrounds the fact that not all Canadians fit within that image. This shift could be considered part of what Melsom regards as *Souvenir*’s project to draw attention to the “queerness” of “the idea of nation itself”—for instance, by questioning widespread images and values that constitute the nation’s ethos.

There is another layer to this discussion, though. Wilderness and Canada are not simply equated with one another in *Souvenir*. Primarily, it is the protection of wilderness that is figured as a core facet of being a Good Canadian. The series thus draws from the power that national allegiance often carries over masses of people and turns it toward ecological ends. In light of Buell’s comment that many believe “environmental stewardship requires a personal commitment to a specific place” (*Environmental Imagination 252*), the fact that Coupland recalibrates an investment in ecological health toward a commitment to Canada will not be surprising. It will also not surprise those who have perceived a national and worldwide ideological shift in which “Nature the Monster” has become “Nature the Threatened,” as Atwood succinctly puts it (10). In

Canadian discourse and beyond, nature as “that phenomenon against which we must survive” has been refigured as “that phenomenon we must protect,” and this protection is often scaled at the national level through policy, politics, and activism.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, that connection between wilderness and Canada is ignited by an environmentalist agenda in the *Souvenir* series. Despite what the title of the series might suggest, *Souvenir of Canada* sometimes seems less concerned with articulating national identity than with catalyzing what Buell calls “environmental consciousness” under the banner of nationalism (*Environmental Imagination* 179). This consciousness is built by “expanding the notion of community so that it becomes situated within the ecological community” (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 266)—in other words, by seeing the humans, nonhumans, land, water, and wilderness around us as constitutive of an individual’s own community or nation.

In the film, Coupland states strongly that, in Canada, “one of the prerequisites of citizenship is to acknowledge a custodial duty” to the water and the land. Using similar language in the follow-up book, Coupland warns that “Canada isn’t something we can take for granted, we have to work at earning it. . . . [T]he moment we stop valuing what we have is the moment we will lose it. The land is our blessing and our duty” (*Souvenir 2* 141). In contrast to the sometimes silly “souvenirs” of Canadian identity that Coupland offers up but that the reader is never really asked to invest in seriously, like Maple-Walnut Ice Cream (*Souvenir 1* 70) and the ones I list in the opening lines of this chapter, these moments in which Coupland expresses a *duty* to protect the souvenirs conferred upon Canadians by the land represent the author’s more thoughtful engagement with what Canadian identity is and needs to be.

In one essay from *Souvenir 2*, entitled “Yanks,” Coupland goes a step further to posit the protection of wilderness as a key difference between Americans and Canadians.<sup>10</sup> The Canadian perspective, he writes, is that “[w]e like nature, and we want it to remain nature” (*Souvenir 2*

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<sup>9</sup> Note that Coupland’s construction of wilderness protection as a part of good Canadian citizenship might easily be read as a naïve investment in the relevance of national scales and identities in the context of forwarding worldwide ecological good. His construction may come off as especially naïve or misguided to those who call out the environmental injustices that Canada, as a political body, has enabled through governmental action and policy.

<sup>10</sup> Coupland’s construction of protected wilderness as a defining difference between Canada and the United States ironically recalls Buell’s tracing of how wilderness eventually came to be “reconstructed . . . in a latter-day scholarly discourse of American exceptionalism” (*Environmental Imagination* 5-6). The *Souvenir* series reconstructs wilderness toward a kind of *Canadian* exceptionalism, particularly in the discussed essay “Yanks.”

133). His use of the plural “we” here is important as an implicating gesture or rhetorical move meant to coerce the reader into Coupland’s own environmentalist agenda and simultaneously to present that agenda as an obvious principle of Canadian citizenship. This process seems to me a variation on Louis Althusser’s notion that ideology “hails,” “recruits,” or “interpellates” subjects (105), or on M. Lane Bruner’s explanation that public forces “‘call the name’ of individuals in such a way that they ‘recognise themselves’ in the offered subject positions” (312). Here Coupland does not just reflect passively the spirit of Canada, as the series ostensibly and paratextually claims to do, but tries to *shape* the terms on which Canadian subjectivity is constructed. Coupland establishes a (certainly disconcerting) “self” and “other” dynamic in which readers who do not identify with the environmental consciousness he posits as quintessentially Canadian are by default shuttled to identify with Americans.<sup>11</sup> At the least, the positioning of an eco-friendly national “we” against a less responsible national “them” (the “Yanks”) elicits, from the reader, a questioning of the terms by which they envision their citizenship.<sup>12</sup> While Melsom argues that “the *Souvenir* series shows that Canada is open to renegotiations,” through, for example, its refiguration of the Canadian family through the depicted relationships between Coupland and his parents, I would argue that the series does not just reflect these renegotiations but might be more forcefully suggesting *how* to renegotiate nationhood. In this way, the *Souvenir* series invokes wilderness to perform a didactic function in terms of defining citizenship.

Sometimes, however, the plural “we” is used to interpellate readers differently and to implicate them in the country’s already-occurring environmental degradation. Take, for example, Coupland’s essay on fish, which describes a number of ecological crises that have affected the

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<sup>11</sup> This dynamic is strongly reminiscent of similarly anti-American sentiments presented (and unsettled) in other Canadian texts. Most fittingly, perhaps, as another work about wilderness, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) begins with an ominous gesture toward a “disease . . . spreading up from the south,” a line that literally refers to birch trees dying out but that motions metaphorically to concerns about the Americanization of Canada (7). These concerns are made more explicit through the novel, particularly at one point when the environmentally irresponsible fishers, whom the main characters have all along thought to be American, turn out to be Canadian. Upon learning this, the protagonist thinks, “It doesn’t matter what country they’re from . . . they’re still Americans, they’re what’s in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus” (129).

<sup>12</sup> By “citizenship,” here, I do not necessarily mean Canadian; I do not assume a Canadian reader, especially since *Souvenir I* itself calls out to be gifted to non-Canadian readers (inside front flap).

country's cod, salmon, and sturgeon. Coupland writes, "We are appalling stewards of our country's waters. . . . We are greedy and stupid and lazy. We'll happily trade fifty jobs for the extinction of an entire species. The key word here is JOBS. It's the word that people hurl in your face whenever you discuss changing fishing or lumber practices" (*Souvenir* 2 24).<sup>13</sup> Instead of a self and other dynamic based on constructed national differences between Canadians and Americans, this passage establishes a dynamic based on Good Canadians (environmentally conscious) versus Bad Canadians (greedy, stupid, lazy, irresponsible). The rhetoric of the passage, too, recruits the reader into sharing Coupland's disgust and his conviction that immediate labour needs should not trump long-term ecological health.

To bring these issues into the context of Coupland's broader concerns, it might be prudent here to note that Coupland "fear[s] for the death of Canada" (*Souvenir* 1 138). Implicitly reaching back to Atwood, Coupland tells his reader that "survival no longer means portaging through unmapped birch forests that stretch past the horizon, or wintering inside a hut while the wind blows at minus 60° Celsius. . . . Survival now means not being absorbed into something else and not being seduced by visions of short-term financial gain" (*Souvenir* 1 139). Against all the many forces of global absorption, Coupland situates wilderness as an important battleground on which the fate of the nation will play out. Different from Cronon's construction of the wilderness as the last frontier (69), Coupland casts wilderness as the last frontier protecting Canada from absolute subjection to neoliberal, capitalist, globalizing, and (notably) Americanizing forces: "What if we become a vast crack-ridden, highway-strangled, ecologically sterilized hunk of nothingness glued onto the United States? That would be death, even though the maps might still technically say Canada" (*Souvenir* 1 138). Coupland calls for Canadian identity to centre on the protection of wilderness, then, as a kind of defense strategy against contemporary political, commercial, and social changes he worries will mute differences between spaces and render Canada unrecognizable from other countries. In the aforementioned essay on fish, Coupland expresses his belief that the sturgeon in B.C.'s Fraser River, and therefore Canada's fish more generally, "stand both as a litmus of our dodgy relationship with the wild and as a measure of our own human souls. What happens to the sturgeon is what

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<sup>13</sup> This comment can be alternately read within the context of Coupland's ongoing complaints, in the *Souvenir* series, about how the Canadian economy is no longer anchored by the process of turning resources into things, which means that Canadians give up potential jobs and make maintaining the nation's economic health more difficult than it has to be (*Souvenir* 2 84).

happens to us. Its dwindling size and numbers reflect some inner dwindling of the Canadian soul” (123). The health of the nation and the health of natural space are connected: “In Canada, when we speak of water, we’re speaking of ourselves. . . . [W]e know that wasted water means a diminished collective soul; polluted waters mean a sickened soul. Water is the basis of our self-identity, and when we dream of canoes and thunderstorms and streams and even snowballs, we’re dreaming about our innermost selves” (*Souvenir I* 123).<sup>14</sup> Wild space must be preserved as a bastion against a “diminished” or “polluted” Canada. Rather than take these passages at face value as Coupland’s genuine beliefs (which they may or may not be), it seems best to read them as intended to marshal the environmental support of the reader. Again, Coupland uses the power of nationalism and the rhetorical oomph of “we” to call out to readers and invite them to recognize themselves in these ideological leanings in a process much like the one Althusser would imagine. To sum up, Coupland’s construction of wilderness tries to convince readers that how they feel, think, talk, and act about and around wilderness will affect how the country moves forward on a global stage.

I have been suggesting that in substantial parts of Coupland’s writing, wilderness becomes the concept and space that helps humans define the nation, the community (later in this chapter: the city), and therefore the self: “we are the land, and the land is us—we are inseparable. . . . [T]he land makes us who we are” (*Souvenir I* 142). This is not a new way of thinking about wilderness. Garrard describes how “[w]ilderness experiences,” like other experiences, are commonly thought “to provide the impetus . . . by which individuals come to an authentic selfhood”—often a selfhood “orientated toward right environmental action” (*Ecocriticism* 202). But it is sometimes, I would add, just a supposedly authentic selfhood, full stop. Finding our “true” selves through the wild around us seems a suspiciously romantic idea, of course, and as Lee Rozelle reminds us, these ideas “are often based on privilege and constructed by capital”; “natural environments aestheticized for human use are typically reserved for SUV drivers, L.L. Bean shoppers, and white-water kayak renters” (22). Moreover, the sectioning off of wild spaces,

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<sup>14</sup> The presence in this list of the canoe, an Indigenous technology that Coupland marks as part of Canadians’ dreams and identities, exposes the limitations and generalizations in the *Souvenir* series’s portrayal of people who inhabit Canada. Coupland constructs a unified Canadian “us,” in this passage, but this first-person plural perspective rehearses the ideological violence of incorporating Indigenous technology, practice, and craftsmanship into a defining feature of the settler-colonial nation state.

such as National Parks, for human enjoyment and fulfillment might “provide necessary protection for endangered species and vulnerable ecosystems,” Garrard explains, “but may also sustain . . . the colonial translocations and expulsions of indigenous people required to endow them as pure wilderness spaces” (“Introduction” 9). The green impulse to keep “remote ecosystems” pristine often enforces the de-territorialization of people who live there, Cronon cautions, a form of “cultural imperialism” (82) endemic in some environmentalist endeavour: which selves get to be wilfully and gladly defined by experiences in the wild, and which selves are damaged by such thinking?

Beyond the noted privileges and human consequences, there is another complication that comes with the process of seeking selfhood through excursions into wild space: this process supports the idea that the environment is made to serve humans first and foremost. In this context, consider Coupland’s description of flying over Kluane National Park:

[I]t was to apprehend God or the next world or something altogether richer than the suburbs of home. Glaciers drape like mink over feldspar ridges like broken backs, and the twenty-four-hour midnight sun somehow burns paler and whiter than the sun in the south—and the horizon seems to come from a bigger planet. To see a wild landscape like this is to crack open your soul and see larger landscapes inside yourself. Or so I believe. Raw nature must be preserved, so that we never forget the grandeur it can inspire. (*Souvenir 1* 134).<sup>15</sup>

The environmentalist agenda clearly indicated by the reference to preservation is here tied to human desires and needs. The wilderness must be protected because it makes humans feel big and profound things. We cannot lose those feelings; therefore, save the whales! At its core, this sentiment is *anthropocentric* rather than *ecocentric* because it figures the feelings of humans as

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<sup>15</sup> In the *Souvenir* film, the scene in which Coupland relates flying above Kluane National Park is accompanied by a mystical-sounding score, with stringed instruments playing ominously ascending notes amidst loon calls and thunder, that compounds the sense of a mysterious and sublime nature. Above the score, the film layers multiple voices telling stories about encounters with the wild that, together, also suggest a sense of magic in the wild: they include references to mist, to loons appearing out of nowhere, and to the feeling of being lost in the wilderness. Coupland’s voiceover synthesizes the idea behind this scene, the layered voices, and the underlying score: “In Canada, the wilderness seduces you with its beauty and calm.”



the “higher priority” in the fate of nonhumans (Buell, *Future* 134).<sup>16</sup> While an ecocentric view would be guided by the “ethics that the interest of the ecosphere must override that of the interest of individual species” (Buell, *Future* 137), the view expressed in this passage anthropocentrically figures environmental preservation in terms of a transaction between “[r]aw nature” (note the adjective connoting consumption) and the humans who can purchase new forms of interiority by being in that nature’s grand presence.<sup>17</sup> Even the language Coupland uses here reveals this anthropocentric view of the world around: the broken backs suggesting human injuries, the twenty-four-hour sun recalling human conceptions of time, the use of “paler,” a word that can describe skin colour as well as light. Through the wild, *Souvenir* tells the reader, humans can find their souls and can gain access to unearthed landscapes of the interior mind—for that, wilderness must be conserved.

To his credit, though, even if Coupland’s environmentalist agenda sways mostly into the realm of the anthropocentric, and perhaps even sways partly into the realm of the narcissistic, at least he seems cognizant of his biases. Take, for instance, a section in *Souvenir 2* in which Coupland relates the development of his art exhibition Canada House, a house slated for demolition that he takes over to paint, design, photograph, and film as part of his creative efforts to capture the spirit of Canada. The art piece features heavily in *Souvenir 2*, which includes as a centerpiece a series of photographs documenting the project, and in the *Souvenir* film. Its end goal, Coupland remarks in the film, is to be “a house for all Canadians to enjoy” (although it is only open to invited guests for one night). As part of Coupland’s “wild” vision of Canada, Canada House includes elements from (or at least evocative of) wilderness—fishing floats, debris, and other paraphernalia Coupland collects off the land and water during his trip to Northern Haida Gwaii. These items become art pieces and decorations which stand out against the backdrop of a house that Coupland has painted entirely white, from the ceilings to the floors,

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<sup>16</sup> A side comment in *City of Glass* suggests Coupland might comprehend the naïveté of anthropocentric thinking when he concludes that we—meaning humans—are “the pests” in the relationship between wildlife and people around Metro Vancouver (172).

<sup>17</sup> Ecocentrism might be more broadly conceived as another name for Buell’s environmental consciousness (described earlier in the chapter), which urges humans to envision community as broader than just themselves. And in that respect, both ecocentrism and environmental consciousness could be categorized within ecocriticism’s branch of deep ecology, which, in Timothy Morton’s description, “asserts that we need to change our view from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism” (2).

the fireplace, cabinetry, and windows. Coupland's reason for painting the house white is that it gives the exhibit "a ghostly, futuristic feel" (*Souvenir* 2 42), but white is also a core colour of Canada's wild (and other) landscapes, heavy with snow as they sometimes are. Further, white can also connote a blank canvas, like a *tabula rasa* onto which Coupland can "paint" his version of Canadian identity, including his version of wilderness as part of that identity. Mimicking the colonial belief that, in Canada, "white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land" (Razack, "When Place Becomes Race" 74), the white-painted foundations of Canada House refer visually and self-consciously to the troubling narrative that the Canadian nation state and the national identities attached to it start from a blank slate. The all-surrounding white paint figuratively overwrites, or whitewashes, the history of Indigenous peoples on the land currently called Canada. Coupland's version of Canada thus originates from whiteness, while it may also, and more generatively, critique how whiteness can be an inescapable, oppressive, and surveilling presence, one that has disciplined the iteration of Canadian identity Coupland presents and has informed the project's take on wilderness.

The wilderness items placed in contrast to the white background of Canada House suggest that Coupland is deliberately gesturing to, and playing off of, the colonially charged expressions of Canadian identity, wilderness, and environmentalism he puts forth in parts of the series. That self-awareness, in his construction of wilderness and his brand of anthropocentric environmentalism, is built directly into one especially important scene from *Souvenir 2*. Coupland remembers that, upon seeing him collect the wilderness-related items from Northern Haida Gwaii that are used to decorate Canada House, "a trio of hippies (yes, hippies) said, 'Whoa! Going out and cleaning up Mother Nature on your own time—awesome, dudes!'" ; to this, Coupland "nodded sagely" (*Souvenir* 2 45). On one hand, this anecdote demonstrates ecological action turned art: Coupland literally cleans the Haida Gwaii beaches and waters of plastic debris for use in his art exhibition, turning fishing floats into lamps, for example.<sup>18</sup> But on the other hand, the fact that he "nodded sagely" to the onlookers who praise him suggests

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, this process is not ecological action turned ecological solution: the plastic does not just disappear after Coupland transforms it, and who knows where it goes after Canada House is demolished? This anecdote conceals the endgame of the debris he collects. Did it return to the land via landfills, was it recycled or repurposed again, does it remain in Coupland's home or in a gallery? Some of the materials from Canada House have been maintained and re-exhibited in other art shows, but still, much ambiguity surrounds the actual outcomes of Coupland's "ecologically minded" art.

Coupland knows that while his actions might appear altruistic, they are actually self-interested. An awareness of the limits of his own ecological project, including its anthropocentric basis and its imbrication in a form of environmentalism enabled by white privilege, comes to the text's periphery here. In a moment of at least constructed self-awareness, Coupland draws attention to his own participation in a system that might not be properly servicing the environment in the ways he claims elsewhere in the series it should be serviced.

*Souvenir of Canada's* perspective on the wild and on ecological matters, then, may be inconsistent and may not meet the standards of the environment's most hearty advocates, but there could be a literal explanation for this: Coupland's often aerial perspective. If the reader takes the series as somewhat truthfully or accurately about Coupland's habits, it might be said that his is a mediated wilderness experience. *Souvenir I* opens with the admission, "I fly more than most people" (4). Corroborating this statement, much of the film and many of the anecdotes told in the books figure Coupland flying over land and space in addition to physically maneuvering through it at ground- or motor vehicle-level. He recalls flying over the glaciers of the North (*Souvenir I* 123) and over/around the Yukon (*Souvenir I* 134); he flies from Vancouver to Toronto (*Souvenir I* 138) and from Vancouver to Frankfurt (*Souvenir I* 5); he flies to London to set up his art exhibit Canada House near the end of the *Souvenir* film; and at one point, he writes almost braggingly that he has "flown across Canada a conservative total of fifty-five times, most likely more" (*Souvenir I* 4). Coupland recalls, too, in the *Souvenir* film, that flying was a huge part of his childhood because his father was a pilot.

This frequent air travel make sense, given Coupland's privileges: he is financially successful, white, and educated, so it is relatively easy for him to travel across lands and borders of all kinds. The constant references to flying also make sense in terms of how Coupland constructs himself, and is constructed (for example, by Karen E. H. Skinazi), as a well-travelled cosmopolitan. However, more pressingly for this chapter, that Coupland continually recollects seeing land from a plane means he is often viewing wilderness from a specific perspective—from high up—and this necessarily plays into how he articulates the country's sights and surroundings. Consider, again, his conviction that water defines the Canadian nation.

That belief could perhaps seem most true, accurate, and powerful to one who spends a lot of time flying around and beyond Canada, especially toward the West Coast, where Coupland has lived for decades. But it is also a belief that might seem truer to Coupland, frequent air-

traveller, because the aerial perspective has long been figured as a *scientific* perspective that can easily and accurately assess the goings-on of the world below. Describing this history of the “airminded way of knowing and being” (2), Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead, and Alison J. Williams write that “the view from above has traditionally been associated with the empowerment of the elevated viewer” as well as with “enhanced forms of legibility” (8), which has produced a related “association between the aerial and scientific epistemologies” that makes the from-above perspective seem like a more “truthful” one, even when it is not (13). Coupland’s narration of his air-travelling views of Canada, then, conjures up this history of associations between the aerial perspective and science, which mark his reading of Canada as particularly “scientific, rational and calculative” (Adey, Whitehead, and Williams 4), but these qualities are part of the “fiction of knowledge” bound up with the top-down view (de Certeau 92). In any case, it is true that Coupland’s vantage point furnishes a literal perspective of the country that must visually negotiate the water enveloping the land on many sides. The bird’s-eye view of Canada’s big wildernesses—the mountains, the trees, the land, the sheer distance (*Souvenir I* 26)—might understandably inspire a person to construct grand narratives of nation that equal, in size, the view of the sites he observes from up high. Coupland’s literal perspective shapes his more conceptual perspective on the nation and its land.

Many of the photographs included in the *Souvenir* books reflect a similar bird’s-eye or at least panoramic view of natural landscapes. On one two-page spread, Coupland includes images from NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command), three of which mimic the aerial perspective in their representation of the Earth: two as-seen-from-space pictures and a map-like graphic of North America (24-25). By adopting a bird’s-eye view of space similar to the one Coupland uses in his textual narration, these graphics imply that the books’ conceptual views of Canada are partly informed by these physical views of land from a distance, either from above or from afar. The Roberta Bondar photographs of Gwai Haanas National Park Reserve in British Columbia (*Souvenir I* 132) and the St. Elias Mountains in Kluane National Park in Yukon (*Souvenir I* 133) provide further examples of this macro- rather than micro-attention to the landscape, as they showcase big and sprawling versions of the represented scenery: the photographs are not focused on individual shrubs, rocks, birds, or other minute flora or fauna, but instead are zoomed-out visions of the land that emphasize the height of the trees, the daunting magnitude of the mountains. Similarly, the Bondar photograph of Prince Albert

National Park, which fills a two-page spread near the end of *Souvenir 1* (128-29), compels readers to reckon with the sheer physical presence of the wild world before their eyes. As a panoramic photograph, it offers the reader a wide view of trees upon trees upon trees, and that repetition is carried into the trees' reflection in the body of water below, appearing to double them.

These zoomed-out, high-up, and/or fly-by views of the wild introduce a few limitations, which I will use to segue into the next section of this chapter, because it will deal, in part, with these very limitations in *City of Glass* and *Polaroids from the Dead*. For one, the repeated references to Coupland's air travel establish a binary in which Coupland is the moving, dynamic, active figure who circles around what is often portrayed by him as still and dormant wilderness. For example, as he narrates flying across Baffin Island, he points out the "frigid rocks" on which "lie the remains of the Franklin Expedition" (*Souvenir 1 4*) and also "the petrified remains of a tropical rain forest, palms and cycads made of stone, rubbed by the arctic chill for a hundred million years" (*Souvenir 1 4*). He goes so far as to call this space, looking down from above, "the land that time and space forgot" (*Souvenir 1 4*). In these lines, Coupland becomes the observer contextualized as part of the current, modernized world, as fluid and mobile as his presence in an airplane suggests him to be, while the wilderness below is mere "remains" of history, removed from time and the contemporary world. Not the most helpful of constructions given Coupland's apparent environmentalist agenda in the rest of the series, it suggests a stark separation between the airplane world of culture, technology, and human perspective, and the wilderness world of failed historic explorations and fossilized plants.

More than that, though, Coupland's airplane view also means he is more likely not to note the details that characterize wild space. The danger is that, from above, everything looks the same. This view comes, in part, from the hard-to-avoid tendency for top-down aerial perspectives to "flatten and abstract" what happens below (Adey, Whitehead, and Williams 4); the bird's-eye view can produce, as de Certeau has argued, a "picture" of the space below "whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices" occurring on-the-ground (93). For Coupland, the limitations of this top-down perspective come out, for instance, in his description of "Canada's extreme northerly spots": "There's just all of this land down there, blank and essentially uninhabited, no roads or power lines—just land, and maybe a spot of lichen. . . . Down there are the First Nations inhabitants—roughly twenty-seven

thousand—of Nunavut, a new territory created in 1999” (*Souvenir 1 4*). Coupland’s observations should be read within the logistical context of his narrating from the sky, and yet, what a strange juxtaposition between land described first as both “blank” and “uninhabited” but then as actually inhabited by nearly thirty thousand people. The essential, “uninhabited” wilderness Coupland first presents is immediately overturned by his motion toward the huge numbers of people living out their lives in a space specifically located and dated as Nunavut, 1999. In these lines, as in parts of the texts I discuss in the next section of the chapter, Coupland exhibits a “blinking” impulse common in Euro-Western representations of wilderness. This blinking rehearses the doctrine of *terra nullius*, or empty/uninhabited land, which has long been used to justify the displacement, dispossession, and genocide of Indigenous peoples in order to maintain settler colonialism. This blinking impulse interprets wilderness as just that: blank space. In the above passage, the impulse manifests in Coupland’s initial description of the North as just land and lichen.<sup>19</sup> While the follow-up note about Indigenous inhabitants might seem to temper that blank-out maneuver, it actually reveals that he *knows* the land is not uninhabited. Thus, at the expense of the communities he later names, Coupland appears to blank out the land below simply for effect: to emphasize Canada as a space of long distance, stretching land, and big wilderness, all of which become recurring patterns in his construction of the nation. In a similar way, but using different patterns, Coupland exhibits this blinking impulse to discursively construct the wilderness in and around Vancouver, an approach I will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

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<sup>19</sup> As a complement or counterpoint to Coupland’s construction of northerly space, consider how Margaret Atwood ends her final lecture in the 1991 Clarendon Lecture Series in English Literature at Oxford University (collected in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*). She invites her listeners to go to an airport souvenir shop in Toronto to see “many gift books with names like Beautiful Canada” that “will have a large supply of Northern scenes—scenes shown as vast, empty, untouched, luminous, numinous, pristine, and endless. Canadians have long taken the North for granted,” she says, “and we’ve invested a large percentage of our feelings about identity and belonging in it” (155). However, she revises, “the North is not endless. It is not vast and strong, and capable of devouring and digesting all the human dirt thrown its way. The holes in the ozone layer are getting bigger every year; the forest, when you fly over it in a plane, shows enormous wastelands of stumps; erosion, pollution, and ruthless exploitation are taking their toll” (115-16).

## Vancouver's Wildernesses: *City of Glass* and *Polaroids from the Dead*

Like the *Souvenir* books, *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* and *Polaroids from the Dead* combine different genres to richly present various geographies.<sup>20</sup> Eva Darias-Beautell characterizes *City of Glass* as “halfway between a city guide, a tourist brochure, and a photo documentary” (136) of Vancouver, British Columbia, and, indeed, the work features multiple media: essays, photographs, maps, movie stills, lists, hand drawings accompanying a short story, and other graphics. These texts range from being entirely individual (particular to Coupland's life and interests) to more collective (their attempts to document a more factual, unmediated Vancouver). The qualification on the back cover of the Revised Edition explains, “as you read this book, imagine that Doug is at the wheel of the car and you're the passenger. Ask away. This isn't the ‘official’ take on Vancouver, but it's my take. Objects in the mirror may appear larger or smaller depending on your viewpoint.” In presenting this scenario wherein readers are whisked along a friendly journey, as if they are in Coupland's own vehicle, *City of Glass* reveals how the text uses the personal to produce the spatial, in much the same way as the *Souvenir* series. The text's very form showcases how cities are produced (Lefebvre) by individuals' anecdotes, stories, and encounters—as a “simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey 9)—just as they may be produced by, for example, official planning documents or sanctioned municipal events and undertakings.

In the same vein as *City of Glass*, *Polaroids* includes photographs, as its name suggests, together with essays, short stories, and other difficult-to-categorize pieces of writing (for example, an informal spatial study of Brentwood, California). Inspired by a series of Grateful Dead concerts Coupland attended in 1991, the weeks leading up to the Super Tuesday primaries in 1992, and Coupland's trip to Brentwood on the thirty-second anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's death (2-3), the collection is themed around what Coupland sees as the spirit of the

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<sup>20</sup> Coupland's personalized Vancouver guidebook recalls, purposefully or otherwise, American writer Paul Auster's novel of the same name, *City of Glass* (1985). Among the number of ways in which these two texts might be brought into conversation with one another is their focus on how individuals “write” the space of the city via their movements and perspectives—Vancouver in Coupland's case and New York in Auster's. This focus is made explicit in Coupland's text, of course, by the subtitle “Douglas Coupland's Vancouver.” In the first few pages of Auster's novel, the idea of individual space-making is established explicitly, too: the protagonist walks aimlessly around the city, always moving, and in so doing writes into being (*à la* de Certeau's “Walking in the City”) the city of New York, which becomes “the nowhere” he “built around himself” (4).

early 1990s. This was a time, Coupland believes, when “Grunge ruled the catwalk” (1-2) and when “the imperative to become ‘wired’ hadn’t yet so much filled the world’s workforce with dark dreams of low-tech paranoia and security-free obsolescence” (2). It was a time, he suggests, characterized by “the vanishing middle; the collapse of entitlement; the rise and dominance of irony; extreme social upheaval brought about by endless new machines . . . and the sense that even a place in time as recent as last week can now feel like it happened a decade ago” (2). Like *City of Glass*, *Polaroids* brings the individual (Coupland’s personal anecdotes and expressions) together with the collective (attempts at more neutral reportage) in its construction of ’90s North America, including places like Oakland, Washington, Brentwood, and, most importantly for this chapter, Vancouver.

I pair the two texts for their rich connections in the context of wild space. For one, the wilderness sections of *Polaroids* I want to discuss share the same core locale as *City of Glass*: Vancouver, B.C. For another, their shared generic hybridity, much as with the *Souvenir* series, means that wilderness is represented in a multitude of ways, from the visual to the textual, the personal to the public, and the fictional to the non-fictional. Even just by their peculiarly hybrid genres, *Polaroids* and *City of Glass* embody a Thirdspace (Soja) understanding of wilderness (recall the introduction to this dissertation), constituted by the interactions between material, representational, and social dimensions of space. The assortedness that generically characterizes these texts mimics the many different ways wilderness, like other spaces, can be expressed, understood, or experienced. That same elasticity of wilderness that I refer to in the introduction of this chapter is featured in the very forms these texts take, from the *Souvenir* series, to *City of Glass*, to *Polaroids*, and the ambiguities and ambivalences in Coupland’s representation of wild space are likewise matched by the ambiguities in the texts’ forms: these are works that cannot be pinned down generically, into one easy-to-name category, just as wilderness cannot be reduced to one shape, one form, one meaning.

I also bring the two texts together because, published just four years apart, they share a temporal context as much as a spatial one, which informs how they treat wilderness in similar ways. Just as the *Souvenir* series is characterized by the (unstable) link between Canadian identity and wilderness, *Polaroids* and *City of Glass* connect wilderness to the spirit of Vancouver. Instead of using wilderness to prop up the idea that Canadian citizenship is premised upon ecological protection, Coupland uses wilderness to engage with the master narrative of



Vancouver as the best or most livable city. In the former case, wilderness characterizes the *national* landscape, while in the latter, it becomes a fixture of the *urban* landscape (of Vancouver). That Coupland uses wild space to forge both kinds of identities, national and urban, introduces some tensions, since urban and national identities are often in conflict as much as they may overlap. Yet, in both cases, wilderness assists Coupland in constructing a narrative of spatial exceptionalism. In the *Souvenir* series discussed previously, this narrative tells of an ecologically responsible Canadian “self” counterposed to an irresponsible American “other.” In *City of Glass* and *Polaroids*, the narrative is all about Vancouver being exceptional (within and outside of Canada) for the wilderness it provides.<sup>21</sup> The remainder of this section will discuss how, like Coupland’s construction of that wild Canadian Self, there are both problems and possibilities with the portrayal of wilderness as integral to Vancouver’s urban spirit: on the one hand, for instance, it risks establishing a civilization/wilderness binary in which Vancouver becomes the urban “somewhere” to the wild “nowhere” beyond, while on the other hand, it troubles this insider/outsider binary in its very fusion of these two spatial categories.

The foundational premise that guides much of this discussion is that Coupland’s construction of Vancouver often renders the city *wild* as much as *urban*. This is true even when, in a work such as *City of Glass*, Coupland undoubtedly sets his creative gaze on *urban* Vancouver, as he explicitly incorporates wilderness into his representation of the city. The “see-throughs” (high towers and condominiums made of glass) featured on the 2009 Revised Edition of *City of Glass*, the essays on Vancouver International Airport (174), Main & Hastings (87), city

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<sup>21</sup> A contradiction emerges here when one considers that Coupland marshals wilderness toward the goal of showing that two different spaces (a nation and a city) are unique. If, as I showed in the previous section, Coupland ties wilderness to all of Canada, how can Vancouver be so unique for its wild edges? While Coupland bolsters the Vancouver master narrative by claiming the city is markedly unlike the rest of Canada (*City of Glass* even includes an essay entitled “The Rest of Canada” [106-07], which is all about Vancouver’s distance from and, some readers might intuit, superiority to the nation’s other regions), one of the central images he uses to do so—wilderness—is incidentally one he names enthusiastically as a foundational trope of Canadian cultural expression. Coupland thus rejects Vancouver’s connection to the nation while he relies heavily on what he figures as one of the nation’s most prominent visual, conceptual, and physical spaces to articulate that rejection. Vancouver is styled as unique because of its embeddedness in wilderness, and yet Coupland’s writing contends wilderness is all around Canada, so much so as to define Canadian nationhood. Taken together, Coupland’s texts cause us to question their seemingly explicit endorsement of Vancouver exceptionalism simply because they call the reader to recognize the repeated wilderness metaphors Coupland uses to depict space in Vancouver as much as outside of Vancouver.

real estate (105), and the SkyTrain (134), are matched, in the book, by a roughly equal number of prose sections and visuals that evoke the wilderness around Vancouver, such as ruminations on Mt. Baker (91), on the ferries that shuttle passengers to Vancouver Island (10), or on the practice of biking through mountains that “backstop the City” (92). Likewise, pieces from *Polaroids* unfold a vision of Vancouver that is “mountains and wilderness” (69), “Douglas firs and yellow cedars and hemlocks” (78), wilderness and city and suburbia all at once. A kingfisher that Coupland spots in a Capilano Canyon river is described, in an autobiographical piece from *Polaroids*, as “cruising the canyon’s twists like a Toyota purring down a California freeway” (79), an image that captures the cross-pollinated wilderness-city spirit of Vancouver that Coupland conjures in his writing. Add to this the discussion from the last chapter, which argued that Coupland parallels wild and suburban Vancouver in “1,000 Years (Life After God)” and which discussed his incorporation of wilderness into quotidian Vancouver suburbia in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and readers can perceive the myriad ways Coupland deploys wilderness to texture his portrayal of Vancouver city.<sup>22</sup>

These wild aspects of Coupland’s Vancouver are not only notable for their persistent presence, but also for how Coupland seems to deploy them in service of the master narrative that Vancouver is the ideal city. Touted variously as the “best,” “happiest,” or “most livable” city by numerous reports, polls, organizations, and media outlets in the last twenty years, this master narrative has accumulated great power in public discourse, while it has also faced critical backlash, as in Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo’s vital question, “most livable for whom?” (97).<sup>23</sup> On

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<sup>22</sup> This reading positions Coupland’s work against the “focus on the urban” that Darias-Beautell argues widely characterizes Vancouver cultural expression (134), and in this way it figures Coupland’s writing as different from typical literary representations of the city.

<sup>23</sup> In 2015, Vancouver placed number one for quality of life in North America, according to consulting firm Mercer (Moore); it placed number one for most livable city, as ranked by *The Economist*, for much of the 2000s (Tarrazo 97); it was recently called the second-best city in the world by *The Telegraph* (de Bruyn); and the list goes on. Some public discourse even describes Vancouver in terms of *utopia*, a figuration that stretches back at least as far as George Vancouver’s “early representations” of the West Coast, which reveal “that narratives of Arcadia and Utopia preceded actual urban development” in that region (Melsom *West Coast* 38). More contemporarily, figurations of Vancouver as a utopia have emerged in printed publications such as a 1994 piece in the *Vancouver Sun*, which projects in its headline that the “Renaissance of downtown [Vancouver] will make it employment utopia” (“Renaissance”), and a 2009 piece from the same newspaper, which describes the city’s action plan to become a “green utopia by 2020” (“Vancouver”). The publication of books like *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia* (2008)

the back of the 2009 Revised Edition of *City of Glass*, Coupland supports this narrative straightforwardly: “I spent my twenties scouring the globe thinking there had to be a better city out there, until it dawned on me that Vancouver is the best one going.” It becomes clear, reading *City of Glass* and *Polaroids*, that Coupland’s rationale for Vancouver being the best city includes what he sees as its wildernesses.<sup>24</sup> Taking visitors up nearby Grouse Mountain, Coupland recalls people often saying, about the ways nature can so regularly inflect the Metro Vancouver experience, “Geez, Doug, I thought you were just being *metaphorical* about the wilderness” (*City* 44). The Capilano Valley, Coupland writes, where the “snow is thick; the nearby peaks loom, too steep to log or otherwise modify[,] . . . is where it dawns, on everybody from newcomers to season’s ticket holders, that we live in a place that really has no equivalent anywhere else on Earth” (*City* 44).<sup>25</sup> Fueling the Vancouver master narrative, these expressions of spatial exceptionalism tell the reader that Vancouver offers a wilderness like none other, unparalleled in the untouchability of its pristine nature or in the magnitude of its mountain peaks.

In these gestures toward the superlative nature of Vancouver’s wild, Coupland’s work constructs a wilderness that delivers the onlooker easy access to the sublime. Originally theorized by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) and Immanuel Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790), the sublime is a concept often used to describe how people react to aesthetic phenomena they encounter, whether that be a mountain, a seaside, a waterfall, or another visually stimulating sight or scene. Positioned alongside beauty, by Burke and Kant’s work, sublimity captures the viewer’s feelings of awe, terror, or disgust (all of which can, perhaps counter-intuitively, lead to pleasure or delight) upon

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suggests, too, that utopia continues to be a framework through which many writers and thinkers choose to understand the region in which Vancouver resides.

<sup>24</sup> This same focus on the “unique” wilderness-city spirit of Vancouver surfaces in other writings on the city, not just Coupland’s. For example, Pippa de Bruyn, describing the winners and runners up in *The Telegraph’s* 2014 Travel Awards, notes “Vancouver’s sublime city-in-the-wilderness ambience” is “proving utterly alluring to visitors.” Similarly, Michael Kluckner, the author of *Vanishing Vancouver*, perceives that Vancouver has developed a “yin and yang” quality in which the more “leafy,” “low-rise,” natural-looking outskirts of the city complement the industrial, “glass-and-steel” urban downtown (216).

<sup>25</sup> Coupland’s reconstruction of visitors who “stand and gawk” at the Capilano Valley, and who express their disbelief about Vancouver’s apparently uniquely beautiful natural surroundings, is tempered in effect by his passing comments that the Valley is “all second growth” but that it “can pass for wilderness” (*City* 44). More on second growth later in this chapter.

encountering something whose aesthetics are unpredictable, mysterious, ugly, enormous, or unfathomable.

This original theorization of the sublime continues to be developed by ecocriticism in ways that apply to the wild and to representations of the wild, such as those found in Coupland's writing. Pointing to texts like Burke's and Kant's, ecocritic Cronon identifies the late eighteenth-century "doctrine of the sublime" as containing a "sense of the wilderness as a landscape where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface" (73). Sublime landscapes like those found in the wild, he explains, "were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God" (73). Feelings of sublimity—often brought about in wilderness contexts by large, looming geological sights such as mountains—therefore engender human "encounters with a nonhuman world whose power ultimately exceeds theirs" (Hitt 609-10). In Coupland's work, this encounter can be seen, for instance, in his description of Grouse Mountain, where "the air is thin, the view is spectacular, and the presence of something holy is always just a breath and a glance away, off in the hinterlands" (*City* 45). The vague diction of "something" expresses an inability to imagine what nonhuman, godly, or supernatural force might be here in this sublime wild, the very unfathomability of which is a key part of sublimity: this holy presence defies precise description and human understanding. But the nearness and intimacy suggested by the inarticulate presence being a "breath and a glance away" characterizes this space as a sublime one, where the "supernatural" or "holy" is brought toward us but is not comprehensible.

In his particular use of concepts and images reminiscent of the sublime, Coupland's writing risks giving in to what Cronon, as paraphrased by Christopher Hitt, would regard as the "fundamental problem with the concept of sublime wilderness," which "is that it depends on and reinscribes the notion of nature's otherness, of the separation between the human and nonhuman realms" (603).<sup>26</sup> This problem with the way sublimity is yoked to the wild has become a common concern for ecocritics, especially because the sublime is most often invoked in the context of particular kinds of wilderness—in particular, the seemingly pure, untouched-by-humans kind. All the characteristic reactions to the sublime—the unfathomability, the awe, the terror experienced in the face of enormity—are charged with additional, politicized energies

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<sup>26</sup> Note that, in a different vein from Cronon's, the entire premise of Hitt's work is that the "ecological sublime" can still "preserve . . . positive aspects of the conventional sublime while identifying and critiquing its negative aspects" (607).

when put in the context of how wilderness is already and often treated as, in Hitt's terminology, the nonhuman "other" to humanity's "self," and the ways such a relationship can have material effects on how wilderness is treated. Invoking the sublime in depictions and descriptions of the wild therefore risks producing a troubling separation between banal civilization and sublime wilderness, between the world "in here" and the one "out there," as described by Cronon (90).

Consider, as an example, when Coupland draws on the sublime to describe Vancouver's wildernesses by using the language of infinity. Describing the sight of distant wilderness from the Lions Gate Bridge, Coupland writes that the view is "endlessly renewing, endlessly glorious" (*City* 114). "Endlessly" signifies, of course, a capacity so big that humans cannot even perceive its limits. Human language and culture cannot accurately convey how "renewing" and how "glorious" is the view from the bridge. The grappling with sublime infinity is brought to the fore again when Coupland instructs his reader thusly: "I want you to imagine you are driving north, across the Lions Gate Bridge, and the sky is steely grey and the sugar-dusted mountains loom blackly in the distance. Imagine what lies behind those mountains—realize that there are only more mountains—mountains until the North Pole, mountains until the end of the world, mountains taller than a thousand me's, mountains taller than a thousand you's" (119).<sup>27</sup> Here, Coupland invites the reader to achieve a difficult imaginative feat, which is to conceptualize a landscape of mountains that are nearly infinite in their repetition and size. The imperative tense forcefully directs the reader to share in, rather than to question, this sublime envisioning of wilderness. The language of infinity—which recalls and reproduces the same spirit of the superlative that characterizes much of Coupland's writing about Vancouver—invokes the kind of sublimity that "others" nature, in the way Cronon imagines, because this wilderness scene is constructed as vastly different from, indeed vastly bigger than, the perceiving subject and their comparatively limited human body.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Echoing the language in this passage, photographs in the *Souvenir* books showcase seemingly infinite-looking treescapes (*Souvenir 1* 128-29) and mountainscapes (*Souvenir 1* 132-33). These photographs, also drawing on the sublime, create the same sense of nature's enormity and its incomprehensibility to humans, thereby functioning to "other" wilderness in the way Hitt (paraphrasing Cronon) describes.

<sup>28</sup> In his repeated use of the language and imagery of infinity to describe wilderness, Coupland invokes a particular form of sublimity: what Kant calls, in *Critique of Judgment*, the mathematically sublime, which overwhelms the viewer with sheer abundance (in terms of number and/or magnitude).

A related aspect of Vancouver's sublime wilderness, in Coupland's portrayal, is its characterization as an ancient, but timeless, force. Existing beyond and prior to the collective memory of human consciousness, its seemingly eternal presence is difficult to grasp. Take, for instance, a few moments from the *Souvenir* series, discussed previously in this chapter. In the passage in which Coupland refers to an "ice storm of Biblical proportions" (*Souvenir I* 122) in his discussion of Canada's waters, he invokes biblical times to construct a perhaps hyperbolic vision of Canadian weather, as if Canada's form of nature has the unique potential to produce storms that do not even belong in this century. In another instance from the same text, the sturgeon in B.C.'s Fraser River are described in comparably superlative terms; "as primordial a fish as ever has existed," their presence in the river gestures toward the water and land's roots in an ancient time (*Souvenir I* 123). A similar maneuver is used in another passage from the *Souvenir* series when Coupland uses hyperbolic language about time to talk about Canadian wilderness:

Geological time is something Canadians have learned to confront more aggressively than most other countries. . . . Canadians fly over the land and see lakes scoured into its surface by countless ice ages and granite tongues of lava left over from the birth of the world. Canadians fly over the Rockies and see a billion years of time crystallized then smashed to form jagged mountains. . . . Europe may have castles and China may have the Great Wall, but Canada has all this evidence of raw bulk time—time before history, time before life itself. The scale of geological time's sweep across the nation is so vast and unremitting that it can really render human time depressingly minute in comparison.<sup>29</sup> (*Souvenir I* 79)

The proportions of time and space implied by the diction in this passage treat the wild as other, de-contextualizing it from human time as if it were not also part of human time or as if it were not affected by humans themselves. In this reading, wilderness becomes the omnipresent and eternal background that lives its life at a glacial pace, whereas culture and humans are positioned in the now, "depressingly minute" in comparison, perhaps, but active and changing, as the

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<sup>29</sup> Here, again, I wonder whether Coupland imagining Canadians *flying* over the land influences the way he constructs land (i.e. in terms that connote a vastness of time and space).

references to air flight, castles, and the Great Wall suggest.<sup>30</sup> Coupland's work makes the case that Vancouver's sublime wilderness is older, bigger, and more profound than any human creation or than any human can grasp, even while also figuring the wild as somehow under threat (as in the *Souvenir* series). In crafting this perception of sublime wilderness, Coupland disconcertingly maintains the "in here" (human space) and "out there" (natural space) boundary that separates individuals from their accountability to the so-called natural world.

The examples above show how time is an important topic in the discussion of wilderness and Coupland's writing. I have lingered on a few examples from the *Souvenir* series, because they so strongly and concisely feature the patterns he uses to construct wild space, but I will return to *Polaroids* now to examine other telling examples of how Coupland's work suggests time is different in the wilderness. In the essay entitled "The German Reporter," Coupland relates the story of when he toured around Capilano Canyon with a reporter who had come to interview him. Hiking up the trails, the two men rest while watching a woodpecker in the trees. Coupland explains, "we sat for long enough that our hearts slowed down their beating, and we watched the woodpecker, not a spit away, and it seemed to not care that we existed" (79). The slowing of their hearts literally denotes the men's bodies' coming down to a resting state, but it figuratively connotes that time is *slower* here, as they observe the oblivious-to-humans (and therefore isolated-from-humans) goings-on of "wild" nature. Humans may come and go, through the trails of the Canyon, but, in Coupland's telling, the woodpecker remains unperturbed by their travels. This difference in the way humans and nonhumans experience wilderness comes up in another anecdote from the same trip: Coupland notes that, early in their wilderness trek, he and the reporter see a group of senior citizens touring around. Then, at the end of the men's journey, they see a group of high school kids. Playfully implying that there has been some sort of circular time warp and the seniors before are now the children present, Coupland's anecdote reiterates the idea that time in the wild is different (80).<sup>31</sup> Ascending the "alps behind the city of Vancouver,"

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<sup>30</sup> This passage also works toward the narrative of spatial exceptionalism for Canada, as it implies that China and countries in Europe may have built important temporary structures, but Canada has a purer, more innate, and enduring value in how the record of time's passing is peculiarly inscribed on its vast lands.

<sup>31</sup> In an essay about Palo Alto, Coupland uses the same language of timelessness and even time reversal to talk about an Arboretum Restoration Project he visits while touring there. Walking down the road to the project, Coupland writes, "all evidence of humanity vanishes. We have traveled back in time a million years. Where are we?" (*Polaroids* 116). He later describes the

where they look out onto “the glaciers and the wild rivers that stretch until the end of the world” (79), Coupland and the reporter leave behind the predictable progression of human-time and enter a mysterious and near-supernatural wilderness-time. Here in the wildernesses of Vancouver, Coupland’s writing suggests, you can behold this surreal experience. This suggestion has important reverberations beyond the space of a short essay in a less-popular Coupland collection, including the very material troubles that can ensue when “wilderness represents a flight from history” (Cronon 79) or an “escape from [the] responsibility” (Cronon 80) of being in present time.

Throughout this story of Coupland’s wilderness trek with the reporter, there is therefore the same threat that wild space is being detrimentally treated as “other.” If, for example, the wild edges of Vancouver initiate a kind of time warp in which heartbeats slow or elderly people are reborn as youths, if wilderness is seen as timeless and eternal compared to the immediacy and urgency of human life, then these constructions risk re-establishing a civilization/wilderness binary in which “built” environments are associated with the contemporary, the dynamic, or the forward, while “natural” environments are associated with the prehistoric, the stagnant, or the backward (as in Coupland’s time reversal anecdote). Reflecting with the reporter on their wilderness trip, Coupland recalls feeling “that as humans we are always on the brink of wilderness—that we are always animals first—that civilization is an act of political will, and not a given right. And that middle-class peace is something to be cherished, not mocked, because without it, we are lost, and we are only animals and never anything more” (79-80). It is telling that in the same essay in which Coupland figures time as different in the wilderness, he also includes this troubling rumination on “civilization” and “middle-class peace” versus “wilderness” and “animals.” Thinking about wilderness-time as apart from human-time leads to these kinds of conclusions: that humans must actively maintain their civilized difference from wilderness, from animals, from the life of the “lost.” Coupland’s charged separation of the peaceful, desirable “middle-class” from those who are “only animals” is especially problematic given the loaded nature of these terms in Canada’s colonial context, in which ideas about who is

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feeling of walking through it as “prehistoric”: “There is a mood of *dilophosauri* and raptors lurking hungrily in the oak copses—of the savagery that lurks to recapture even the most Disneyfied of environments in the absence of vigilance” (177). However, this sense of timelessness is admittedly mitigated by Coupland pointing out that “the sounds of engines in the distance fail to reassure” that the space has transported him back to a previous time (117).



or is not civilized have long informed the violent efforts of colonial governments, and settler individuals, to “civilize” Indigenous peoples. By drawing very sharply “the boundaries between civilization and wilderness,” then, Coupland “buttress[es] those spaces that are considered civilization” (Crane 15).

Vancouver itself thus becomes the buttressed space in Coupland’s writing—the apex of civilization in its being the “best” and “most livable” city (Tarazzo’s question here takes on new meaning: most livable for the so-called civilized middle class?)—through his problematic and romanticized figuration of the city’s surrounding wildernesses. To add to that figuration, on the flip side of the same coin that features the wild as infinite or temporally and spatially expansive, Coupland conversely portrays wilderness as blank nothingness. This blanking impulse, as I describe it in Chapter 1 and the final section on the *Souvenir* series earlier in this chapter, accumulates as Coupland repeatedly casts growing up in the suburb of West Vancouver as “growing up in the middle of nowhere: a zero-history, zero-ideology bond-issuing construct teetering on the edge of the continent” (*Polaroids* 102). Reducing to “nowhere” the wild space outside his suburban backyard, Coupland writes that “[t]o be buried on the edge of nowhere is to question one’s sense of existence. Who are we, if we have no landscape to call our own?” (*Polaroids* 102). Another essay in *Polaroids* commits the same act: “Imagine living on the edge of the world (Vancouver) and attending a small elementary school in a remote suburb next to a forest, beyond which there is nothing except forest and alps and tundra and ice for thousands of miles until the North Pole, which is, in itself, nothing in particular. Next stop after that: literally, Siberia” (121). Coupland’s diction performs a kind of spatial reduction, moving from the “edge” to the more “remote” to the “nothing” (and then to “nothing in particular”). As if he is drawing, for the reader, concentric semi-circles going north from Vancouver, Coupland creates a hierarchy of space in which (civilized, school-going) Vancouver is the *something* to beyond-Vancouver’s (wild) *nothing*. For the attentive reader, this constructed hierarchy exposes its own failings in the image it presents of thousands of miles of wilderness—which is certainly not *nothing*.<sup>32</sup> Even

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<sup>32</sup> The diction used here recalls that used by Scout, the narrator of “1,000 Years (Life After God),” who remembers going on fishing trips to Northern B.C., “deep, deep into the worlds of Nowhere” (*Life After God* 344). In this story, the wild is described as “raw” and “undiscovered” (344). Reducing the landscape to a perceivable nothing, Scout describes “water so clear that it seems it might not even be really there” (357). And even when Scout tells of how he “walked deeper and deeper into this organism, this brain, imagining man-made noises where [he] knew

when Coupland discusses Stanley Park, a place that seems to register for Coupland (and others) as a little bit more artificial than that “pure,” “blank,” “raw,” and “timeless” wilderness with which Coupland engages elsewhere (as in when he refers to the “unmolested ecosystems” in Canada’s North [*Souvenir 1* 123]), he expresses a desire for this same erasure of flora and fauna.<sup>33</sup> Discussing the different interest groups that have wanted to mobilize projects in the Park, Coupland maintains that “[i]n the end, what we want there is *nothing*—just the trees and animals. As it should be” (*City* 140, emphasis Coupland’s).<sup>34</sup>

This impulse to counterpose trees and animals, forest and tundra as the wild nowhere (or “nothing”) to an urban or suburban somewhere has a long and charged history. Early explorers, settlers, and contemporary space dwellers alike have often viewed environments in which humans have not built material structures as, essentially, empty, despite existing plenitude. Buell reminds us, though, that “[w]hat the first European settlers of North America saw as primordial or ‘empty’ space, and what their descendants persist in thinking of as ‘wilderness,’ had been somebody’s else’s place since the first humans arrived millennia before—and much longer than that, if we allow nonhumans to count as ‘somebodies’” (*Future* 67). It is, as Crane explains in the context of Canada and Australia, a “colonial gesture” to declare *this land is a wilderness*, as doing so contributes harmfully to “placing indigenous presences and practices under erasure” (2). Buell’s and Crane’s comments emphasize how the space Coupland calls “nothing” will inevitably be an integral “something” to other humans, as well as nonhumans. The civilization/wilderness discourse that runs through both *City of Glass* and *Polaroids* therefore works to the benefit of the Vancouver master narrative, in its strategic and selective portrayal of

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none could be,” he performs a conceptual separation of wilderness from civilization as he ignores the “man-made” noises he would be making as he walks through the forest (351). Yet, with quintessential Couplandesque ambivalence, the story undercuts many of Scout’s constructions of the wild by, for example, noting “a logging company’s road sign” (349); the logging trucks the narrator could not see but could occasionally hear (347); and the “loggers’ debris” peppering the roads that led to the wilderness (347).

<sup>33</sup> This erasure is apparent, too, in *Souvenir of Canada 1*, in Coupland’s construction of the Canadian North: “[t]o the north,” he writes, “for millions of square kilometres, lies nothingness” (*Souvenir 1* 26).

<sup>34</sup> The fact that Coupland talks about Stanley Park in the same way that he talks about the Northern wilderness of British Columbia draws attention to the arbitrary construction of the concept of wilderness: two vastly different types of spaces, each with internal complexities and differences within themselves, are treated in roughly the same way through Coupland’s blanking impulse toward “wild” environments.

the Vancouver wilderness as unique and sublime, but it harmfully misrepresents other kinds of land and “wilderness,” reducing them to the so-called nothing that extends as far as the eye can see beyond the suburb of Coupland’s youth.

All is not lost, though, in Coupland’s representation of wild space in *City of Glass* and *Polaroids*. In the spirit of ambivalence and complication that characterizes Coupland’s work, aspects of these texts seem self-reflexively to raise questions about the way Coupland writes about wilderness and nature. Consider, for example, that by using wilderness to texture the urban landscape of Vancouver, Coupland actually troubles the “out there”/“in here,” nature/culture, wilderness/civilization divides that prevail in some popular thinking (and that surface in other aspects of his work). I use the situational language of Cronon (“out there” and “in here”) again to invoke his argument that “[i]f wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, . . . then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both” (90). Critiques, then, Timothy Morton would add, must be directed toward work that is “setting up nature as an object ‘over there’—a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact” (125). In establishing the wild as a central aspect of Vancouver’s urban geography, Coupland certainly does the work of combining the two spatial categorizations in ways that call into question whether they are actually separate or not.

“Going meta,” by self-referentially exploring the qualities and limits of his own view of nature, is another way in which Coupland adds complexity to a construction of wilderness that reads as conventional and even problematic. In an essay titled “BC Ferries,” Coupland writes about the seagulls that fly around as travellers ride the ferry from Vancouver to Vancouver Island or other nearby islands. The ferry in this passage functions as a liminal space, transitioning passengers between lands and across water that might, from one perspective, be seen as representative of wilderness. From the perspective of the ferry rider, the birds seem “motionless” because their flight matches the ferry’s speed (*City* 10). Corroborating this feeling of nature’s inaction is the essay’s accompanying photos of still, misty, far-away mountains taken from a moving boat (*City* 11-12). It is as if wilderness becomes, in these images and in the description of the birds, the still point in contrast to Coupland’s moving body and dynamic gaze. The human observer is therefore marked as mobile, free, in flux, and thoroughly caught up in the

contemporary world of passing time, while the birds and the mountains are like still-life pictures remaining forever there for the perusal of someone like Coupland.

At this point, a reader could conclude that “BC Ferries” exemplifies the tropes of infinity and timelessness that Coupland uses elsewhere to characterize wild space. That conclusion, though, is immediately overturned as Coupland describes how the scene turns “brutal,” the birds fighting with one another for food (10). Now, these are no motionless or passive creatures of the wild. The change in behaviour, the “carnage,” Coupland writes, “makes you rethink all your preconceptions about birds” (10). However, this scene seems to be less about birds in a literal sense and more about humans’ difficult process of understanding nonhuman, or wild, phenomena like birds. In this reading, the essay actually narrates self-reflexively the development of Coupland’s ideas about nature. At first, he gives into the perception of nature’s unchanging, timeless quality (motionless bird); then, he considers nature’s behaviour and deems it “brutal,” noting its “carnage” (personifying the observed scene, to some extent, and thus still centring the perception of the observing “I”); and finally, he relinquishes his comprehension of the scene, admitting that he has been called to “rethink” his “preconceptions,” in a gesture that ultimately acknowledges that nature is more complicated than dominant narratives might lead us to believe. In subtle ways, the stages of human perception showcased in this essay suggest that the language and tropes used to imagine nature need to be questioned. Be suspicious of your investment in the image of the still mountain, the essay cautions, or the peaceful bird.

Working to a similar effect, Coupland’s occasional comments about second growth also temper his characterization of wilderness as still, unchanging, or timeless. One example surfaces in an essay called “Trees.” He instructs the reader, “In Vancouver, you have to differentiate between trees and logging” (*City* 152). “Pretty much every bit of land visible from the city,” he explains, “was logged at the turn of the century. What looks like primordial forest is second growth, not to be frowned on, but real trees have to be a thousand or so years old to truly rate” (*City* 152). While the established distinction between “real” and second growth trees might remain somewhat concerning—even through the cheeky tone of Coupland’s comment that trees must be *really* old to “truly rate”—this passage moves Coupland’s representation of wild space toward more informed ground by showing how wilderness is very much situated in the same time and context as humans. Things *do* change in the wilderness, and wilderness is enmeshed in, rather than apart from, the world of human action. Moreover, while the Vancouver wildernesses

may look pristine, pure, or untouched, these references to second growth suggest that indeed they are *touchable*, as they indicate a history of human involvement and intrusion in the lands Coupland otherwise figures as empty and unchanging. Vancouver wilderness, in these moments, is not ancient or infinite like other passages may suggest, a contradiction that draws attention to the way Coupland's version of the Vancouver master narrative is built on shaky ground.

This discussion leads me, by way of conclusion, to emphasize how Coupland's portrayal of wilderness, particularly Vancouver's wildernesses in *City of Glass* and *Polaroids*, is an unresolvedly complicated one. On one hand, as I have argued, Coupland constructs wild space in ways that bolster a simplified master narrative of Vancouver as an ideal city, drawing on the sublime (including the language of infinity and timelessness) to treat nature as the "other" to humanity's "self" in order to cast Vancouver's wilderness-city spirit as uniquely alluring. But, on the other hand, he tempers this romanticized, fanboy version of Vancouver wilderness by reflecting in a "meta" way about perceptions of nature, by showing an awareness that notions of the wild as untouched or separable from human forces are *constructs* used ideologically toward, for instance, the colonial project or the construction of an idealized urban Vancouver identity. Overall, in his use of wilderness to discursively construct Vancouver, Coupland brings the "in here" of quotidian sub/urban life together with the "out there" of a seemingly unfathomable or beyond-human wilderness, and in so doing helps to "relinquish the myth of human apartness" that ecocritics have identified as a central problem in the creation of global ecological health (Cronon 145). Analyzing Coupland's complicated revision of this myth is a worthwhile exercise in parsing cultural texts for their ideological problems and possibilities. But what about action? Does bringing together wilderness with the urban landscape of Vancouver, as Coupland does, push us to treat wilderness differently? Does unsettling the "in here"/"out there" binary in a literary work compel readers to actually do something for the good of their environments, urban or wild or beyond? The final section of this chapter will confront these questions to speculate about Coupland's and literature's role in making just ecological futures.

### **Conclusion: Notes Toward the Future**

Much as Coupland's writing might sometimes locate the wild in the historic and far-reaching past, contemporary visions of the space seem always, somehow, tied to visions of the future. Concerns about the wilderness in the present are, perhaps more urgently than ever,

extrapolated into possible future crises. The almost clichéd sentiment is if humans do not protect the wild now, our future may not include it—indeed, humanity may have no future at all. Naturally, given the popularity of this kind of thinking, apocalyptic rhetoric and narratives are increasingly used to speculate about the wild, particularly in ecocritical and eco-creative work. The apocalypse has been snugly attached to wilderness discourse and ecocriticism since, at least, the publication of what Garrard calls the “founding text of modern environmentalism” (*Ecocriticism 2*): Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). Like many of the works it inspired, *Silent Spring* “relies on the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism 2*). This reliance makes sense, given Carson’s environmental message; there is great power in apocalyptic scenes geared toward just ecological ends. As Garrard sees it, apocalyptic discourse “is capable of galvanizing activists, converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy” (*Ecocriticism 113*). And yet there is a serious problem with the prevalence of apocalyptic thinking, which Garrard sums up very precisely: “Only if we imagine that the planet has a future . . . are we likely to take responsibility for it” (*Ecocriticism 116*).<sup>35</sup>

I bring up the topic of apocalypse here because, in some strange ways, its rhetoric and imagery seem like an extension of the hyperbolic language Coupland uses when he writes wild space. Like in much of Coupland’s other fiction and non-fiction, apocalypse—and, in particular, eco-apocalyptic speculations about the future—plays a role in how space is constructed in *City of Glass*. In an essay called “The Big One,” Coupland presents a vision of Vancouver slowly preparing for the inevitable huge earthquake he thinks will come to destroy the city’s lands and architectures (19). Reading much like a scene of apocalypse rather than a scene of manageable natural disaster, Coupland imagines that “Ikea and the big-box stores” near a mall in Richmond “will become glorious colourful rubble within ten seconds some future rainy afternoon” (19). Here is a vision of the city’s capitalist spaces crumbling at the will of nature. His comment about Mount Baker “shooting off just enough steam every few years to let [Vancouverites] know that if it really wanted to, it could bury us” gestures toward the same apocalyptic sentiment that sees humans at the mercy of nature (*City 91*). Moments in Coupland’s texts at which he envisions the world ending by “natural” disaster exemplify what Rozelle calls the “ecocidal imagination” that

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<sup>35</sup> As a counterpoint to this statement, consider Buell’s idea that “[w]e create images of doom to avert doom” (*Environmental Imagination 295*).

has grown tremendously in contemporary discourse (50). Truly, humans have become used to imagining our own ecocide.<sup>36</sup>

Even when Coupland does not explicitly write humanity's end at the hands of ecological forces, he constructs a somewhat pessimistic view of the future for humans and nonhumans alike. In broad terms, Coupland writes ominously that the "future is going to be a very harsh place. It is not going to care too much about equality or fairness" (*Souvenir 1* 68). Similarly, he speculates about "how gruesome the twenty-first century is going to be. It's going to be *awful*. We have to prepare" (*Souvenir 1* 68). At the same time, he often directs his pessimism about the future toward more specific phenomena, such as the nation's diminishing fish populations: "[s]ymbolically, fish are [Canadians'] soul, and to be a fish in Canada right now is a very depressing thing" (*Souvenir 2* 24). Atlantic cod in Newfoundland, for example, are being "permanently imperiled—to a point where many experts think that they'll soon be extinct" (*Souvenir 2* 24). Coupland adds that the sturgeon in the Fraser River are disappearing, inland trout are increasingly affected by airborne toxins, and there is lead shot in prairie lakes (*Souvenir 2* 24). His concerns are many and varied.

Where does Coupland locate hope for the future, then? Given how he urges readers to adopt an ecologically savvy attitude (under the guise of supporting the nation) in the *Souvenir* series, I argue that Coupland's writing suggests hope lies in the creation of active, informed, and ethical ecological subjectivities.<sup>37</sup> Lousely describes ecological subjectivities as "natural-cultural-political sites where contested futures are made and lived" (167), an articulation that foregrounds the important notion that futures are negotiated and built first in the subjectivities that individuals and communities create. Coupland's version of this idea is tied to citizenship and nationhood. When he writes that "if we want to remain a country, we have to continue being *Canadian*" (*Souvenir 1* 115), he means, in his refiguration of citizenship, that citizens must continue being responsible stewards of the lands this nation currently stands on. Canadians can thus ensure "the future we build remains bright for us here" (*Souvenir 2* 141). This form of

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<sup>36</sup> For more on apocalyptic scenarios (environmental and otherwise) in the texts and cultures of North America's West Coast, including in Coupland's writing, see Ryan Melsom's doctoral dissertation *West Coast Apocalyptic: A Site-Specific Approach to Genre* (2011).

<sup>37</sup> Just as, in the previous chapter of this dissertation, I argued that Coupland invests the suburban landscape with hope and optimism in *Girlfriend's* reversed apocalypse narrative and its furnishing of the suburban subject's political agency.

responsibility ought to be apparent in behaviours and actions, Coupland's work would suggest, but ecological subjectivities start with ideas and words, which is why examining literature like Coupland's can contribute materially to sound environmental ethics.<sup>38</sup> My approach in this chapter, as in the other chapters, values the investigation of texts and representation as a vital tool of (eco)critical endeavour. When Coupland writes about the dwindling sturgeon populations (*Souvenir 1* 123), for example, or about the necessity of "changing fishing or lumber practices" in order to address the country's ecological perils (*Souvenir 2* 24), readers are compelled to consider their own water politics. When he uses wilderness as an anchor for his portrayal of urban Vancouver, he urges the reader to unsettle the "in here"/"out there" distinction that, as Cronon argues, troublingly establishes a boundary between "wild" and "civilized" space. These ideological provocations are not to be discounted, as they lay the ideational groundwork for real-world results. So while this chapter has focused on written works and representation (necessarily so, since this project is a study of Coupland's writing), and in particular on the metaphors and language used to describe wilderness, I hope it also foregrounds a Thirdspace (Soja) sensibility that acknowledges the literal (physical) and social (produced) dimensions of wilderness. The futures of the wild, after all, may be forcefully shaped by humans' imaginations *and* bodies, as we turn language and ideas into ecological action.

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<sup>38</sup> The issue of material action versus (or combined with) ideological action relates to one of the founding debates that has unfolded within the forum of ecocriticism, which is around the tension of space-as-idea versus (or in addition to) space-as-physical-site. This debate has become especially "divisive" (Soper and Bradley xvi) for ecocritics because, to some, shifting the way humans approach space (as material or ideological phenomenon first) means the difference between saving or destroying the environment. After all, from one standpoint, "environmental writing does not literally repair the biosphere, does not literally do anything directly to the environment" (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 267), but physical action does. It is a tricky balance, as Garrard explains, to "keep one eye on the ways in which 'nature' is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse" (*Ecocriticism* 10). This chapter, like its companions in the larger project, strives to model a dual accountability (Buell) to both matter and discourse, the physical and the representative-social-cultural, even while it focuses on literature's contribution to spatial discourse rather than on the material qualities of wilderness.



## Chapter 4

### Browsing the Texts of Consumable Mexico

#### Introduction: Placing Mexico in Coupland's Map of North America

“North America is a place that few would call home,” writes Lee Rodney in a declaration that somehow seems both obvious and daring (18). To qualify his statement, he adds that the continent is “more the invention of politicians and economists than the product of its inhabitants’ collective imagination,” tacitly invoking Benedict Anderson’s famed pronouncement that communities, such as nations, are formed via the imaginations of their citizens (18). North America may not *feel* like home, or be constructed that way in the minds of many who live there, yet since the publication of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), it has served as a kind of writerly “home” to Douglas Coupland. As the introduction to this project explains, for nearly thirty years, in many literary, publishing, scholarly, and media contexts, Coupland has been characterized as a North American writer. The continent has anchored how reviewers, scholars, and general readers alike negotiate his work and public image.<sup>1</sup> Even this project proceeds from the acknowledgement that North America is an important frame of reference from which to read the spatial politics of Coupland’s work, an angle I explain in the introduction. Equally significant, Coupland himself has influenced his public image as a writer belonging to North America.<sup>2</sup> In *Player One: What Is To Become of Us*

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<sup>1</sup> For a sample of scholars who employ the continent in framing Coupland, see G.P. Lainsbury, Robert McGill, and Jordan Stouck, or see reviews by Jay McInerney, Scarlett Thomas, and Michael Agger. Note, too, the presence of not one but two pieces on Coupland in a collection about “contemporary North American dystopian literature,” the book entitled *Blast, Corrupt, Dismantle, Erase* (2014).

<sup>2</sup> He does not admit explicitly to such manipulations, particularly given his stated desire not to be labelled a U.S. writer, as recounted in a 2002 piece for *Macleans* (“Strong and Free”). There, Coupland writes, “Some Canadians like to think of me as American. The Americans like to think that I’m British, and the Brits all think that I’m German because I was born on a now decommissioned Canadian Forces base in Germany. My daddy flew Sabre jets for Canada, dammit!” (“Strong and Free”). In highlighting the many different nationalities under which he

(2010), his contribution to one of the longstanding mainstays of public Canadian culture, the CBC Massey Lectures, Coupland detoured from any focus on the nation by presenting a novel that never references Canada by name (except in paratextual matter) but that includes six references to North America and three to “Americans” or an American state.<sup>3</sup> Regular appearances of the term “North America” in his written work make clear his utilization of the continent for at least referential, if not more substantial, purposes. In his Marshall McLuhan biography, for example, North America comes up fifteen times, including when Coupland refers to “most North American cities” (implying that there is such a thing) (42); to a “North American sense of distance” (42-43) (as if it would be shared between all inhabitants); and to “North America’s dominant social agenda” (123) (as if there were only one).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the trend in identifying Coupland via North America simply reflects that Coupland’s writing takes a continental perspective. His works are set in both the United States and Canada, two of the

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has apparently been located, this statement contributes to rendering Coupland *global* (and, less pressingly, continental) in character—despite how it also contains complaints about not being associated with Canada. There may be a performative dimension to his comments here that is not to be ignored, especially in light of Lorraine York’s scholarship on how Canadian authors carefully and publicly cultivate literary citizenship according to cultural, financial, and other needs (see her *Literary Celebrity in Canada* [2007]). It is an especially difficult dimension for me to ignore given that, as a Coupland researcher, I have never come across research that mistakes Coupland for a German writer; my suspicion that he uses such anecdotes to cultivate a particularly *worldly* persona therefore mounts.

<sup>3</sup> The Massey Lectures were established in 1961, a time of fervent public and governmental enthusiasm for the arts in a period often called the heyday of Canadian cultural nationalism, brought upon in large part by the 1949 “Royal Commission to assess the state of the arts, letters, and sciences in Canada” (*CanLit Guides* Editorial Team); its resulting developments included the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957 and the National Library of Canada in 1953. The Lectures are a five-part, radio-broadcasted lecture series delivered each year by a selected individual of significance to Canada. The logistics have changed over time, but currently, Massey Lectures are presented at select locations throughout the country over the course of one week and are later published in print.

<sup>4</sup> Coupland is perhaps being deliberately cheeky in his generalizations here, but the same generalizations surface in more obviously serious contexts, such as in scholarship, which suggests that there are others who likewise invest in the idea of particularly *North American* cities, sentiments, or agendas. As one example, see Lainsbury’s description of the “relatively comfortable, suburban, middle-class existence that most book-reading North Americans live.” Further, note that while in these instances and others, Coupland seems to conceptualize a theoretically united “North America,” there are other instances in which he draws a strict line between Canadian and U.S.-American people (such as in his figuration of wilderness and land stewardship, discussed in Chapter 3).

continent's biggest countries; his characters frequently travel across the continent, or from the continent, overseas, and back; and several of his most famous books (*Generation X*, *Microserfs*, *JPod*) eschew the local, and certainly the Canadian, in pursuit of cross-national concerns. If Coupland's is the so-called "voice that has no regional character—a voice from nowhere" (*Life After God* 173), it appears that, for some, the voice has registered as North American.

Yet, there is one matter of fact that renders more precarious Coupland's linkages to the continent: its Latin American geographies, including Mexico, are made just barely legible in Coupland's literary map of the land. Browsing this map for such geographies therefore required me to combine macro- and micro-level reading methods to parse the ways in which Mexico, in particular, features in the North America that Coupland's books collectively create. On the macro side, I used digital text-search methods to mine Coupland's oeuvre for any mention of Mexico, while the micro-method involved close reading passages to analyze these mentions and to find other markers of Latin American or Mexican presence, some of which were subtler than those in which, for instance, Mexico featured by name.<sup>5</sup> This chapter will explore the more significant patterns that emerged from this combination of zooming out to observe trends in Coupland's construction of Mexico and zooming in to see how those trends operate at the level of individual words and images. Overall, I found through this search that Mexico and Latin America make mostly passing appearances in Coupland's work—the work of someone who is, by numerous accounts, figured as a North American writer.

From one perspective, the absence of Mexico in Coupland's writing does nothing to upset his designation as North American culture-maker: there are many ways one might define a North American writer, and focusing on the places that appear (or do not appear) in the writer's work is just one possible method. Moreover, despite Mexico's position within the physical boundaries of the continent, in some discursive contexts, North America has come to signify just Canada and the United States, *sans* Mexico. The *Oxford English Dictionary* seems to have ingested this understanding of the continent, at least in the definition it provides for "North American" (n.): a "native or inhabitant of North America, esp. of the United States or Canada." Meanwhile, some scholars echo this same understanding: Helmbrecht Breinig clarifies, at the outset of his book on

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<sup>5</sup> This word-search process devoted particular attention to words that begin with "Mexic-" and to key terminology associated with Mexico, such as "Spanish" (referring to the language or used as a qualifier for nouns) and "Latin-" (accounting for mentions of Latin America or Latinx communities).

literary depictions of Latin America, “I speak of ‘North America’ as excluding both Mexico and all of the Caribbean—a term that is therefore obviously inadequate but common practice” (4).<sup>6</sup> The grouping together of Canada and the U.S. under the banner of North America also occurs in more quotidian contexts. Consider how musicians will often announce “North American” tours during which they visit only locations in Canada and the U.S.<sup>7</sup> There are instances in which, too, North America really just signifies “the United States,” as Albert Braz has identified in the phenomenon he calls “the North Americanization of the USA,” which has caused not only an “effacement of Canada” (“North of America” 81) in “inter-American discourse” (“North of America” 80), but has also, at times, pushed Mexico out of the public portrait of North America.

These cases reveal only some nuances of space and nomenclature in the context of North America, and clearly there is much more to be said. The widespread acceptance of Coupland as a North American writer, for example, is likely a byproduct of how his whiteness encodes him as part of the “dominant” population, or as someone whose social position can easily command a transnational or global, rather than only parochial, readership. Further, the question of how Mexico is located geographically—in North America, Central America, or otherwise—is charged with cultural, social, political, and economic heft.<sup>8</sup> And the question of whether continents are even a relevant spatial category anymore is likewise a hot and contested one. Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen would venture that the idea (or, in their words, the “myth”) of continents is damaging, and “[o]nly by discarding the commonplace notion that continents denote significant biological or cultural groupings can a sophisticated understanding of global geography be reached” (3). However, it is not the goal of this project to resolve these issues. Instead, as the presence of this chapter in a study of one writer’s depiction of North

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<sup>6</sup> He later adds a footnote that the term “Anglo-America” could be a “suitable” alternative for North America, depending on context (323).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, tour announcements from recent years for The Flaming Lips (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/flaming-lips-extend-north-american-tour-w517191/>), Metallica (<http://variety.com/2018/music/news/metallica-announce-massive-north-american-tour-1202710277/>), and Jaden Smith ([http://exclaim.ca/music/article/jaden\\_smith\\_announces\\_north\\_american\\_vision\\_tour](http://exclaim.ca/music/article/jaden_smith_announces_north_american_vision_tour)).

<sup>8</sup> Some might argue that this same question applies to Canada’s role in the continent, which carries a similar political charge. Braz would go so far as to say that “Canada has no continental identity”: “Given that Canada is located in the Americas, its geographical position would suggest that it is an American country. Yet, historically, Canada has perceived itself—and has been perceived by the world—largely as a European outpost” (“Canada’s Hemisphere” 349).

American space might suggest, this project begins from the premise that Mexico can be thought of as part of North America—particularly in Coupland’s literary mapping.

Given the context I outline above, it is easy to see how Coupland’s well-known label as a North American writer might persist despite, or even because of, his works being so deeply and obviously informed by white, Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-American interests and attitudes. And while this labelling might still strike the skeptical observer as troubling, it should be contextualized within the reality that Coupland’s writerly disinterest in Mexico is actually fairly typical when measured against a long history of Canadian artists and writers who, many argue, have not paid significant creative attention to Latin America or to Mexico more specifically. It is because of this history that Braz boldly casts “the United States–Mexico border” as “Canada’s real southern boundary—the line that most of its citizens dare not cross—not even imaginatively” (“Canada’s Hemisphere” 349). Creative exchanges between Canada and Latin America “have been limited in scope,” Braz writes, “something that is conspicuously evident in literary and cultural discourses in English” (“Canada’s Hemisphere” 349). And, Braz contends, if Canada has shown little cultural curiosity about Mexico, then the very same can be said for Mexico’s curiosity about Canada. In J.C.M. Ogelsby’s words, “Canadians . . . have not, as a whole, been very interested in the America that stretches from Cape Horn to the Arctic Islands” (1); meanwhile “Canada has never attracted much Latin American attention” (Ogelsby 3). This mutual disinterest is noted in the introduction to the special issue of *Comparative American Studies* on “Canada and the Americas,” in which Rachel Adams and Sarah Phillips Casteel note that even “[l]andmark essay collections, such as *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (1990), edited by Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and *Poetics of the Americas* (1997), edited by Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries, pay scant attention to Canadian writing,” as they focus instead on Latin America and the United States (6). Beyond scholarship and into the world of literary publication and book-buying, Graciela Martínez-Zalce writes that “[t]here is still no market in Mexico for Canadian literature” (70) for a host of reasons, including issues of cost, publicity, and the logistics of translation, all of which make it materially difficult for Mexican reading publics to come to know the literatures of Canada.

Notably, not all agree with these assessments. In *The Artists’ Mecca: Canadian Art and Mexico* (1992), Christine Boyanoski writes that, in fact, “Mexico has held a particular fascination for Canadian artists ever since the 1930s” (1). Her research suggests that this was for three

reasons. First, “Mexico offered Canadian artists an exemplar of a socially-oriented art”; second, “Mexico was exotic” and Canadian artists were “attracted by its colour, light and ready-made subject matter”; and third, “Mexico permitted the Canadian artist freedom from the status quo” (1). Boyanoski also reminds us that, apart from the artistic and creative engagement between the two, there is the important reality of tourism and travel from Canada to Mexico and vice versa, particularly the large number of Canadians who holiday in Mexico, the beginnings of which she locates in the 1940s-50s (5). Whether one sees Boyanoski’s account as reaching toward exception and anomaly, or as an important corrective to the narrative of mutual apathy that has thus far characterized scholarship on interactions between Canada and Mexico, her work brings up important questions around the ethics of Canada’s particular form of engagement with Mexico. In Boyanoski’s account, it seems that Canadians are largely drawn to Mexico because of what they can *gain* from it: an example of a socially-minded art community, which they can draw from and use as a model for transformation when they go back home; an exotic locale that seems like it might offer more attractive opportunities for Canadian creatives; a permissive atmosphere that allows them to be freed from local and national responsibilities and accountabilities; and so on. If the majority of scholarship raises the question of why Canada and Mexico are disengaged from one another, then Boyanoski’s scholarship asks how they *are* engaged and what implications might accompany that engagement. The narratives that circulate about the two countries’ interactions are important for a host of reasons beyond the purpose of this chapter, not least of which is that there are real-world reverberations that can come from public understandings of their relationship, in the form of policy, negotiations, economic exchanges, and so on.

In this chapter, I am not interested in whether Braz or Boyanoski is “right.” Instead, I want to explore how one particular Canadian writer engages with Mexico and what the implications of that engagement might be. Coupland’s body of work could be seen as representative of the scholarly dialogue happening around Canada and Mexico, outlined above. That is, Mexico is mostly absent in his writing—signalling a kind of disengagement with that part of the continent and reflecting his embeddedness in a white, Anglo-Canadian and U.S.-American version of North America—but when it *is* present, it is usually in ways that underscore the one-way movement of Canadians (and Anglo-North Americans more generally) gaining from, taking from, or otherwise consuming Mexico for their own benefit. In short, Mexico, in

Coupland's fiction, is tied to consumption, for better or for worse (as discussed in the coming sections). To examine this premise, in the first section of this chapter I will adopt a "macro" view of Coupland's works, identifying trends in how Mexico is rendered across his writing. The two trends I focus on concern food and drugs, particularly their connections to space. In the case of food, I explore how Coupland's textual landscape is peppered with Mexican restaurants, and I discuss how this feature serves both a documentary function, by conveying the physical setting of the works, and also reveals the sometimes-troubling perceptions of the characters who express a "hunger" for Mexico. I also identify how Mexico is equated with drugs in Coupland's fiction, and I discuss the "othering" impulse embedded in such an equation, using the novel *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001) as an extended example. In both cases, I demonstrate that readers are not called to simply internalize the characters' understandings of Mexico, but are also invited to interrogate the characters and texts. The second section of the chapter will pick up from Chapter 1, narrowing in to a "micro" level to study the second big move that the protagonists of *Generation X* make, from Palm Springs to San Felipe, Mexico. In this discussion, I concentrate on two major ways the Xers engage with Mexico: first, through Dag's dreams of opening a hotel in San Felipe (dreams that rehearse settler colonial impulses for travel and rely, again, on othering his destination), and second, in Andy's border-crossing narrative that closes the novel (a narrative expressed tellingly in terms of food and consumption). Finally, I will end by exploring how the reader is never actually *witness to* the Xers' lives in Mexico, an exploration that will disclose the historical and cultural contexts that make necessary this analysis of Coupland's Mexico.

### **Food and Drugs in Coupland's Fiction: Featuring *All Families Are Psychotic***

If called to situate them in relation to the topic of this chapter, one might describe the *dramatis personae* of any given Douglas Coupland work as follows: they are not Mexican, they are not Latin American, they typically do not step foot in Mexico, and they have no significant attachments to Mexican culture, so far as the reader can discern. All that said: they sure do like Mexican restaurants. In fact, Mexican restaurants constitute one of two significant patterns that typify the characters' engagements with Mexican spaces; the other pattern is drugs. Even while Mexico remains more a faint, ambient energy than an always-physical presence in Coupland's works, the repeated references to Mexico in relation to food and drugs become, in aggregate,

important objects of study for this project on Coupland's North American spatial politics. In this section of the chapter, I explore representations of food and drugs in relation to Mexico in an attempt to analyze the broader trends characterizing Coupland's representation of the country. While I devote some focused attention to *All Families Are Psychotic*, for the most part I deal with texts from across Coupland's fiction.<sup>9</sup> As I move from the topic of food to drugs, I will show the complicated ways in which Coupland's characters engage with Mexico via the ingestion of its substances.

If ingestion fundamentally defines characters' relations to Mexico in Coupland's writing, then the Mexican restaurant might be considered the fundamental, or at least meaningfully recurring, space that marks and facilitates such ingestion. A repeated feature of Coupland's North American landscape, Mexican restaurants certainly occupy a notable presence in the background, but not the foreground, of his characters' lives. Indeed, what most strongly links the references to Mexican restaurants across Coupland's work, perhaps, is that the restaurants are quickly passed over by those characters who point to them. Generally, these restaurants are not fully described and usually hold little importance for the characters. In an earlier novel from Coupland's oeuvre, *Shampoo Planet* (1992), one character recalls another telling her where "the cheapest place to eat a Mexican dinner" (112) is in Lancaster, Washington. The reference here is used only as a kind of marker to signal characters' familiarity with Lancaster and to suggest that Lancaster has at least enough restaurants serving Mexican food to justify a local advising an outsider about which place is most cost effective. Readers never hear about this restaurant again. Later in the same novel, another character will "stand with the tourists in the shade behind a Mexican-food stand" (221) in Venice Beach, California. The food stand is not otherwise commented on, and thus this detail does little more than link Venice Beach loosely to Mexican food and food-stand culture, while suggesting that tourists might be especially attracted to such phenomena, but the neutral language reveals no critique nor endorsement of the tourists there. That the character in question is spatially situated in relation to the food-stand—he stands *behind* it—is a maneuver repeated in *All Families Are Psychotic* at a moment in which one character hails a taxi in Vancouver "by the stand near the bus loop's Mexican fast-food place" (20-21).

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<sup>9</sup> There will be one exception in which I bring in one of Coupland's non-fiction essays, entitled "Pot." Overall, though, the reason Coupland's fiction takes centre stage in this chapter is simply that references to Mexico/Mexican culture and Latin America come up most frequently in his fiction and often not at all in his non-fiction.



In both texts, Coupland uses Mexican restaurants pragmatically to note the characters' surroundings; no matter where they actually are (Lancaster, Venice Beach, Vancouver, or wherever), Coupland's characters seem to be near some version of a Mexican food joint. For one character in *The Gum Thief* (2007), that proximity manifests in her first job "bussing tables at a cheesy Mexican restaurant" (204), seemingly in a suburb of Vancouver, though it is not made explicit. Even in this instance in which the character is familiar with the restaurant (having worked there), it is not referred to by name. Indeed, of all cases in which Mexican restaurants are noted in Coupland's texts, only one restaurant is actually given a name: in *Generation A* (2009), a character recalls seeing potentially illicit lovers "sharing nachos and refried beans at Mexicali Rosa's" in North Bay, Ontario (53). The lack of naming makes sense in the context of my reading that the characters are, on the whole, not engaging deeply with these places. In some cases, they point out these structures to situate themselves spatially, and they are likely not paying attention to details like the name on the front of the building. In other cases, such as the Lancaster example, the individual restaurants are not what matter; what *does* matter is the general fact of being able to find affordable Mexican food, a prioritization that speaks to Coupland's characters' broad interest in consuming Mexico.

Among these short restaurant scenes from Coupland's body of work, one stands out as a more extended commentary on the politics of Mexico as the consumable good that Anglo-North Americans desire. The scene is from *Generation A*, when a character named Harj enters a restaurant in New Albany, Ohio, that is not explicitly deemed "Mexican" but is coded as such by its platters of nachos and beer "brewed and bottled in Mexico" (131). Upon receipt of one such beer—ordered on his behalf by his dining companion—Harj thinks, "why on earth would someone choose a beverage made in Mexico? When it arrived, it sat on the table and I stared at it as though it were from the Dark Ages. People want America, not Mexico. Well, maybe at least the idea of America . . . America before the year 2000" (131). Part of the joke in this scene is that Harj, a Sri Lankan visitor to the United States, does not "get" the U.S. fascination with Mexico, even while he acknowledges that the U.S., too, is perhaps only desirable as a concept rather than reality.

Taken together, the Mexican restaurants that pop up across Coupland's collection offer a couple of different readings. On one hand, it makes sense that the books reflect how Mexican restaurants *do* populate the commercial landscapes of countries outside of Mexico (to differing

degrees). Jeffrey M. Pilcher might identify this trend in Coupland's writing as parallel to the real-world "proliferation of taco shops and ethnic restaurants [serving Mexican food] in the Southwest during the first half of the twentieth century, and their nationwide spread [through the U.S.] in the second half" (Pilcher 229). Coupland's works somewhat organically document this changing gastronomic landscape, in Canada as well as the U.S, in occurrences such as the ones outlined above. On the other hand, the references might, in addition to their documentary function, suggest ways Coupland's characters perceive the spaces around them. Unlike Harj, many Coupland characters—on the whole, hailing from the U.S. and Canada—seem unthinkingly and cavalierly caught up in that touristic fascination with Mexico and "other" places. Like experiencing a hiccup that shakes up the body of bland, middle-class North America—the Lancasters and New Albanys of the continent—Coupland's characters often express the narrative equivalent of *ooh, look, a Mexican place!* With no further description or engagement to accompany such expressions, Mexican restaurants decorate Coupland's Canadian and American landscapes in only the most ornamental of ways. The characters, and even, sometimes, the narrative's seeing-eye, appear mildly piqued by anything they perceive as convincingly exotic, a reality that speaks to how Coupland's geographies are often situated within a worldview that defaults to whiteness. Mexican restaurants become the metaphorical *spice* they look for (literally speaking: they see, they note what they saw, they move on) to flavour their quotidian lives, even if that means simply noticing that they are standing near a tourist-attracting Mexican food stand, as in *Shampoo Planet*.

Coupland's works are just one example in a discursive tradition which, Pilcher explains, has long viewed Mexican food as a method of "escape" from middle-class American drudgery and mass culture (222). Foods seen as "primitive," to relatively privileged Anglo-North Americans, are experienced as "a visceral thrill of transgression from overly processed factory fare" (Pilcher 222).<sup>10</sup> The "plebeian image" ascribed to Mexican restaurants in the United States,

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<sup>10</sup> That being said, the foods that Coupland's characters typically order might be thought of as more run-of-the-mill American, especially in the American Southwest, than particularly primitive or different from what middle-class white consumers are used to—e.g. nachos and refried beans (*Generation A* 53) and beer (*Generation A* 131). The only instance in which Mexican food itself appears somewhat exoticized is in *Worst. Person. Ever.* (2013). The novel juxtaposes a recipe for a "beloved Mexican classic," "Chili Cicadas with Rice," with a scene in which the main character eats (and then vomits up) a "full bowl of bugs" at the behest of his boss, the head of production on the reality show *Survival* (259).

an image with “lower-class associations” (Pilcher 229), perhaps adds another layer to how Coupland’s characters see and note pockets of the “exotic” in their hometowns, for it is at such places that these middle-class characters can most convincingly feel like they are “slumming it”—for example, by drinking (with hesitance) beer that looks “as though it were from the Dark Ages,” produced and bottled in Mexico (*Generation A* 131).

A reader may interpret the Mexican restaurants in Coupland’s work in a variety of ways, but their physical recurrence signals that Coupland’s writing frames Mexico in terms of consumption. This framing makes sense given that eating food is a literal process of consumption. But more metaphorically, the moments in which Mexican restaurants are noticed by characters seem to suggest their collective impulse to “consume” Mexico, without actually going there.<sup>11</sup> If a thirsty person walking in the desert is likely to imagine the conditions under which their thirst would be satisfied (“hey look, water ahead!”), perhaps Coupland’s characters and narrators exemplify a kind of hunger for Mexico that surfaces in their observations of the world around them (again: *ooh, look, a Mexican place!*). Part of the history of consuming Mexico as Pilcher describes it, Coupland’s writing deftly reveals how Mexican food is sometimes used for the escapist fantasies of white, middle-class Canadians and Americans who seek to “spice up” their lives, metaphorically or otherwise; being in the presence of Mexican restaurants, and there consuming Mexican food, can facilitate this fantasy. From this perspective, Mexican restaurants in Coupland’s writing end up raising the issue of Anglo-North Americans’ sometimes unthinking consumption of Mexican cultures. In other words, the restaurants assume a background role in order to show how Mexico remains in the background of Anglo-North Americans’ minds, only coming to the fore in instances of hunger or desired consumption.

If these references to Mexican restaurants and food in Coupland’s writing work to document the literal landscape of the U.S. and Canada, to reveal the habits of perception guiding Coupland’s characters (such as their desire to see the “exotic” in the world around them and perhaps to highlight their shallow engagement with Mexican culture), then Coupland’s treatment of drugs, as spatial indicators of Mexico, can be said to do much the same. Across his work, Mexico is named and framed in relation to a variety of drugs used recreationally and/or medicinally. Take, for instance, Coupland’s essay “Pot” from *Bit Rot* (2015) (the only significant

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<sup>11</sup> I will discuss how going there actually affects this pattern of consumable Mexico later in this chapter.

appearance of Mexico-related content in Coupland's non-fiction). The essay, a personal reflection on Coupland's relationship with drugs, mostly regards Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada more broadly, but nevertheless references, in passing, "the best Mexican" weed, as well as the "Mexican weed trade" (205). Much like the restaurant examples, these occurrences are never fleshed out, except in the sense that Coupland goes on briefly to shame "the pathetic US government" for its "attempts to destroy the Mexican weed trade" during Coupland's youth (205). His critique therefore points toward the U.S. rather than Mexico; the implied vice is not that one nation facilitates a drug industry, but that another ego-driven nation tries to squash the industry of its neighbour. As is the case in much of Coupland's writing, then, unrelated phenomena (Mexico, weed) are marshalled toward Coupland's judgment of the United States, rather than discussed in their own rights. Mexican weed functions as a tool of critique.<sup>12</sup>

In *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), the link between drugs and Mexico surfaces again, but with slightly different connotations. When the protagonists of that novel are still teenagers, one of them, Richard, attends a house party in the suburbs of Vancouver and stumbles upon "a branchy wigwam rife with headache-inducing Mexican pot of the weakest caliber," friends-of-a-friend "toking furiously" inside (16). Coupland's use of that particular qualifier for the noun "pot," marking it explicitly Mexican, becomes even more significant when considered in combination with the unappealing descriptors that accompany it: the pot is "headache-inducing," "of the weakest caliber," and "smells like an egg fart inside a subway car," as Richard describes it (16). Take, as another example, the moment in which Zack in *Generation A* encounters "a Mexican" who, to Zack's pleasure, sells him "a bag of magic mushrooms for ten bucks," the slippage from "dollars" to the more colloquial "bucks" emphasizing how Zack thinks of this as a cheap deal (67). The connotations of the two scenes appear to be that Mexico as a country is most comprehensible, to these characters, for its relationship drugs, particularly cheap or low-quality drugs.

However, this spatial association between Mexico and drugs is not without exception; take, for instance, the drugs that feature in the short story "In the Desert," from *Life After God*, which was explored in Chapter 1. In the story, the narrator is transporting "1,440 ampules of

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<sup>12</sup> Recall, for example, the discussion in Chapter 3 about how Coupland uses wilderness to construct an opposition between good, environmentally ethical Canadians and bad, environmentally harmful Americans.

50cc Parastolin anabolic steroids smuggled up from Mexico . . . to a private physical trainer of TV celebrities” in Palm Springs (172). Compared to the moments noted above from *Girlfriend* and *Generation A*, the steroids here are described with more scientific precision and treated with slightly more reverence—not just a ten-buck bag of ’shrooms or the egg-fart pot of Richard’s teenage years—as they are also being distributed to the Californian elite. Certainly, at its core, the same message can be found in this example: Mexico is the producer and purveyor of drugs. But in a story premised upon the tension between superficiality and spirituality (see Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of the text), it is possible that the Mexican origin of the steroids is revealed in order to underscore that there is not much of a moral difference between U.S. celebrities who rely on steroids and the Mexican industry that produces them. This way, much as in the essay “Pot,” Mexico itself (and its relationship to the drug production and consumption cycle) is not being uniquely shamed or critiqued but instead is being used to critique the U.S., including aspects of celebrity culture.

The larger pattern of understanding Mexico as a space primarily animated by drug culture continues through Coupland’s references to beer and other alcohol. Consider how Zack in *Generation A* compares a river in his sightline to “the colour of bad Mexican whiskey” (291)—not just any whiskey, but *Mexican* whiskey, and not just any Mexican whiskey, but *bad* Mexican whiskey. While the particularities of the described hue might be lost on those readers who are not experts in varieties and colours of whiskey, this passage at least tells the reader that Zach defaults to a Mexican-made drug as his frame of reference for describing the world. It is as if Zach, like some of Coupland’s works themselves, has internalized an association between drugs (particularly dubious ones) and Mexico, however unconsciously. This internalized association will come as no surprise to those familiar with narratives of uninhibited entertainment and escape in Mexico. Such narratives have been gradually but persistently built by intersecting forces, including travel and tourism materials (more on this later in the chapter) and cultural expressions such as the television show *Laguna Beach*, in which an annual trip to Cabo San Lucas becomes the partying highlight of the year for Orange County teenagers, or Malcom Lowry’s novel *Under the Volcano* (1947), which depicts outsiders getting swept up in the intoxication and danger apparently enabled by their Mexican surroundings. But the public discourse around uninhibited Mexico has also been shaped by real-life histories of outsiders who flock to Mexico for release and relief, as in the well-known case of the American Beat poets who sought imaginative spark

in what was thought to be the fertile artistic community of Mexico (more on this, too, later in the chapter). These narratives of escape to a wildly permissive, experimental, and creative Mexico are forged by and themselves forge the industry that Andrew Grant Wood and Dina Berger, among others, call “vice tourism” (378): travel catalyzed by desires to engage in “vice” behaviours, such as drinking or consuming other drugs, gambling, and partaking in any number of illicit or illegal activities. By linguistically and narratively establishing a connection between Mexican space and the “vice” of drug consumption, even subtly in the way a river is described, Coupland’s writing contributes to the vice-driven narrative that has long typified Anglo-North American attitudes toward Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

In *Generation A*, though, there appears a somewhat different story about Mexico and drugs. Harj’s bafflement about Mexican beer tells some of that story, and the rest unfolds soon after, when Harj is being nearly mauled by mobs of people who have heard he is one of only a few individuals to have been stung by a bee in the near-future, beeless world of the novel. To escape the mobs, Harj “tumbled out the second-floor window . . . only to land plop on a half-deflated vinyl pool toy promoting beer from Mexico” (148). Fewer than twenty pages after the restaurant scene in which Harj scoffs at Mexican beer, this moment provides a pseudo-ironic counterpoint: “people” may “want America, not Mexico” (131), as Harj believes, but now it is Mexican beer that has cushioned his fall. The reader is perhaps invited to read this follow-up scene karmically: *this is what you get for stepping on Mexico as you threaten to indulge in the myth of U.S. exceptionalism, Harj!* But more than that, the pool toy lying half-deflated outside the house of a “Craig”—the name Harj uses for the type of person who has a “heady blender drink of beer, casual American style and questionable morality” (129), among other qualities—connotes the empty, product-based, and plastic-deep fascination that the Craigs of the world have

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<sup>13</sup> The narrative of Mexico’s permissiveness, though, has some grounding in reality that should not be dismissed. A popular example to use here is how the mid-century American Beat poets were drawn from the U.S. to Mexico, in part, because of its loose governmental regulations and social acceptance of things that were, in the U.S., morally or legally prohibited: “In Mexico, there seemed to be less state control and governmental interference with daily activity. Even illegal drugs, and needles and syringes to inject them, for example, were available for very little money; doctors could be easily convinced to write prescriptions for morphine, and [William S.] Burroughs could satisfy his heroin addiction for about a dollar a day” (Tytell 54).

with Mexico.<sup>14</sup> So while Mexico is *related* to alcohol in these examples from *Generation A*, the relation functions more to critique attitudes about Mexico (such as Harj's) and superficial engagement with Mexico (such as the Craigs's) than to stereotype Mexico as some sort of drug hub.

Drugs do not play a part only in “vice tourism,” of course, and they are not solely the shallow interest of Craigs; they play a central, if often controversial, role in many individuals' quotidian lives, in part for the relief, pleasure, and possibilities they can offer—intellectual, social, spiritual, creative, and so forth. One important dimension of drug use, and of Coupland's representation of the Mexico-plus-drugs nexus, is its curative potential. This dimension is explored most extensively in *All Families are Psychotic*.<sup>15</sup> The drug storyline in this novel begins when Janet Drummond, the matriarch of the titular family, contracts HIV and procures thalidomide to help treat her resulting mouth ulcers. The drug is hard to find. Janet explains to her daughter that she was forced to “ferret out the entire Internet just to obtain it from countries like Brazil and Paraguay” (151). Part of an online “medical list,” which distributes information about where to find thalidomide, Janet discovers that in addition to rumors that “a British firm, Buckminster, was going to have legal supplies available shortly,” there is also a “potential Mexican source” from which she might obtain the drug (36). Some time later, it appears that Janet has followed up on this source, as she tells her son that she can “get [thalidomide] from Brazil, through an underground network. Usually it comes FedEx. Or sometimes through Mexico, but Mexico's a disaster, so Brazil's better” (65). Left unexplained by Janet, this passing comment reads like the words of someone who is not deeply involved with Mexico or Brazil, or their drug industries, but has one or two anecdotal experiences to support her belief that Brazil is

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<sup>14</sup> In his younger years, Harj was employed to “escort young people—mostly young American tourists—around the island as they tried to ‘find themselves,’” and in that process he had to “endure” some “awful conversations,” “listening to a Kris or a Max or an Amy or a Craig discuss what it means ‘to be free inside one's head’” (24). Reminiscing about this, Harj thinks: “is it so wrong to want to kill a Craig?” (24). Clearly, Harj has developed some well-earned skepticism of the behaviours of seemingly privileged Americans.

<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing, the only other Coupland work that approaches the topic of medicinal drug use in some relation to Mexico is *The Gum Thief*. One character recalls trying to help “cure” her sister's cancer: “In the end, we did the usual nothing-ventured-nothing-gained stuff: Mexico, herbalists in Manitoba, a child in South Carolina who would breathe a miracle onto your loved one's photo for a twenty-dollar donation. But the cancer was one of those forest-fire varieties” (113).

the better drug procurement option. But the comparison between the two countries is less important than the fact that the reader learns the drug is available in or through Mexico, and that the firm operating in Britain goes about distributing the drug in a morally upstanding way, while the Mexican channel is coded as unpredictable or disastrous.

The chief point, though, is that Mexico, and Latin America more broadly, is again at the fore in the characters' experiences with drugs. In order to parse why this matters, readers need to look to the larger narrative the novel creates around thalidomide. By the end of the book's first chapter, readers are meant to understand that thalidomide is a Very Bad Drug. This is not far off from how the drug has been regarded historically, since by the mid-1960s, thalidomide was made illegal in many countries because if pregnant women ingested it, it could produce phocomelia, congenital heart disease, and other "malformations" and "abnormalities" in their fetal babies (Kim and Scialli 1).<sup>16</sup> In the novel's world, the reader learns early on that Janet's daughter, Sarah, was born without one hand because her mother took thalidomide while pregnant (57). Sarah, now an adult and an accomplished astronaut, calls herself one of the "canaries in the coal mine," sacrificially warning future drug-consumers about thalidomide's dire effects:

We were the first children born in which it was proved that chemicals from the outside world—in our case thalidomide—could severely damage the human embryo. These days, most mothers don't smoke or drink during pregnancy. They know that the outer world can enter their babies and cause damage. They smoked and drank and took any number of

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<sup>16</sup> The history of thalidomide is a complicated one. The drug was developed in the 1950s, and put on the market in 1957 by a German company called *Chemie Grünenthal*. Its original use was as a sedative; it was a sleeping pill especially marketable to those with insomnia, anxiety, and trauma born of a recently warring world. But then it began to be distributed to pregnant women to treat morning sickness. At this time, it was sold as an over-the-counter drug that was considered very safe. In fact, its entire marketing campaign hinged on claims about how safe it was, and it was seen as so benign in the public mind that people (including pregnant women) would often not even bother to list it on medical documentation as a drug they were taking (Bryner and Stephens 15). Despite concerns over its side effects registering within one year of its release in Germany, it was still approved for use in countries such as Canada, Britain, and Australia. At its most popular, the drug was on the market in 46 countries (Bryner and Stephens 16). And while it never received FDA approval in the United States, it was distributed there in clinical trials and drug testing in the late '50s and early '60s. Over the course of a few years, because a causal relationship was found between thalidomide and certain congenital anomalies, many countries, including Canada in 1962 (Schwarz), took the drug off the market or made it legally unobtainable.



medications without thinking twice. Now we know better, and as a species we're smarter as a result. . . . (10)

This passage, the first in the novel in which the drug is named, establishes how the reader should feel about thalidomide: it is a bad chemical that only the tragically irresponsible or innocently uninformed individuals of decades past would ingest. It is a drug that prevented the growth of Sarah's hand in utero, causing her to name thalidomide "the worst molecule in the universe" (152). Others in the novel share her feelings. Upon discovery that Janet has begun taking thalidomide again (for her mouth ulcers), her ex-husband, Ted, angrily tells her, "Putting that shit into your body is evil. They should take every last molecule of that vile crap and burn it" (158). Another member of the family scours herself in a hot shower after touching the blister pack of thalidomide pills, worried that simply touching the package will harm the baby she is carrying (58). And when one of Janet's sons, Wade, also finds out that Janet has resumed taking the drug, he asks, "What I'm wondering is where does a person even *find* thalidomide these days? Do scientists have garage sales? It's—freakish—that anybody's even making the stuff any more. It's creepy" (65).

Wade's question is answered straightforwardly by the novel: in the world it depicts, a person can find thalidomide in Mexico and Brazil.<sup>17</sup> The drug that the text cumulatively builds up as morally evil, freakish or creepy, and damaging on a molecular level can be most easily retrieved in Latin America. The significance of this representation becomes clearer in light of the other ways the novel engages with Latin America: this is a novel that associates Mexico with a "drug from the 1970s made from peach pits," which Janet says turned out to be a "hoax" (120), and a novel in which one character considers wishing for the superpower of "[s]*uperimmunity that would allow him to crawl through all the raw sewage of Mexico with no ill effects*" (129).

The text's indictment of thalidomide, combined with these other references to Mexico, establishes a hierarchy in which Mexico becomes the primitive and unclean (note the image of "raw sewage"), medically or scientifically untrustworthy (note the peach pit "hoax" and thalidomide distribution), and ethically questionable counterpoint to the modern, sanitary, intellectually forward, and rigorously ethical Anglo-American/Canadian world that the

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<sup>17</sup> And perhaps recently in the U.S., but that underground source has now "moved into the more lucrative field of banned diet medications," and it is never confirmed that the source is, indeed, from the United States (36).

characters inhabit.<sup>18</sup> Janet's description of Toronto in the 1930s as "bland, methodical, thrifty and rules-playing" (11), or as "a city of porridge, bricks and sensible rain garments" (50) later in her life, speaks to the other side of this built hierarchy. The image of Toronto's "sensible rain garments," invoking protection, comfort, and safety, is an especially telling contrast to Mexico's "raw sewage." Synthesizing this contrast with what the novel tells us about thalidomide, the reader can glean the general message here: Toronto, and other Canadian and American cities like it, cares about and protects its citizens—even if bland, it is safe. Meanwhile, Mexico becomes that dangerous "other" space inside of which one can procure unsafe, unregulated drugs. Thalidomide, in particular, is used to buttress an ethical and trustworthy U.S./Canadian self against a morally dubious (or dangerously lenient) Mexican other.<sup>19</sup> This dichotomy hinges upon what Daniel Cooper Alarcón identifies as the "timelessness" trope that informs discourses about Mexico (xix). In the novel's characterization, it is as if the U.S. has moved forward in time, its advances in medicine and research on thalidomide signifying the nation's capital-P Progress (recall Sarah's comments about our species knowing better, language that tellingly aligns human modernity with knowing that thalidomide is bad, even while it actually has important health-related uses), while Mexico remains that timeless place where folks can go to procure the harmful drugs of science's past. Moreover, there is the accompanying resonance that while the U.S. has clearly delineated, for its citizens, which substances can be ingested both medicinally and *morally* (recall how characters' discussions about thalidomide are morally coded using words like "evil"), Mexico has failed its citizens, and the drug consumers who are serviced

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<sup>18</sup> The association between Latin America and the primitive might even be introduced as early as the first sentence of the novel. Janet awakens in her motel room in Orlando to describe how "Florida's *prehistoric* glare dazzled outside the motel window": "A dog barked; a car honked; a man was singing a snatch of a Spanish song" (1). Among the many ways a reader could interpret the opening lines, one is with a focus on how hearing the Spanish song may be contributing to Janet's evaluation of the world outside her window as "prehistoric." Temper this reading, though, with the fact that other characters describe Florida in terms that evoke the primitive (e.g. Wade thinking that between "all the states," Florida is "most firmly locked in the primordial past" [71]), but without tying their observations to markers of Latin American or Mexican identity.

<sup>19</sup> This otherness is propped up by the characters themselves, in both subtle and obvious ways. For example, when one character stumbles across Janet's thalidomide package, labelled in Spanish, she remarks, "It's not even in English" (57). Hispanophobic in tone, the "not even" here implies that "at least" if the label were in English, it would read as more legitimate to the character.

through the country, by permitting the use of thalidomide.<sup>20</sup> Readers are thus encouraged to make judgments about which place is “good” and which is “evil” by paying attention to places’ attitudes about a drug passionately maligned by the novel’s characters.

This discussion, however, needs to be situated more firmly within the historical context of the novel. Published in 2001, just three years after thalidomide was approved by the FDA as a legal medication in the U.S. (Kim and Scialli 2), the novel is contemporaneous with a U.S. drug climate in which thalidomide has become acceptable as a treatment. While in the novel’s world, the drug is still only available via underground circuits and other countries, this would not have been the case outside of the novel. Certainly, around this time, there would still be many who regard thalidomide with deep suspicion, especially those who were harmed, or whose loved ones were harmed, by the drug’s side effects. But the FDA approval in 1998 at least suggests that the discourse surrounding the drug would start to become neutralized. For readers aware of this part of the novel’s context, the ties between Latin America and thalidomide would seem especially unnecessary or contrived. The characters’ strong indictments of the drug and its users might be differently read by those who know, at the time of the novel’s publication, that thalidomide was legally available in the U.S. and elsewhere as a treatment for different health problems, including for mouth ulcers. Janet need not have “sought the stuff out—hunted for it” (152), as Sarah accuses her of doing, had the novel been set in the real world that saw its publication. From this perspective, the characters’ outcries seem, perhaps, overly concerned, and the image of a backwards Mexico peddling the so-called evil molecule to unsuspecting patients becomes a bit more absurd.

As this section of the chapter has shown, in *All Families Are Psychotic* and across his work, Coupland’s characters comprehend Mexican space mostly through the consumption of food and drugs, for pleasure, healing, and sustenance, without ever seeming to engage with the country in ways that go beyond consumption. Characters may eat the food, drink the booze, and take the medicine, but that is about the extent of their interactions with Mexico. If the beginning of this chapter questioned whether a cohesive North America was possible, an analysis of Coupland’s works would suggest that it is not. But perhaps that is the point. Coupland’s exposure of this one-way flow of consumption means that his (often white, Anglo-North

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<sup>20</sup> All this while, as Janet explains to her son, thalidomide is actually being used to necessary purpose in Latin America, “for treating leprosy” (65).

American) characters are held up for critique. These are not overtly ignorant people, either, which I would suggest is also the point; these are characters deep in the throes of North American consumer culture, characters for whom Mexico may register only weakly on their radar, and only in ways that have to do with what they can consume from it. As Jefferson Faye, among other critics, has noted, consumption is the common denominator linking characters' behaviours in Coupland's work: "In all his novels Coupland suggests that cultural identification has taken the form of commercial affiliation—to paraphrase Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, we are what we wear. And eat. And watch" (503). So while Mexico stands out in Coupland's writing for being consistently yoked to consumption, the more overwhelming trend in his work is how Coupland's characters are pulled along so strongly by what they eat, drink, and ingest. In this light, Mexico becomes simply another substance they consume rather than a space that they meaningfully inhabit.

### **Travel, Hospitality, and Cannibalism: *Generation X* Enroute to Mexico**

This chapter began with reflections on North America, focuses on depictions of Mexico, and analyzes the work of an author from Canada. It may seem strange to turn now to a novel that Graciela Martinez-Zalce has called "American on purpose" (68). Coupland, she asserts, "has decided to set [*Generation X*] in California and not Toronto or Vancouver because . . . one of the things that distinguishes North America is the pre-eminence of the United States—particularly in the dissemination of popular culture and, in turn, lifestyles" (68). It is true that Coupland's first novel has long been framed by its U.S. setting, and this framing no doubt has influenced how Coupland is constructed as a U.S.-American writer, much as he resists the label ("Strong and Free"). In Chapter 1, I, too, focused on the novel's U.S. setting as I explored one of two major moves its protagonists make: from separate cities across Canada and the U.S. to Palm Springs, California. This move, I argued, emblemizes their nostalgic search for a place that offers a historyless "blank slate" onto which they can creatively rewrite new life stories, a search that ultimately reveals troubling, settler-colonial impulses. The Xers use *tabula rasa*, the notion of the blank slate, as an organizing principle for how they think about ideal space; I contended in Chapter 1 that they want to occupy that space and make it theirs, through storytelling or other means. Where that discussion left off, in Palm Springs, is where this section picks up. The characters' second big move in the novel—to San Felipe, Baja California, Mexico—is, like their

first, embedded in a complicated set of motivations and factors. Having found themselves unfulfilled with life lived in Palm Springs, the Xers are optimistic about life in San Felipe. But their optimism, as I will show in this section, belies the darker side of their plans, as the characters' language around the move threatens to reproduce troubling strands of Mexico's history and to re-establish well-worn tropes that have long sullied Anglo-North American attitudes about Mexico.

Of the nine instances in which *Generation X* mentions Mexico by name, the country is most frequently figured as a physical *destination*—an end-point, an away-from-home, a stop on the itinerary, and a spatial marker to be reached by tourists, shoppers, and the Xers themselves.<sup>21</sup> The novel's represented flow of movement is thus clear and one-way: people go to Mexico but do not come from Mexico. Research on tourism suggests there is some accuracy in this: "Mexico continues to receive tourists—from college spring breakers to wealthy yachters—while sending disproportionately fewer abroad" (Berger, "Goodwill" 124). But just like the other texts discussed in this chapter, in which Anglo-North Americans engage with Mexico and Mexican culture primarily at the level of consuming food and drugs, the one-way flow depicted by *Generation X* reveals minimal engagement with the country except as a place where Americans go to tour and/or consume. Of course, to some, these two are nearly indivisible from each other: "the tourist," Alarcón ventures, "does nothing but consume and spend discretionary income while in the host country" (157). And while tourism is undoubtedly more complicated than what Alarcón's bold statement suggests,<sup>22</sup> in *Generation X*, Alarcón's vision might very well ring true.

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<sup>21</sup> The only instance in which this is not the case is in a passing reference to Claire's home, which is decorated "with Persian and Mexican throw rugs" (75). That this remains the only mention of the country outside of its function as a destination for Americans reveals how limited is the novel's construction of Mexican presence in the States. That presence is ostensibly reduced to the products that ornament Claire's house, and Mexico is therefore rendered a decorative detail.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, there are entire bodies of tourism scholarship that would complicate, or at least add to, Alarcón's statement. See, for example, Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976), which frames tourism in terms of a leisure activity that modern individuals partake in to find meaning, authenticity, and identity in the face of broken or lost narratives; Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988), a memoir about the author's Antiguan homeland which has been attentively parsed for its theories on and insights about the tourist; John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (1990), an interdisciplinary study of the different ways in which tourists see; Eric Leed's *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (1991), a study that delves into the history of travel in its focus on how travel

The vision of Mexico that the novel paints, as filtered through Andy's first-person narration, is mostly defined by travel-for-consumption or travel-for-gain (as in the narrative of creative escape), but whether the reader is being invited to critique or share Andy's perception is another question, one that I hope to elucidate in this section.

One of the earliest instances in which Mexico registers substantively in the novel occurs when Andy characterizes Mexicali as a place to which he believes Dag would retreat in order to "write heroic couplets out among the saguaro" (67).<sup>23</sup> The reader's entrance into the novel's figuration of Mexico, then, is one in which the country serves as a creative sanctuary, furnishing "[b]rief creative bursts that," Andy believes, would "allow [Dag] to endure the tedium of real work" (67). Andy's narrative here will be familiar to many. As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, a defining trope of travel to Mexico, especially in the context of Anglo-North American or -Canadian and -U.S. travellers, has been that Mexico provides the kind of wild and loose, morally and creatively uninhibited atmosphere that uniquely fosters artistic thought and production. A brief glimpse at the literary histories of Canada and the United States, as elsewhere, quickly demonstrates the wide range of authors who position Mexico as a location for creative escape, either figuratively, in their writings, or literally, in their lives; Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiak compiles a list of a few key figures in this tradition, including "Graham Greene, D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Malcolm Lowry" (95), in addition to Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg, subjects who form the bulk of her analysis. For these writers, Mermann-Jozwiak explains, Mexico is "the site of the bourgeois subject's escape from Western civilization and [the subject's] neoromantic quest for restoration" (95). They engage in what Mermann-Jozwiak terms "Mexicanism," a concept which

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shapes identity; and Julia Harrison's *Being a Tourist: Finding Meaning in Pleasure Travel* (2003), which studies the reasons (affective, identity-based, cultural, spatial, etc.) people are compelled to travel using a sample of travelling Canadians as its base. For collections that approach tourism from a variety of theoretical, methodological, and ideological perspectives, and using case studies and examples from across the globe, see *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989) or *Seductions of Place: Geographical Perspectives on Globalization and Touristed Landscapes* (2005).

<sup>23</sup> That Andy uses the more specific "saguaro" here, rather than the more general "cactus," might signify an attempt to make the situation he has imagined on behalf of Dag seem more exotic, given the Spanish roots and sound of the word, but it might also signal Andy's respect for the land in his effort to name the particular cactus species prominent in Mexicali and across the Sonoran Desert.

nods to Orientalism and refers to “the representation of Euro-American perceptions of Mexico” (96). Among the typical tropes of Mexicanism are primitivism, authenticity, and simplicity, as well as skepticism toward any signs of modernity. Broadly speaking, Mermann-Jozwiak’s theory is that “Mexico holds a central place in the Anglo-American cultural imagination as civilization’s Other, representing the exotic, primitive, and premodern” (97).<sup>24</sup> When Andy discloses his vision of Dag writing poetry among only the cacti (in a seemingly bare, “natural” landscape that connotes the premodern), enjoying creative “bursts” which would allow Dag to both energize and recuperate enough to be able to come back and endure “real” work (the kind of activity that happens in more “civilized” places), he rehearses these tropes of Mexicanism and implicitly establishes a binary relationship between Mexico, where Dag will go, and the U.S. where Dag is now. But it is important to note that these speculations are Andy’s alone. They do not necessarily represent what Dag is actually doing, and they might be more indicative of *Andy’s* views about where one might go to escape tedium. Moreover, given Andy’s playful tone, his speculations might actually invite readers to critique the idea of finding artistic respite in Mexico more than they ask readers to invest in that option as a serious possibility.

When the reader learns later that Dag does indeed want to retreat to Mexico, they also learn it is not entirely in the poetic, writerly way that Andy imagines. Claire requests that Andy join her and Dag in San Felipe, and instructs him to bring books and pencils (170), but the Xers’ dream is not to squirrel themselves away in a corner of Mexico to write experimental literary masterpieces. Instead, Dag hopes to open a hotel in San Felipe. Coyly disclosing that he wants to tell Andy “a secret about [his] future” (116), Dag frames his fantasies of being a hotelier in different ways throughout this initial conversation with his friend. At first, he uses somewhat colonial terminology of claiming and purchasing property: “I want to own a hotel down in Baja California” (116), he tells Andy. A few lines later, he reiterates: “That’s what I want to do in my future. Own a hotel” (116). The indefinite article Dag uses in these preliminary remarks quickly changes to the possessive. When Andy expresses a desire to leave their present situation (he and Dag sit on top of a stranger’s car while Dag burns cigarette holes in its roof), Dag protests: “not until I describe my hotel to you” (116). When he actually begins to explain his fantasy in more

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<sup>24</sup> Mermann-Jozwiak focuses on the Anglo-American imagination, but I would add that the same reductive engagement with the country surfaces in the Anglo-Canadian imagination (and Coupland’s oeuvre is one important, if also richly complicated, example of this).

detail, he switches from the language of ownership back to the indefinite article, describing how he “want[s] to open a place,” and then, later, “a small place”—the more commercial “hotel” being replaced here by the more neutral, if less specific, “place” (116).<sup>25</sup>

These shades of language reveal larger tensions at work in Dag’s dream of Mexico. On one hand, his dream smacks of the colonizing impulse to intrude into, take ownership of, and then profit from (even spiritually, creatively, or non-materially) an already-occupied piece of land. Overwriting the historical and present occupants of the land, including Indigenous peoples such as the Cocopah in Baja California, Dag’s fantasy projects an image of *tabula rasa*: San Felipe, in Dag’s characterization, is “surrounded by nothing but sand, abandoned uranium mines, and pelicans” (116), an ostensible blank slate. Further, his hotel dream relies on the prospect of employing locals and long-term visitors (“I’d only hire elderly Mexican women and stunningly beautiful surfer and hippie type boys and girls” [116]) to service his own touristic business venture. On the other hand, this vision departs from being purely one of American imperialism through capitalist pursuit; he imagines that “[p]eople who told good stories could stay for free” and that, in a revision of the typical “customers-only” restroom rule of many profit-driven businesses, people could “use the bathroom” as long as they “felt-penned a funny joke on the wall” (116). The currency of Dag’s proposed future is therefore language, story, and humour, rather than money. Indeed, Dag fantasizes about an exchange system in which money is devalued while artistry, or the ability to tell a story or joke, is elevated. This fantasy, too, contributes to the narrative of Mexico as creative escape, especially since the precondition to Dag’s dream is the existence of a “tiny” (116) Mexican shrimping village that Dag believes would endorse his rejection of dollar- or peso-based capitalism for story-based exchange. Of course, this is easier dreamt than done, and the one passing reference to *actual* money in the passage, in which Dag envisions that “everyone staples . . . money to the walls and the ceiling” of the bar, suggests that even his imagination cannot divorce fully from the realities and motives of capitalism. But if the reader accepts as true Dag’s version of San Felipe, which emphasizes its tininess, its primary function as a shrimping village (not a tourist hotspot), and its emplacement

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<sup>25</sup> The possible intertext here, of course, is Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, published just a few years before *Generation X* and dealing with issues around the ethics of tourism—the same issues that surface when one considers the characters’ movements and desires in *Generation X*.



within the “nothing” that surrounds it (116), Dag’s fantasy of de-prioritizing money as currency will likely come true: this hotel will not do well, financially speaking.

Taken as a whole, Dag’s dream reveals that he does not merely want to be a tourist in Mexico; he wants to be *part of* Mexico—indeed, part of the hospitality industry in Mexico—a host rather than a guest.<sup>26</sup> This is not exactly what Andy imagined on his behalf. Dag’s is not a fantasy of creative escape and submersion into a “permissive” Mexican culture. However, the implications of his plans are not far off from the kind attached to that narrative. Dag’s desire, which begins to come to fruition near the end of the novel when he and Claire relocate to San Felipe, replicates efforts by American professionals in the early twentieth century to install themselves in Mexico as businesspeople and even, more specifically, as hoteliers.<sup>27</sup> Berger explains that, in the early 1900s, Mexico’s “partnerships with well-heeled, pro-Mexico Americans from engineers to hoteliers resulted in widespread construction of highways, hotels, and a tourist infrastructure more broadly that could accommodate the burgeoning industry” (“Goodwill” 108). In some ways, then, Dag’s story straightforwardly mimics this history of U.S. involvement in tourism and infrastructure in Mexico, a history which is, significantly, bound up in what Alarcón calls “strands of neocolonialism,” with “foreign investment, tourism, and expatriate arts communities” (84) taking control of space, property, and other capital in Mexico.

I make this historical connection to at least gesture toward the problems related to an American subject claiming and then benefitting from property in what seems like a fragile socio-economic system (recall San Felipe’s abandoned mines), even if this link to Mexico’s history

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<sup>26</sup> Granted, this statement relies on the premise that working and owning property in a place does not constitute tourism, but this is a surprisingly complicated premise. Consider, for instance, how Dag’s desire to set up shop in Mexico anticipates the “growing trend toward second homes in Mexico,” accelerated in large part by the 70-80% of Mexico’s tourists who are from the United States, as of 2010 (Saragoza 312). As Saragoza writes, these intersections between duration of trip and property ownership raise “the question as to whether such stays can be considered tourism” (312).

<sup>27</sup> For more on the history of hotels in Mexico, see Michael Clancy’s *Exporting Paradise: Tourism and Development in Mexico* (2001). Clancy’s research reveals that Dag’s dream of hotel ownership might be a bit dated for his time. While in the years before 1970, hotels in Mexico were mostly independently run, usually small, and family-operated, after 1970, U.S. hotel chains such as Inter-Continental and Hilton started to move into and proliferate in Mexico (Clancy 79). That said, the question of how many hotels in Mexico are controlled domestically or by foreign interests depends on the where and when. For example, Torres and Momsen report that, in the case of Cancún, one of the more tourism-dependent Mexican cities, 87% of its hotels were still under domestic ownership in 1997 (323-24), so the intrusion of chains is by no means universal.

would suggest that San Felipe might also experience some benefit from Dag's endeavours. It is true that Mexico's economic stability has been tied, in part, to international travellers' and investors' involvement in the country (Saragoza 307), and that Mexico has itself played a huge part in facilitating that involvement since 1936, the year in which the Mexican National Tourism Committee first met (Berger and Grant 1). Outsiders who set up shop in Mexico, as Dag plans to do, are therefore not always unwelcome, and their efforts, of course, cannot always boil down to imperialist business ventures. What Dag seeks, remember, is a meaningful connection with *people*—to build a place anchored by jokes and stories and words shared between travellers and friends.

In this focus on the importance of words and story, alongside the desire to flee the United States for Mexico, Dag's plan resonates especially with the real-life history of the post-Second World War American Beat poets. In particular, the plan is reminiscent of Burroughs's "intention . . . to open a bar on the Mexican side of the US border," "buying land in Mexico to grow opium," an intention that John Tytell interprets as part of Burroughs's "transgressive nature, an extreme, unorthodox response to the settled complacency of American life in the 1950s" (53). In addition to their planned retreat to Mexico, the Xers share many other similarities with the Beats, particularly in terms of how the latter "suffered from an existential, psychic exhaustion, a sense of being beaten down spiritually by what seemed to them the regimented and oppressive patterns of American life" (Tytell 50-51). Also like the Beats, Dag and the other Xers could be charged with engaging in the Mexicanism that Mermann-Jozwiak describes, particularly in regard to Dag's expectations that he will arrive in a largely empty, commercially abandoned town, freed of human concerns about money (though actually probably suffering, given the abandoned mines and the reliance on shrimping as a primary industry).<sup>28</sup> These threads of history—the flood of foreign businesspeople who looked to Mexico for profit and investment, the Beats and other creatives who escaped to Mexico for artistic or intellectual invigoration—speak to a broader tradition of which Andy, Dag, and Claire are part, and that is that "each generation of North

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<sup>28</sup> Not all Beat poets contributed to Mexicanist discourse, and juxtaposing Mermann-Jozwiak's article with Tytell's reveals that the Beat poets actually engaged critically with each other's thinking about Mexico. This is evident, for example, in a letter written by Burroughs that criticizes Kerouac for what Tytell describes as his "idealizations of Mexican life" (not that Burroughs was altogether accurate in his characterization of Mexico, having constructed the country in some troubling ways himself) (60-61).

American tourists found a Mexico to fit its taste” (Pilcher 223). The physical lands of Mexico have thus been subject to the ideologies, and resulting movements, of come-from-away travellers who ascribe to its spaces dreams of profit or entertainment.

Dag’s dream of running a hotel in San Felipe constitutes just one of two major ways that Mexico comes to prominence in *Generation X*. The other is when he and Claire *actually move there* and beckon Andy to join them. In the final section of the novel, Andy describes his journey toward his friends, toward the U.S.-Mexico border, and his descriptions are as telling and rich as Dag’s elaborate San Felipe inventions. As he approaches the border, Andy thinks,

I can already smell the methane of Mexico, a stone’s throw away, while I bake in a Calexico, California traffic jam, waiting to cross the border while embroiled in wavering emphysemic mirages of diesel spew. My car rests on a braiding and decomposing six-lane corridor lit by a tired winter sunset. Inching along with me in this linear space is a true gift-sampler of humanity and its vehicles: three-abreast tattooed farm workers in pickup trucks, enthusiastically showcasing a variety of country and western tunes; mirror-windowed sedan loads of chilled and Ray-Banned yuppies (a faint misting of Handel and Philip Glass); local *hausfraus* in hair curlers, off to get cheaper Mexicali groceries while inhaling *Soap Opera Digest* within cheerfully stickered Hyundais; retired look-alike Canadian couples bickering over maps falling apart from having been folded and unfolded so many times. To the side, peso brokers with Japanese names inhabit booths printed the bright colors of sugar candies. (169)

Foremost among the patterns of language Andy uses to describe his border-crossing queue are references to food, cooking, and eating.<sup>29</sup> Not only is literal food implied in the “groceries” pursued by U.S. shoppers hoping for a deal, but also the descriptions of farm workers invoke ties to agriculture and the labour of feeding people; sales booths are likened to candy, with the peso brokers contained, like chewy centres, within them; and a surprising number of other terms suggest different points in the cycle of food consumption. Andy himself “bake[s]” and is

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<sup>29</sup> In at least one notable way, Andy’s experience crossing the border also fits into the Mexico = drugs equation I discuss in the earlier part of this chapter. In the final pages of the novel, as Andy waits in line to exit the United States, he spots what he describes as a “cocaine white egret” (177) who, later on, swoops spontaneously down toward Andy: “The egret had grazed my head—it [sic] claw had ripped my scalp” (178). Andy’s narration of his experience with this bird makes literal one of the novel’s tacit judgments—that in Mexico (where even the birds are drug-coloured!), white, Anglo-North Americans are not safe from harm.

“embroiled” as he waits in line at the border, while the yuppies in vehicles next to him are conversely “chilled”; the *hausfraus* do not just read magazines but “inhale” them, a word that literally denotes breathing but has the figurative connotation of food being ravenously devoured; the people who wait to cross the border are figured as a “gift-sampler of humanity,” much akin to the edible components in something like a Hickory Farms meat-and-cheese basket; meanwhile, the road is not just in need of repair but is “decomposing,” like leftover food, while the vehicles on it “spew”—or vomit—diesel. This passage is complemented by similar moments from Andy’s border-crossing tale in which, for example, he notes travellers carrying consumable substances, such as “anticancer drugs, tequila, . . . and Corn Flakes” (172). Around the same time, he compares “the chain link border fence” that he approaches to “photos of Australia”—“photos in which anti-rabbit fencing has cleaved the landscape in two: one side of the fence nutritious, food secreting, and bursting with green; the other side lunar, granular, parched, and desperate” (172). Clearly, food and consumption are fundamental to how Andy interprets his physical trip across the border and into Mexico.

But more than that, *people* are seen as food in Andy’s border-crossing narrative. In moments from the long passage above, Andy, his fellow border-travellers, and the peso brokers are all characterized as if they themselves were edible goods being readied for consumption. Even the *hausfraus* “inhaling” magazines—taking them in through breath or eating them up—suggests cannibalism: consuming simulations of people through photographs, articles, and interviews. Further, imagining a scene in which he already inhabits Mexico, Andy dreams of having “traces of brine on [his] fingers” (173), referring to salty ocean water but also describing a sensory experience in which he himself is a brined good. Moreover, when Andy imagines the environment *beyond* the border he is about to cross, he thinks of it as a place “where a different food chain carves its host landscape in alien ways [he] can scarcely comprehend” (171). This sentiment engages not only in othering Mexico (there is no way that Andy could comprehend the forces that shape Mexico’s “alien” landscape) but also in a pseudo-cannibalistic characterization of the country: the “food chain” Andy names “carves,” as if it is a butcher, the land personified as a “host”—thus preparing it for consumption. In the very next sentence, cannibalism comes up even more directly by name: “[o]nce I cross that border,” Andy reflects, “automobile models will mysteriously end around . . . 1974, the year after which engine technologies became overcomplex and nontinkerable—*uncannibalizable*” (171). Here, of course, cars rather than

humans are figured in terms of cannibalism, but the invocation of the root word itself—cannibal—renders more explicit my previous reading of people-as-food in Andy’s tale of border crossing. And while the term *uncannibalizable* might suggest a negation of cannibalism, or an inability to be cannibalized, Andy continues to imagine that “half-cars” are being butchered as if for a feast: “demi-wagons cut lengthwise, widthwise, and heightwise, stripped of parts . . .” (171).

On one hand, then, Andy conveys the sights and surroundings leading toward Mexico in terms of foods such as candy, treat samplers, and Corn Flakes (*yummy!*), while on the other hand, he frames the same in terms of baked, broiled, butchered, and carved human or humanized bodies (*yucky!*). My parenthetical reactions here serve to highlight how the stark tension between these two patterns of description mirrors what Alarcón identifies as one of the essential tropes that has anchored depictions of “Mexico in the modern imagination” (to borrow from his monograph’s title). This Infernal Paradise trope “vividly suggests the tendency to perceive and represent Mexico as a place of paradoxical extremes” (Alarcón 40), manifesting, for example, in an “oscillation between attraction and repulsion” (Alarcón 51), or between yummy, desirable foods and yucky, undesirable cannibalism. Andy is compelled toward Mexico by his friends, by the attractive future fantasy that they believe awaits them, just as his fellow border-crossers are attracted by Mexico’s good deals and reputation as an appropriate holiday destination for retirees. Yet his diction reveals potential repulsion hidden just below the surface. Andy reads as outwardly optimistic about his future in San Felipe with his friends, but there is also a sense of danger-to-the-human-body conveyed in the language and images of cannibalism. Crossing the border to this unpredictable, free-wheeling country, Andy is threatened with the possibilities that face him and perhaps expresses that feeling through language that invokes fear of being himself *eaten*. Alarcón would likely read this aspect of Andy’s narration through, again, the trope of Mexico-as-Infernal Paradise, which is here “fusing the attraction of the country as a place of spiritual or artistic freedom with the threat of physical danger” (41). As Andy approaches the border, his language conjures the image of one of the most feared and exoticized threats to physical wellbeing: the cannibal. The possible subtext of his narration therefore becomes: *stop! danger ahead!*

The cannibalistic language I identify functions in the same way that discourses of cannibalism have long functioned, which is to mark moral, racial, cultural, or ethnic differences

between dominant and marginalized communities. “[F]or the most part,” writes Gananath Obeyesekere, “cannibalism is a discourse on the Other, defining out-groups in terms of their horrifying man-eating propensities” (63). In other words, Lynda Ng explains, “the widespread belief that [particular] cultures practiced cannibalism came to symbolize the clear demarcation between Western civilization and the pure savagery of native peoples” (109). More than that, cannibalism has been used as a discursive tool—or a “textual strategy” (Sands 128)—to justify violent colonial efforts: “For if cannibalism connotes anything,” Ng writes, “it is the need for a civilizing authority to step in and put an end to such practices” (111), and in that way it “acts as a limit case—a way of locating the outer-most edge of civilization” (Ng 114)—a sign, a delimitation, a border itself. Analyzing Andy’s border-crossing narrative within this context of cannibalism discourse, the reader can see what kind of impression the narrative constructs: this border “mark[s] the world beyond European knowledge” (Hulme 3). Here is where cannibalistic language begins to infiltrate Andy’s thoughts, his inner monologue, his perceptions. Here, at the literal border demarcating metaphorical difference, is where the “other” that is Mexico begins to change the Xers—especially since, as Maggie Kilgour points out, cannibalism, in the first instances, establishes difference, but then *dissolves* difference (240), because it involves literally bringing another/an other into one’s own body.<sup>30</sup> This dissolution surfaces even in how Andy and his fellow travellers, characterized by difference from him in their being “yuppies” and “*hausfraus*,” are ultimately brought together in their shared endeavour to cross the border and in their figurative transformation into consumables along the way.

Beyond these readings derived from its more literal function, though, cannibalism is also just one of several “tropes of consumption,” Sands reminds us (126), since it can be pared down to the incorporation of external materials (figuratively or otherwise) into the body or the self. Karl Marx, as Jerry Phillips points out, famously employed this trope when he “imagined capitalism as cannibalism” (185), but it is also used, for example, in contemporary business journalism to describe “when a limit is approached, beyond which further expansion of consumer appetite is deemed impossible” (Bartolovich 208). Cannibalism, in this context, becomes “the mark of absolute saturation” and of “stasis” (Bartolovich 208)—or, perhaps even more likely, the

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<sup>30</sup> Consider, here, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s question about how cannibalism in its conventional sense—the consuming of human flesh—is different from other forms of incorporation (e.g. surgery, blood transfusions) in which parts of human bodies become parts of other human bodies; to riff off of his essay title, “We Are All Cannibals,” are we not all cannibals? (88).

demarcated limit beyond which appetite *contracts* rather than stays the same. Whether the topic be capitalism, market saturation, or something altogether unrelated, the “cannibal figure,” writes Jennifer Brown, often “represents the fear that our appetite for consumption knows no end, and indeed reminds us of our own potential inhumanity” (7). For Kilgour, cannibalism is therefore used “as a means of attacking those who are seen as consuming without producing” (241), “the cannibal [being] a perfect demon for a culture based on geographic and scientific expansion and progress, which yet fears its own imperialist appetites” (244).

But what does all of this mean for how Andy employs cannibalistic imagery? Putting aside the possible interpretation, noted earlier, that the imagery evokes an underlying feeling of danger—Andy figures himself and his fellow travellers as consumed goods, waiting for Mexico to chew them up and swallow—perhaps it also reveals that Andy recognizes his own role as a soon-to-be or *de facto* consumer of Mexico. He is aware of the cannibalistic possibilities of his behaviour and the behaviour of his fellow border-crossers, who jump to Mexico to take advantage of deals and pursue business ventures (*à la* Dag and the Xers).<sup>31</sup> When viewed through the lens of consumption-as-cannibalism or tourism-as-cannibalism, the ethics of such behaviours come more easily to the fore: whose bodies and lands are being consumed? Implicitly, that question is raised when Andy places cannibalism, at least figuratively, at the core of his narration. The one-way flow of bodies from the U.S. to the Mexican border leaves the reader wondering who comes back from Mexico, and what kind of Mexico they leave behind.

Tellingly, the reader is not offered an answer to this question because the novel never shows us how the end of Andy’s trip, and his reunion with Claire and Dag, plays out. Apart from reading the characters’ fantasies and goals, readers never actually get to *witness* the Xers’ physical presence in Mexico, as they come along only as far as the border. The novel therefore denies readers access to what kind of life the Xers will lead in Mexico; we do not know whether their move goes well or badly. Corroborating this sense of ambiguity is the fact that Andy crosses into Mexico on New Year’s Day (169) of the new millennium, and that the final chapter of the novel is entitled “Jan. 01, 2000” (175), which points to a fresh, new start but also an uncertain future. The novel refuses to provide closure on the Xers’ relationship to Mexico, and in

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<sup>31</sup> Self-awareness has been called an emerging feature of contemporary tourism (Grant Wood and Berger, “Conclusion,” 373), so it is fitting that Andy showcases this quality as he travels across the border on the first day of the new century (the chapter in which he border-crosses is titled “Jan. 01, 2000”).

this refusal, it places unpredictability and uncertainty as a central feature of Anglo-Canadian and -American relations with Mexico into futurity. The route of this generation is left open for speculation.

Still, there is huge significance in the prospect that the Xers end up in Mexico in the final pages of the novel. Andy, Dag, and Claire—North American everypeople, the Canadian from Toronto and the Americans from Portland and Los Angeles, the seeming representatives of the novel’s titular generation—complete their “terminal wanderlust” (171) in San Felipe, Mexico. Their itinerary, as far as the reader expects it to play out, ends in a “supertiny” (170) village in a country where, by all textual evidence, they are not even fluent in the national language. The important question here is: what does that final destination suggest? The implication might be that this is a generation defined by the crossing of borders, by a desire to occupy space in other countries (with all the troubling and optimistic possibilities accompanying such a desire), by a kind of cosmopolitan travelling spirit—and a specifically inter-American or continental one, too. This is a generation that perhaps fulfills the prediction of the very terminal wanderlust Coupland defines: “[u]nable to feel rooted in any one environment, they move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location” (171). This is a generation that, like the ones that came before (including the Beats), looks to Mexico as the next possible salve for the ailments brought upon by a Western culture they find harmful and stifling. It is the next, and but probably not final, place they will look to for that elusive sense of home.

### **Conclusion: On the Dangers and Possibilities of Coupland’s Mexico**

The beginning of this chapter acknowledges that Coupland’s written works do not engage deeply with Mexico. Despite that reality, the chapter seeks to parse the complicated meanings fastened to Mexico in the texts studied. In the process of doing so, I believe it has become clear that Coupland’s work assigns little room, textually speaking, to the voices, actions, and attitudes of Mexican people. In *Generation X*, the flow of movement, interest, engagement, and investment is clear and one-way. Coupland’s Anglo-North American characters *represent* Mexico, as if on its behalf, through their often-cursory experiences with Mexican food, drugs, and the U.S.-Mexico border, or through their imaginations and speculations about the country (as in the case of Dag’s hotel dream). This representation is perhaps unsurprising, given that



Coupland himself is an Anglo Euro-Canadian writing predominantly about other Anglo Euro-Canadians and -Americans.

But I want to end here by considering, as I have done in the conclusions for each chapter in this project, the implications of Coupland's minimal engagement with Mexico, given that cultural expressions, such as books, influence people's attitudes about space. For one thing, what does not appear in Coupland's fiction is depictions of Mexican people's agency in shaping the social and geographic conditions under which Coupland's Anglo-North American characters experience Mexico and its cultural reverberations. Since this chapter has focused, in part, on travel and tourism, it feels necessary to point out that Coupland's works completely leave out the vital role that the Mexican government and Mexicans themselves have played in shaping the country's tourist industries toward the goal of attracting the very characters Coupland books feature. For instance, the Mexico-as-escape narrative that some of Coupland's fiction rehashes is not merely a concept produced by ignorant or naïve Anglo-North Americans looking for some time to write in a cheap and lively atmosphere; it is a narrative that has in part been consciously built by the Mexican state and other domestic forces across Mexico's history.

Tijuana is the most popular and obvious example here. The Mexican government had a direct role in guiding the tourist economy in Tijuana (Peralta 138) and in creating the alluring sense that the city really could provide an escape for interested tourists. In the early twentieth century, in particular, "Tijuana came up with its own Mexican festivities and featured around-the-clock entertainment such as cock fights, alcohol, gambling, and many other venues for the prohibited desires of Californians" (Peralta 137). Other moments in Mexico's tourism history have also been driven by the sanctioned activities and policies of the state. Miguel Alemán, president from 1946-52, became known as the "Acapulco developer" (7) and the "architect and father of tourism in Mexico" (Berger, *Development* 8); likewise, the post-2000 presidential reign of Vicente Fox saw huge changes in tourism in Mexico, especially in how conditions were created to attract more wealthy travellers from the United States (Saragoza 295-96)—hence, the flourishing of "luxury tourism" in the country (Saragoza 296). While it is not the job of any writer to account for all the real intricacies of history, my point is that by leaving any sense of Mexican agency out of his works, Coupland distributes a script about Mexico in which it is seen as the "naturally" passive victim of Anglo-North American intrusion, and not, at least partly, as the active creator of its own realities. In other words, the history of the Mexican state's

involvement in the tourism industry does not *have* to be represented in Coupland’s writing, but its absence has implications that must still be considered.

This conclusion, then, emphasizes that literary representations of Mexico matter. They matter because, for example, Mexico’s economy can be harmed by the idea that it is a dangerous country, a notion buttressed by early Western novels in which Mexican characters were often depicted as “menacing” or villainous (Cortés 52), or by mid-twentieth-century films in which the wily “Mexican *bandito*” became a recurring character (Cortés 59), or more contemporarily, by the figure of the “evil” Mexican who does not simply remain in Mexico but “infiltrates” other countries and thus justifies concerns about “the problem of Mexican undocumented workers” (Cortés 64). Michael Clancy explains that “[p]erhaps the biggest threat to tourism in Mexico today is real and perceived threats to the personal safety of foreigners” (127). In fact, part of the struggle of even *building* Mexico’s tourism industry was, at first, combatting the “hardly flattering” perceptions of Mexico held by Americans (Berger, *Development* 63), and this process very much hinged on managing textual representations of Mexico in the United States, such as tourist guides and informational pamphlets.<sup>32</sup>

These cultural and historical considerations, which inform how Coupland’s depiction of Mexico is bound up in notions of consuming space, provide important examples of *why* the work of this chapter is important. As the introduction to this project explains, Coupland is an internationally bestselling author whose works have been translated into dozens of languages. He writes to immense readerships in Canada, the United States, Europe, and around the world. It is therefore not a stretch to say that his work has the potential to pivot the way that readers (especially the white, Anglo readers who are paralleled in his characters) view Mexico, for better or for worse. Coupland’s cultural heft, as a writer and public figure, makes necessary the kind of analysis that this chapter undertakes. Just like with the other representations of space examined by this project, Coupland’s mapping of Mexico is complex and demands sustained attention. By

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<sup>32</sup> One of the channels through which these representations were managed was Mexico’s Department of Press and Publicity (DAPP), established in 1937. The DAPP was created with the specific mandate to craft promotional materials such as “an English-language, tourist guidebook and magazine on Mexico,” which included, in one of the first editions, a “front cover of an Indian next to a snow-peaked volcano and a cactus”—“symbols of Mexico’s social and environment composition” (Berger *Development* 74). The main goal of such material was to supplant outsiders’ negative views of the country with these images of innocent, “natural” tranquility.

turns, it is simplistic and nuanced, reductive and expansive, benign and disruptive, self-critical and un-critical, back-and-forth, good and bad, damning but also liberating. A vital and complicated textual cartographer of our time, Coupland delivers to his readers a Mexico that can be both saviour of a lost generation and evil distributor of dangerous drugs—a Mexico that is Infernal Paradise, attractive and repulsive, a dream and a nightmare and all that falls in between.

## Conclusion

### Where do all roads lead?

#### Exiting Coupland's North America by Way of the Road

I am writing this conclusion at home in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, on a winter's day. On this day, and in this place, a Google search of the phrase "all roads lead to" yields a list of suggested endings. Among other possibilities, the main suggestions include: all roads lead to Rome, all roads lead to home, and all roads lead to you. These results strike me as disparate yet linked, poetic in their grouping and in the way they sound, but also clichéd in their algorithmic repetition of well-worn sayings. More than that, though, these results reinforce my recognition of how deeply the road is enmeshed in everyday language about diverse phenomena—so much so as to become a device used to describe almost anything and everything.<sup>1</sup> *Follow the open road. Take the road less traveled. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Life is a highway. All roads lead to home. All roads lead to Rome. All roads lead to you.* The gaps in meaning between "Rome," "home," and "you" show how the figure of the road is manoeuvred in everyday sayings to convey widely varied messages. Roads can lead *anywhere*, especially if they are only roads in the metaphorical sense, invoked colloquially. Yet, at the same time, the shared associations stirred up by this particular grouping of words—with their connotations of public and private community, of the human relations that give spirit to domestic as well as metropolitan hubs—mirror how roads connect places that seem (or literally are) distant from one another. Even in this discursive, phrasal sense, roads become a kind of formula that can forge continuities across difference and distance, from Rome, to home, to you.

I launched this Google inquiry more as an act of play than research, prompted by a similar question that has continued to surface in my mind as I think through the final space in

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<sup>1</sup> This recognition recalls what Brent Bellamy describes as a tension between "the weight and emptiness of the road as a cultural signifier" (223)—it can mean everything and nothing at the same time.

this project on Douglas Coupland: where do “all roads lead” in Coupland’s writing? Or, differently phrased, how do characters in Coupland’s works inhabit the road, and toward what (figurative or literal) end do they travel? Just as the Google search generated a variety of distinct-but-linked responses to the matter of where all roads lead, so too does an analysis of Coupland’s work deliver numerous possibilities. I have already explored some of these possibilities, given that the preceding chapters, to differing degrees, have dealt with manifestations of the road in Coupland’s writing. The study of the American Southwest desert region in Chapter 1 focuses, in part, on one of Coupland’s more straightforward road texts: “In the Desert,” a short story that tells of one character using the space of the road to deliver syringes and steroids to a physical trainer in Palm Springs. There, the road becomes a channel through which the character reflects critically upon his passing desert surroundings, casting his environment as superficial and as a wasteland at the same time that he shows signs of embracing a new spirituality among and despite the (highway) debris of contemporary life. Chapter 2 invokes the road in tangential but important ways as it observes how Coupland uses roads to “mark” suburban space—for example, the cul-de-sacs and curvilinear roads that wind through residential areas, the streetlights (*Girlfriend in a Coma* 54) illuminating subdivisions, or the driveways that characterize the street-facing landscapes of contemporary suburban housing (*Girlfriend* 107). Suburbia is therefore tied to car culture and to the road even in the barest physical descriptions Coupland provides. The absence of the road emerges, in the analysis provided throughout Chapter 3, as part of how Coupland constructs wilderness: in *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland’s perception that there are “no roads or power lines” in “Canada’s extreme northerly spots” leads him to categorize the environment as “blank and essentially uninhabited” wilderness, in a conceptual manoeuvre that troublingly showcases how Coupland’s work sometimes reads the infrastructures of settler colonialism as signs of proper “civilization” (4).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Chapter 3 also shows how taking the road “into the wild” is a narrative device through which Coupland constructs both personal and national identity in the *Souvenir* series. And in the final chapter on Mexico, the road assumes again a more prominent role. The chapter discusses how the particular narration of Andy’s road trip across the U.S.-Mexico border in *Generation X* reveals Andy’s awareness that he is a

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<sup>2</sup> It is not just Coupland who figures wilderness as (in part) the absence of roads. This figuration is built into historical discourse and even legislation. Phil Patton notes, in the context of the United States, that “when Congress passed the Wilderness Act in the mid-sixties, wilderness was legally defined as any contiguous area at least five miles from the nearest road” (16).

consumer of Mexico as much as it also implies that Andy conceives of Mexico as a dangerous, near-cannibalistic other-place, the road's physical border stop demarcating where American civilization ends and Mexican danger begins. As these examples suggest, the road in Coupland's work does not remain consistent in meaning, and it is invoked in a variety of ways, just as in the Google results. But, as in those same results, there are subtle continuities in the way the road is figured by Coupland's texts. Often, the road helps to ascribe meaning onto *other* spaces in Coupland's literary map of North America, like the desert, wilderness, suburbia, or Mexico. Mirroring the literal use of the road, then—to connect one space to another or to allow movement between spaces—Coupland uses the road to convey other geographies to his reader and his reader to other geographies.

But perhaps more than any of its other functions, the road in Coupland's writing is most often featured for its powerful (even when illusory) ability to convey the characters toward an imagined escape. Harking back to the long-alluring "freedom of the open road," Coupland's characters tend to take to the road in order to leave the past behind, release former identities, detach from social, familial, or cultural responsibilities, and seek personal transformation via the real-and-abstract escape of road mobility. If a more accurate depiction of roads is that they are often tools of colonial imposition, channels for forced movement, facilitators of ecological ruin, and sites of vehicular violence and road carnage (among their other pernicious functions), then suffice it to say that Coupland's characters often espouse a view of the road that is far more romantic, anchored as it is by fantasies of freedom and escape. This view makes sense given that the literal function of roads is to travel away from Point A and toward Point B, and given how Coupland's texts frequently feature characters with easy access to voluntary mobility due to their whiteness and social positions. But it also makes sense, more figuratively, within a North American and particularly U.S.-American historical context, inside of which literature, film, art, and public discourse make escape a central part of thinking the road. "The open road has always ministered to the American flight from self," writes Phil Patton, and "[t]o drive without purpose—to 'cruise'—is the central trope not only of Kerouac but of a hundred popular songs" that make up the cultural archive in the United States (250). To identify a recent and popular example from this archive, one need only peruse Matthew McConaughey's series of Lincoln commercials to see how visuals and language of freedom and escape are used, in the American cultural imaginary, to construct the space of the road (and, in turn, to drive profits). Literary

scholar Ronald Primeau reinforces this sense of road-as-freedom in his seminal *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996), a work that surveys a variety of American road narratives and finds, within them, that the “lure of the road is simple adventure, escape, and the offer to break the routine” (15). “Getting away,” Primeau writes, “we are free to be different; in the invigorating, free-floating space of the temporary nomad, we can challenge what has been dominant and explore emergent values and dreams” (16). In Primeau’s figuration, the road also becomes a space of renewal and reinvention—not just escape, but escape viewed as “flight from self,” in Patton’s terms. On the road, Primeau asserts, travellers “give up—or are released from—a social structure that impinges upon dreams and aspirations,” and thus “the highway journey . . . suspends for a while definition according to one’s origins, profession, and geography” (69).<sup>3</sup> The road, in this framing, becomes the *release* of that which one wishes to leave behind. To set foot on the road is to be freed.

That simple, long-held, and privileged equation between the road and freedom is refigured by Coupland’s works, however, insofar as his characters ultimately find that escape through the road is not possible, or that their attempts at individual renewal fail, or that road mobility may not be freer or more romantic than staying put. Consider, for example, Coupland’s first published novel, *Generation X*, in which the main characters shuttle from different places across North America to Palm Springs (discussed in Chapter 1) and then to San Felipe (discussed in Chapter 4) in order to seek a “clean slate with no one to read it” (31).<sup>4</sup> In both cases, the

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<sup>3</sup> Wisely, scholarship has since questioned Primeau’s road-as-freedom premise, and while there is particular merit to his ideas in terms of Coupland’s written work (i.e. Coupland’s characters share the perspective on road escapism that Primeau identifies as characteristic of road travellers in culture), it is important to keep in mind that road mobility cannot be automatically equated to freedom, escape, or individual transformation. In its pivoting away from this focus on the freedom of mobility, then, Ann Brigham’s scholarship is an extremely valuable contribution to research on cultural depictions of the road. She contends that “mobility is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite—a mode of engagement” (4). Brigham’s figuration of mobility is a necessary corrective to the emphasis on road-as-freedom in prior scholarship, though her ideas are not as easily applicable to the particular cases I discuss in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> In Dag’s case, the trip to San Felipe nearly becomes a more literal escape—from the law—since his recent past includes getting into a legal scuffle over having accidentally-on-purpose set a car on fire as he burned cigarette holes into its roof (106). Readers learn later that, by some trick of luck, Dag is safe from any consequences of his actions, but the fire incident and its potential legal ripples seem to jumpstart Dag’s “escape” into San Felipe with Claire and then, later, Andy.

escape narrative, or the drive to encounter a blank slate, fails. As I explain in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, the Xers do not find any unique satisfaction on the road or in the new locations they once, starry-eyed, set their sights on. Instead, Andy, Dag, and Claire experience what Coupland describes as terminal wanderlust: a “condition common to people of transient middle-class upbringings. Unable to feel rooted in any one environment, they move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location” (*Generation X* 171).

Dissatisfaction despite “continually” moving is a defining feature of the Xers’ wanderlust, and theirs is a road mobility characterized as the *search* for ideal living rather than as ideal in and of itself. Their travels bring them no closer to freedom or fulfillment. In addition, as I consider in Chapter 4, the novel does not let the reader see how the Xers’ road narrative ultimately plays out once they all reunite in San Felipe, leaving their status beyond their move to Mexico up in the air. This ambiguity means there is no witnessed, textual moment of “true escape” for the Gen Xers. Thus, in the reader’s mind and given the open ending, Andy, Dag, and Claire live perpetually in this cycle of dissatisfied (if optimistic) searching on the road, the space itself becoming a trap more than a conduit for movement.

The Xers’ narrative recalls another work of Coupland’s—a short story called “Gettysburg” from *Life After God*. In the story, a father tells stories to his child about the honeymoon road trip he and the child’s mother took across the U.S. On the road, the father says, they begin to feel like “criminals lost in a life of crime” (131): “It was ten days of not having to be ourselves, of being invisible and free” (131-32). The fact that the couple are celebrating this particular occasion seems a significant context for why they adopt a rosy, “honeymoon” view of the road, the implication being that this view, like a honeymoon vacation, is temporary and emotionally inflated. And indeed, much like in *Generation X*, the “Gettysburg” couple’s seemingly freeing road trip is soon undercut by its parallel to a different, less romantic road story told later in the work. In this latter road narrative, the husband describes how he must “travel the roads” (147) as part of his employment, now many years after his honeymoon: “I work for a medium-sized software company called ImmuDyne. I am not an egghead—I’m just a guy in a suit who drives a boring mid-sized car and spends too much time in airport hubs with a suitcase full of brochures, diskettes, smoker’s toothpaste and airline honey-roasted nuts” (147). The diction here undercuts any glamour that might have been attached to the road on his honeymoon trip; everything about his employment, and his travels, is middling, from the size of the company



he works for to the size of his “boring” car. Carrying around trash-bound ephemera and insignificant consumables, he is “just” an employee who is compelled to road and air travel by necessity. The bare materiality of his travel experiences, as expressed in his list of items, foregrounds how roads, and airports, remain physical presences to which beliefs (like the fantasy of escape) become attached. This is a road narrative that therefore supplants the more romantic honeymoon road tale from earlier in the story, a supplanting that is compounded by the reader’s awareness that the marriage eventually deteriorates: “She says she has fallen out of love with me,” says the father about the couple’s split. By juxtaposing the two road narratives, then, “Gettysburg” exhibits skepticism of any unqualified view of the road-as-escape and shows that view as temporary and contingent, based more on the personal and social conditions surrounding particular travellers than on any universal truth of the road.

The character from “Gettysburg” is reminiscent of the narrator from “In the Desert,” mentioned above and discussed in detail in Chapter 1. In both stories, the characters’ road travels seem to suggest that there is something robotic or formulaic in how individuals take to the road to search for themselves. “In the Desert” showcases this idea metaphorically in the narrator’s use of the car radio’s “SEEK” button, “continuously prowling for new stations” (168) as the narrator presses it again and again (171), never encountering any stations that appeal to him (183). While the narrator claims that his “real home” is his “virtual community” (168-69), composed of “fragments” (168) from the radio and other media, he ultimately confesses that many of these radio fragments (particularly the ones that talk about Jesus, religion, and salvation) are difficult to comprehend: “I was cut off from their experience in a way that was never connectable” (183). The narrator’s constant “seeking” action, unthinking and almost mechanical, seems to represent a core problem of road-travel-as-escape: the desire to search for something by embarking on a trip is real, but the process might not yield any satisfactory results, much like with the narrator’s radio results. Mindlessly pushing the SEEK button over and over therefore serves as a metaphor for the searching that road travellers do. This mindlessness is reinforced by the narrator’s description of vehicular travel:

“[T]he physical act of driving itself occupies a good chunk of brain cells that otherwise would be giving you trouble overloading your thinking. New scenery continually erases what came before; memory is lost, shuffled, relabeled and forgotten. Gum is chewed; buttons are pushed; windows are lowered and opened. A fast moving car is the only place

where you're legally allowed to not deal with your problems. It's enforced meditation and this is good" (176).

The passive voice describing actions associated with driving not only erases the "I" or the self attached to those actions in a kind of linguistic escape act, but also creates a sense of automation in the doing of these tasks. While the driver is figured more positively, at the end, as one who experiences "enforced meditation," the fact that driving is also rendered a *release* from thought, from memory, and from the past itself (or "what came before") means that the driver is more unthinking than meditative. Here, too, as in "Gettysburg," inhabiting the road is depicted less glamorously than in Primeau's sense of "adventure, escape," and a way to "break the routine" (15). What adventure can the road really offer, if manoeuvring along it compels the driver toward machine-operating somnambulism?

Like the characters in these short stories and in *Generation X*, John from Coupland's novel *Miss Wyoming* (2000) voices a similar desire to escape through the road before he figures out that this form of escapism is perhaps illusory or at least more complicated than popular culture might have us think. Telling his business partner, "I don't want to be a citizen of anywhere" (54), John declares his intention to go on the road: "This is the *road* we're talking about—the romance of the *road*. Strange new friends. Adventures every ten minutes. Waking up each morning feeling like a wild animal. No crappy rules or smothering obligations" (52). While John clearly wants to break away from structure, his noticeable attention to cycles of time, counting minutes and mornings, exposes how despite his efforts to detach himself from stifling social realities and adopt a wild and adventurous road lifestyle, he is still subject to the same constraints of time as everyone else. Escape via the road is perhaps not so radical after all. Even when John fantasizes about the alluring possibilities of being a "nobody"—his class privilege showing through here—the language of the fantasy foretells that John's trip might not go as he plans: "He would be—*nobody*—he would have nothing: no money, no name, no history, no future, no hungers—he would merely be this sensate creature walking the country's burning freeways, its yawning malls, its gashes of wilderness, its lightning storms, its factories and its dead spaces" (48). On one hand, this passage features the same impulse for a "flight from self" (Patton 250) that many of the road protagonists in this chapter have demonstrated; John effectively wants to shed his identity by taking to the road, and the repeated language of negation emphasizes his drive toward erasure: "no" is used five times in one sentence, alongside words

such as “*nobody*” and “nothing.” But on the other hand, the passage is not altogether optimistic about how that self-erasure will go. In light of the diction used, it seems the “creature” it so dehumanizingly describes will likely die by burning, by a gash, by lightning, or by capitalism. After all, it is easy to have no self—“no future, no hungers”—if you are dead.

And yet—spoiler alert—John does not die. He does, however, view his time on the road as a failure. Along the way, John begins to feel like “a noble fool,” “romantic and naïve,” whose road story is “damned from the start”: “He thought the corny idea to shed the trappings of his life would deepen him, regenerate him—make him king of fast-food America and its endless paved web” (103). His travels are later referred to as a “doomed search” (243), language that accords with his business partner Ivan’s reaction to John telling him he wants to hit the open road: “The road is *over*, John-O. It never even *was*. You’re thinking like a kid behind a Starbucks counter sneaking peeks at his Kerouac paperback and writing ‘*That’s so true!*’ in the margins” (52). Ivan and John, upon John’s return, both convey the sentiment that there is something naïve about believing in the romantic aura of being on the road. In their construction, road escapism is a “corny idea” most likely to be championed by the uncritical reader of cultural road stories. This view refigures the idyllic and glamorous perspective of road freedom as merely a narrative formulaically spoon-fed to inexperienced individuals who yearn for an easy escape from the likes of jobs at chain coffee houses.<sup>5</sup> Having bought into that very narrative himself, prior to his trip, John is later depicted as somehow wiser for having realized that “[h]is time on the road was a sham” (174). When prompted about his travels, he reveals, “I really went nowhere. I ate out of dumpsters. I slept under bridges. I traipsed around the Southwest and got gum disease and my skin turned into pig leather and I didn’t learn a goddamn thing” (254). John’s story follows a conventional innocence-to-experience trajectory in that he recognizes the errors in his former thinking about road freedom, but it also rejects that trajectory insofar as John does not otherwise

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<sup>5</sup> In this vein, Neil Archer, drawing on Marc Augé, figures the road as a non-place whose “appeal is not freedom so much as the suspension of decision-making itself; for, as long as we inhabit it, the non-place—motorways, service stations and hotels, the road itself—delivers us from the burden of individual subjectivity” (141). Archer reads the “freedom of the road [as] an illusion, a cinematic fantasy”; yet, he writes, “its increasing prominence as fantasy in the era of late capitalism . . . underlines its symptomatic nature” (147). In other words, the road-as-escape narrative can be understood as a symptom of contemporary labour realities. Commuting by road becomes associated with “the mid-point between work and non-work, between commitment and solitude” (147).

develop through his travels. He admits to learning nothing, and he suspects his mother is disappointed to find him “seemingly unchanged” (245). For John, the space of the road leads not to transformation or renewal—can asphalt and gravel spark such drastic change?—but only to temporary (and ultimately disappointing) escape.

A vital similarity between John and the other characters discussed in this conclusion, and, in fact, uniting the majority of Coupland’s characters, is that they lead relatively secure, normative, middle-class lives, and their decisions to travel are enabled by their privilege. These characters, by nature of their class and employment in Canadian and U.S. society, are fully able to test out whether the road is freeing or transformational for them. These characters can experiment with a potential release from responsibilities or social and familial accountabilities. These characters, in short, *can* seek escape, even if it does not work out. John recognizes this, as it dawns on him, during his travels, that “his own form of loneliness was a luxury, one as chosen and as paid for as three weeks in Kenya’s velds or a cherry red Ferrari” (105).<sup>6</sup> The image of the Ferrari draws on stereotypes of mid-life crisis, figuring John’s road journey as the equivalent to purchasing an expensive, luxury sports car on a whim. But the reality is that this iteration of road escapism is not a valid possibility for many. For some, escape through road travel is a matter of survival, as people flee oppressive and violent personal and political situations for safety. And for others, experiences on the road can themselves be violent, oppressive, confining—even fatal. It is a testament to the privileges of Coupland’s characters that their road travel includes metaphorical language of death and danger—as in Andy’s case, when he crosses over the U.S.-Mexico border and enters “cannibalistic” territory, or in John’s case, when the book figures his road trip in terms that predict the death that never actually happens to him—yet no lives are actually threatened or deeply harmed by road mobility. Perhaps the worst outcomes are that the characters remain unfulfilled, like the Xers (arguably) or the character from “Gettysburg”; that they do not learn anything or experience transformation (like John); or that their car breaks down and they must walk to the nearest station for help (as happens to the narrator of “In the Desert”). Coupland’s characters seek marginalization from society by adopting nomadic, road-bound personas, but it is actually their *lack* of marginalization in everyday society—their ability to quit

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<sup>6</sup> John’s note about “buying” time to spend in Kenya’s velds is particularly telling in terms of his positionality and privilege, invoking as it does a long and contentious history of white North Americans travelling to different places in Africa for luxury vacations while remaining ignorant of the social and ecological impact their travels can have.

jobs and move to other countries or roam the one they are in, or their employment that permits cushy travel in planes and “air-conditioned metal nodules” (*Miss Wyoming* 8)—that allows them to make this choice. And even that very choice to escape reveals the characters’ privilege, as it is only those who can afford not to have a significant stake in the quotidian, social, and political goings-on who are able to “unburden” themselves from civic responsibilities and eschew interest in contemporary society.<sup>7</sup> In the end, as seen in “In the Desert,” the road traveller’s choice to remove themselves from society’s horrors, or at least its minutiae, can lead to a soulless kind of detachment: seeking, seeking, seeking, but never finding. Seeking, but never satisfied. So go the travels of the narrator of “In the Desert,” as he drives through the “bigness” and “Nothingness” of the desert (167) in an enclosed vehicle cut off from the rest of the world, his movements automated in their unthinking repetition, and so far removed from others, from even the idea of two-way communication, that the radio stations he encounters are all alienating to him (183). The road can be lonely.

If this is the reality of the road for these characters, then the answer to “where do ‘all roads lead’ in Coupland’s writing?” might just be: to the same place they began. Even when the characters end in a *literally* different location, as with the Gen Xers’ travels to Palm Springs and then San Felipe, they do not, *figuratively* speaking, demonstrate any sense of change or awakening, or any sense of being in a headspace different from where they began. For Andy, Dag, and Claire, as mentioned, the results of their travels might be optimistic—the unending hopefulness that comes with being able to “move continually” in the cycle of terminal wanderlust, always searching for “idealized” (171) environments—but the more likely interpretation is that they are, indeed, trapped in a cycle of mobility and unable to satisfy their idealism no matter where the roads lead. For the protagonist of “Gettysburg,” the more exciting possibilities of where the road might lead are tied only to the character’s honeymoon trip; as an

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<sup>7</sup> And yet, importantly, this very choice to escape does not always emerge as a product of privilege. Deborah Paes de Barros shows, in her *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women’s Road Stories* (2004), that “[w]ithin popular culture, the road serves for women as a kind of space of temporary adventure, a space from which women must finally return restored to patriarchy. In a slightly more subversive sense . . . the road also becomes the solace for the marginalized and unhappy woman” (186). Similarly, Alexandra Ganser’s *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women’s Road Narratives, 1970-2000* (2009) ties “women’s road narratives” to “a possibility of escape” (13) and shows how “American women’s writers have told cross-country journeys as pleasurable and empowering, as a chance for personal discovery and exploration, and as cultural critique” (14).

older adult, he is no more impassioned or transformed by his travels on the road than he is by the peanuts and smoker's toothpaste he carries with him (147), the glamour of road life having been rubbed off by the necessity of his travel for work. And John, from *Miss Wyoming*, is the character who most explicitly reveals the "sham" (174) behind the road-as-escape narrative, as his disclosures about learning nothing through his travels and having an altogether meaningless time bluntly reject the possibility that roads lead to anywhere transformative (254).

The only character who could be said to experience some form of change during his travels is the narrator of "In the Desert," who, I argue in Chapter 1, comes to embrace a new or lingering sense of faith in spite of his immersion in a seemingly post-spiritual landscape. But even then, as I describe in Chapter 1, this new or renewed faith is enabled by the narrator's on-foot encounter with another person in the desert. His transformation is not specifically connected to his road travel. Instead, when he drives, the narrator worries "about [his] feelings disappearing more and more" (175), or about how he is "feeling less and less" (177). Physically driving along the road is linked to these thoughts of emotionlessness, and the narrator's robotic motions connote an unthinking, anesthetized traveller. Even in this more ambiguous case, then, Coupland's character takes to the road, but the sheer act of inhabiting the space does not produce difference or transformation.

This trend in Coupland's writing demonstrates that, both physically and figuratively, the road can be a space that restricts as much as it frees. I am drawing here on language Bellamy uses to describe the tension between freedom and confinement that characterizes the road and many U.S.-American road narratives. The road itself, "formally suggesting confinement" in its material makeup, can also be a channel for physical escape, as Bellamy writes (225): "The road is a structure that only leads in certain directions. Though it seems to offer multiple destinations and futures, the destinies that the road enables are remarkably similar to the ones that [the characters in the road narratives he studies] are trying to escape in the first place" (233).

Bellamy's insights ring true for Coupland's characters, too, many of whom experience a kind of entrapment by and through the road: the Gen Xers' seemingly endless terminal wanderlust, John's inability to escape his past through travel. By creating the definition for terminal wanderlust in *Generation X*, by creating road stories that end in the same place they start (with no character transformation or significant differences fostered along the way), Coupland shows how the road-as-escape narrative might be more of a prescribed trajectory, a formula, than a

workable possibility for many people. The road itself, and road mobility, is far too complex to reduce to one possible experience—of escape—even if that remains the culturally dominant reading, as Primeau’s scholarship argues.

Ignoring, then, the possible ironies in my using the space of the road to “escape” from, or to exit, the present study of Douglas Coupland’s spatial politics, it seems that roads are actually a fitting place to end a project of this sort. Quite literally, roads connect places to other places. This is their barest and most innocent function. Likewise, this project has sought to connect places to other places in its reading of key spaces in Coupland’s map of North America. Not coincidentally, Coupland’s works show this same impulse to connect seemingly disparate places, almost as if his writing becomes a road itself, linking environments and communities. And so the suburban landscape of Coupland’s youth becomes tied to the wilderness that envelops it (as in Chapter 2); and the “consumable” Mexico of Coupland’s writing is joined, by critique, to suburban America’s often damaging attitudes (as in Chapter 4); and the hot American Southwest desert region is likened, by virtue of its “wildness,” to the forested peripheries stretching out from Metro Vancouver to Canada’s icy North (as in Chapters 1 and 3).

Coupland himself articulates this inter-connected understanding of space in an interview published at the end of the 2008 reissued Harper Perennial edition of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in which he is asked, “Where do you go for inspiration?” To this, he responds, “Four-hour drives in my car, usually into the interior of British Columbia, into the desert cordillera that stretches down into Mexico. Believe it or not, Canada has cactuses/cacti” (3). To see the desert in British Columbia’s wilds, to see Mexico’s landscapes in Canada—more than simply a neutral articulation of the physical similarities spaces share, this kind of seeing reveals a desire to make linkages across seemingly distinct spaces. Coupland’s response, in many ways, represents what this project has been all about: seeing a space in its own right, but then also as part of a larger matrix of other spaces. The chapters of this project have sought to show how, for Coupland, spatial units as diverse as the ones in this study (deserts, wilderness, suburbia, Mexico) are still gathered under “the same sun” (*Life After God* 355). As Scout reflects, looking up to the sky during his trip to Vancouver Island wilderness, “This is the same sun—the same burning orb of flame that shone over my youth—over swimming pools and Lego and Kraft dinner and malls and suburbia and TV and books about Andy Warhol” (355). This same sun burns over the “Nothingness” of the Mojave (*Life After God* 167) and the Mexican restaurants from North Bay,

Ontario (*Generation A* 53), to Lancaster, Washington (*Shampoo Planet* 112), and beyond. It burns over the U.S.-Mexico border, across which Andy journeys as he “bakes” (*Generation X* 169) in the heat. It is the same sun that Karen, in the heat of suburban apocalypse, imagines she will “turn into” at the peak of a mountain, “any mountain” (*Girlfriend* 202); the same that Dag invokes when he envisions the moment of his death, an angel coming down to retrieve him before they fly, together, directly into that sun (*Generation X* 168). And it is the same sun that burns over the desert cordillera that Coupland sees as inspiration and muse: a mountain chain across the length of the continent and a thread that runs through his writing; a physical link from Canada to Mexico and a vital topography in his mind’s eye; or something like a road that fuses us together, one space to the next.



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