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PhD Thesis

Faith at the Edge:

Religion after God in four novels by Douglas Coupland

Louis Greenberg

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Louis Greenberg

28 October 2010

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In memory of my mother, Jule Greenberg (1934–2009).

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Introduction

Douglas Coupland's official website (Coupland 2010b) tells that he "was born on a Canadian air force base near Baden-Baden, Germany on 30 December 1961. In 1965, his family returned to Vancouver where Coupland continues to live and work. He studied art and design in Vancouver, Canada, Milan, Italy, and Sapporo, Japan." (Coupland 2010b: Biography) He has recently written for theatre, television and film. He has published over twenty fiction and non-fiction books, and says about the novels: "Because my writing comes from a different place (art school) than most other fiction, it tends to not fit into too many molds, and each book tends to be quite different than the one preceding it […A]s a consequence I have frequently received polarized responses from readers". (Coupland 2010d)

Mainstream print and online media is saturated with reviews and discussions of Douglas Coupland's work. There are blogs, forums and fan sites dedicated to the writer and his work, and he warrants a substantial Wikipedia entry. (Various Authors 2010) Coupland goes a long way in fuelling this media coverage: apart from hosting his own website, he has a public Twitter account, (Coupland 2010c) has kept a blog on the *New York Times* website (Coupland 2006b) and an online diary for *Slate* magazine, (Coupland 2008) and gives regular self-appraising online and press interviews, and often goes on book tours, the latest of which can be found on the news page of his website. (Coupland 2010b: News) Perhaps this painstaking construction of his public image is an attempt to manage the depression, paranoia and fears of schizophrenia from which he is said to suffer. (Andrew 2003) He talks a lot about his works and attitudes to life and the future,

and he most recently styles himself a "radical pessimist", (Coupland 2010e) but for all this one gets the sense that his public utterances are highly controlled and carefully considered, part of a public-relations image devised for the promotion of his novels and are not likely to tell us any more than he would publicly admit. My focus in this thesis is not on Coupland's public persona, but purely on his texts whence, incidentally, some illuminating insights into the assumptions of his authorial persona emerge.

Coupland has published thirteen globally distributed novels to date: *Generation X* (1991), *Shampoo Planet* (1992), *Life After God* (1993), *Microserfs* (1995), *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), *Miss Wyoming* (1999), *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001), *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003), *Eleanor Rigby* (2004), *jPod* (2006), *The Gum Thief* (2007), *Generation A* (2009) and *Player One* (2010). He has also written one illustrated novel, *God Hates Japan* (2001), only released in a limited edition in Japan.[1]

Generation X introduces readers to Coupland's abiding concerns with production and consumption in a high-capitalist culture, with a condition of purposelessness and spiritual emptiness, and with frayed personal relationships in need of redefinition. These concerns thread their way through all the rest of his novels which can be classed into

[1] Coupland is also the author of several non-fiction books. *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996), a collection of essays on US culture, is the best-known of these. *City of Glass* (2000, revised in 2010), *Souvenir of Canada* (2002) and *Souvenir of Canada 2* (2004) offer Coupland's perspectives on Vancouver and Canada. *School Spirit* (2002) is a collaborative art book between French artist Pierre Huyghe and Coupland in a limited French and English release. *Terry* (2005), an illustrated biography of Terry Fox, a Canadian cancer survivor and campaigner, is most recently followed by a biography of *Marshall McLuhan* (2010), part of Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians series. Coupland does not list *Lara's Book: Lara Croft and the Tomb Raider Phenomenon* (1998) in the bibliography on his official website.

three roughly sketched, overlapping categories. *Shampoo Planet*, *Microserfs* and *jPod* are novels about earning and spending within the North American capitalist system. The protagonist of *Shampoo Planet*, Tyler Johnson, is the preppy antithesis to the idealistic dropouts of *Generation X*. He's younger, less doubtful, has more money and unashamedly spends it, buying into the superficial happiness capitalist culture has to offer. *Microserfs* is the story of six computer programmers who work in a Microsoft-like hive, and who strike out to start their own company. These six characters, like those in *Generation X*, rebel against a multinational corporation, but with a more commercial focus than the protagonists of *Generation X*. *jPod* is a retrospective novel, presenting us with a group of computer game designers yet again stuck in a corporate pod that has the feel of some jolly, colourful hamster maze. Little seems to have changed in the eleven years since *Microserfs*, except that macropolitical rebellion now seems beyond these characters. They talk a lot, including about escape to some non-technological utopia, but the free drinks at work seem to make up for freedom's impossibility.

Miss Wyoming, *All Families Are Psychotic*, *Eleanor Rigby* and *The Gum Thief* examine the fragmented state of contemporary life from a more personal perspective, eschewing the broad critiques of the novels above to look at the effect of social disconnection on families, lovers, mothers and children. In *Miss Wyoming*, Susan Colgate, teen beauty queen and now low-grade soap actress, is the sole survivor of an aeroplane crash. She wanders out of the wreckage, intent to escape her small town and her trashy mother, to find silence and start afresh. Meanwhile John Johnson, a high-budget movie producer, has a near-death experience and is presented with the image of Susan, and this Hollywood Lazarus embarks on a quest to find his angel. While many critics enjoyed

this novel, admirers of Coupland's previous books generally disliked it. With its boy-meets-girl-after-many-amusing-and-frustrating-detours structure and neatly drawn main and supporting characters, it seems to have been written according to a Hollywood formula, possibly as a self-referential, ironic ploy.

All Families Are Psychotic is a study of a sprawling, dysfunctional, nasty family seen through the eyes of its single success, Sarah Drummond, an astronaut about to go into space. *Eleanor Rigby* is a quieter, less sweeping novel about a lonely woman who is rescued from a despairing demise by the apparition of the 17-year-old, saviour-like son she never knew she had. *The Gum Thief* is a tale of two misfits working, again, in a dead-end job, this time at a branch of a multinational stationer's. The middle-aged man with an alcoholic background and frustrated writerly aspirations and his younger, disaffected Goth co-worker make a personal connection. It elides Coupland's concerns with soulless working conditions, social fragmentation and the importance of deeper personal engagement. *Miss Wyoming* overlaps into this category, a story of two culturally spent strangers finding each other.

Generation X, *Life After God*, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!* – abbreviated in citations as GX, LAG, GC and HN respectively – are the novels on which I focus this study. While they address the issues of consumptive culture and interpersonal disconnection like all of Coupland's novels do with varying focus, these novels all approach the condition as a spiritual crisis and express this crisis with mystical archetypes and quasi-religious plots and settings. In them, Coupland engages

with the possibility of socio-political and religious action in the face of such cultural conditions.

In *Generation X,* Andy, Dag and Clare drop out of urban life to live in Palm Springs, California, a calm simulation of a town at the edge of the desert which, but for its superficial contemporary trappings, could as well be in ancient Palestine. They tell each other stories about contemporary life and apocalyptic endings. The nested parables and the peripheral footnotes and definitions – the postmodern structure of the book – made a great impact when *Generation X* was published. It spoke from the perspective of young people dislocated and disconnected from meaning and power, about their yearning for something bigger than the McJobs in which they were forced to labour. These characters' dreams of apocalypse and their catalogue of tales illustrating postmodern fragmentation and loneliness continue to be definitive. The concept of Generation X has become mainstream itself, absorbed into the voracious capitalist frame of reference. In 2009, Coupland published *Generation A,* an update on the themes of *Generation X*, in which a diverse group of characters is faced again with a contemporaneous crisis. This time the crisis is environmental rather than primarily spiritual or existential, and the characters are far more politically savvy than the naive searchers in *Generation X*.

Life After God is a series of short narratives detailing the post-faith anxieties of a set of narrators and their quest for some spiritual meaning. After presenting us with a spiritually empty condition in *Generation X* and *Shampoo Planet*, Coupland here sets his characters on a quest to find the depth below the surface and an antidote to cynicism and irony, which sometimes takes the form of a road trip into the countryside. It is the

Coupland novel which is most directly concerned with spiritual matters, but far from finding the answer, the journey raises more questions. We leave the narrator admitting that he needs God, but his conception of God is unclear. The most compelling and epiphanic images of the divine are natural, like geese flying in formation overhead. The book was widely criticized in newspaper reviews as an over-inflated and not-particularly-profound account of a quarter-life crisis but its willingness to leave fundamental questions open, and Coupland's ability to express the vague profundity characteristic of late-20s depression struck a chord with many readers. The vague, drifting quest Coupland presents accounts for the dissatisfaction of those readers who try to derive a definite narratorial or authorial position from this book in which nothing is made clear.

Girlfriend in a Coma, Coupland's fifth novel, was his first book with a more traditional novelistic form, rather than the counterpointed vignettes of his prior work. In full prose passages and with a developed plot, it presents the end of the world and six Canadians' second chance at life. Eighteen years before, two virgins have sex on a Vancouver ski-slope. The price for their pleasure is steep: Jared dies and Karen lapses into a coma, during which she gives birth. Numbed by their loss, their teenaged friends carry on in a half-life, drawn, as they grow older, to drink and drugs and surreal work creating false corpses for American TV. Their Vancouver changes with them over the next two decades, becoming, like them, a zombified version of US-American culture. Then Karen wakes up, forecasting the end of the world, which indeed comes. It's a strange apocalypse; everyone simply falls asleep as if there is nothing new, nothing compelling to do. The six friends, though, live on, and armed with the chance to remake the world,

they choose instead to lounge about and watch videos. This angers Jared, the ghost, who exhorts them to make a change. The question remains, though: what sort of change can these listless characters effect?

Finally, in *Hey Nostradamus!*, 17-year-old Cheryl Anway is shot and killed in a school massacre. She's been secretly married to Jason Klaasen for six weeks and has just told him that she's pregnant. Jason's father, Reg, is a bitter and cruel Christian fundamentalist, and Heather is the woman who tries to love Jason ten years after the shooting. These four connected characters narrate one of Coupland's most sombre novels. Cheryl and Jason are devout Christians themselves, but after the shooting Jason clashes with the school's Christian lobby. This depiction of the ills of fundamentalism, while still valorising the young peoples' search for spiritual depth, is Coupland's most direct engagement with institutional religion.

It is worth reading a few of the reviews *Life after God* received on publication, in which he was excoriated presumably for attempting be serious and to express depression and spiritual yearning when his reviewers were expecting more postmodern jollity. "The sparkiness and deft intelligence of Coupland's previous work is absent here: for all its engagement with Big Issues, it's thin, almost exhausted, horribly close to mawkishness", wrote Nicholas Lezard of the *Guardian* (7 February 1995). Brenda Peterson wrote that "the voice never really varies: it drones where it might delve, it skims where it might seduce, it hoards where it might offer sustenance. The range of character and emotion is so slight as to be undetectable" (*The New York Times Book Review*, 8 May 1994), and Tom Shone wrote in the *Sunday Times* (7 August 1994) that

"this is a book that melts instantly in your mind. Coupland isn't really interested in talking about his generation, merely in giving good sound bite."

Zoë Heller called *Life after God* "gruesome stuff. Coupland's mawkish, low-grade fancy finds its true home in the stoned conversations of sixth-formers. A reader might be more forgiving were it not for the fantastic, hipster smugness that accompanies such grim silliness. […W]ill Coupland ever wake up and cry with regret and shame and grief at having written such embarrassing, self-regarding twaddle?" (*The Independent,* 31 July 1994) Titles of further reviews like "X Marks the Schlock: Slacking Towards Bethlehem with Author Douglas Coupland" (Bruce Handy in *Vanity Fair*, March 1994) and "Caught in Claptrap with Generation X" (Carolyn See in the *Washington Post*, 1 April 1994) suggest reviewers' disappointment in the book.

This scathing critical response to *Life after God* is more than mere journalistic wit at play. It demonstrates a surprising normative strand within the liberal and creative industry of literary journalism. The young journalists who panned Coupland's books appear to have been regurgitating fashionable anti-religious readings of deconstruction they may have learned at university. In the mid-1990s, their knee-jerk reaction to any attempt by a secular writer to express spiritual belief would be dismissed and ridiculed with full contempt.

In North America and Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when these journalists were cutting their intellectual teeth, the excessive hype about deconstruction led to simplistic and polarised readings of it. These student-journalists were either uncritically

for an undergraduate distillation of deconstruction, or fervently *against* it. The vogue, in liberal circles, would have been the former, and this popular intellectual fashion was used with full force to shame Coupland's attempts to grapple with religion in *Life after God*. Now that the academic vogue for deconstruction in Britain and the US has long dissipated, and especially since terror attacks on the west have reminded Britons and Americans that the world at large is not all that post-religious, more nuanced and varied readings of Derrida and other postmodern philosophers are allowed, including readings which point to the importance of post-religious expressions of spiritual belief in their work. What Coupland attempted in 1994 is no longer risky or avant garde, and many younger postmodern writers, like Jonathan Safran Foer, Victor Pelevin, David Foster Wallace and David Mitchell, consider post-religious psychological issues to great popular and critical acclaim.

Coupland's intellectual background is similar to those critics who dismissed him, however, and his religious explorations are always expressed with varying degrees of hesitance and embarrassment. His attitude towards religious questions shifts constantly, and I chart a trajectory across the four novels from a playful neopagan agnosticism in *Generation X*, via eschatological depression in *Life after God* and zealous, though unconvincing, evangelism in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, back to resigned humanist agnosticism in *Hey Nostradamus!* It is this constant shifting which disturbs critics who seek to categorize his work, and which discourages scholars.

I regard Coupland's hesitance to express post-religious religion and his lack of definitive religious answers, due either to deliberate avoidance or an inability to express

them, not as an imaginative weakness, but as an appropriate stance towards the subject in the postmodern culture he reflects. Coupland positions his characters on the edge in manifold ways: on the edge of madness, on the geographical margin of the continent, at the threshold of the end of time, and on the verge of great, transcendent truth. This thematic liminality defines the specific culture about which he writes: middle-class, young, North American, disillusioned suburbanites. The central question in this thesis is not a religious one: it is not concerned as some Coupland scholars (especially Tate 2002 and 2007, and McCampbell 2009) are, with reconstructing a higher power, a broken, old-fashioned God, from the fragments of it left behind in postmodernity. The presenting problem in this thesis is primarily a psychoanalytical and political one. What, after God in this culture is dead, can replace the cathartic and transcendent psychological functions that religion once filled? What can stand in for the sense of agency and social connectedness that ideology founded on religious certainty once conferred? In teasing out Coupland's answers to these questions I examine the multiple layers of spirit in Coupland's imaginative universe: tendencies to romantic notions of environmental paganism, the residual effects of dominant and hierarchical religion, and his tentative probing into an altogether new basis of belief and agency.

In chapter one of this thesis, I examine the psychological crises of Coupland's characters through the lens of Kristevan analysis. Julia Kristeva's conception of the subject as founded on language, constantly in flux, and always threatened by the return of the abject is uniquely suited to illuminating the post-religious intrapsychic conflicts of Coupland's characters. There is a remarkable parallel between their work: what Kristeva sets out in theory, Coupland's characters play out in narrative. The first section

of the chapter examines various characters' self-marginalization as a radical strategy against the normalizing monolith of capitalist culture, and suggests that this strategy is ultimately self-destructive. The second section of the chapter examines the gendered spiritual archetypes Coupland deploys in his stories, including monstrous female bodies and mystical males. The last section is a short coda, detailing the stories of two characters who seem to have devised a successful and radical approach to the demands of a newly structured world.

Chapter two reads the spiritual significance in Coupland's locations with theoretical counterpoint from various postmodern thinkers, primarily Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard who have distinct visions of the future. The first section examines Coupland's spiritualization of liminal terrain: the forest wilderness of British Columbia and the south-west US-American desert. These often serve as quasi-biblical locations for spiritual awakening and epiphany, and are contrasted with the novels' cities, which are presented both as a site of capitalist oppression from which his characters must escape, and as a vision of postmodernity, in all its paradoxical chaotic congruence. The second section examines Coupland's nostalgic fixation on the mid-1970s, the height of his, and his characters' adolescence, and the last flush of their innocence. This period, for Coupland, is a frozen, death-deferring memento of the past, and serves as a place of safety to which his characters repeatedly return. The third section of the chapter examines some of the ideological assumptions behind Coupland's imagination of landscape, and shows how his vision is founded on a complex mixture of colonial and anti-colonial politics.

The third chapter of the thesis looks closely at the apocalyptic themes in Coupland's novels. Apocalypse in Coupland's work refers both to the teleological, religious apocalypse of manifest destiny, and to the literal end of the world and the death of its people. The first section of the chapter positions Coupland in a tradition of Canadian apocalyptic literature and assesses his eschatological vision in relation to this tradition. The second section discusses Coupland's thematization of nuclear apocalypse by reading certain of his apocalyptic case studies, while the third section examines a specific target of his apocalyptic fantasies: the shopping mall, which is metonymic of consumptive capitalism and of postmodern urban blight. The final section of the chapter shows how Coupland's apocalyptic imagination, which culminates in the almost-total destruction of Earth's human population in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, is rewritten in *Hey Nostradamus!* in a more forgiving, less violently zealous tone. I argue that *Hey Nostradamus!* is a direct revisitation of the themes of *Girlfriend in a Coma* catalyzed by the deeply symbolic real-world terror at Columbine High and at the World Trade Center.

The final chapter is organized as a long meditation, rather than as a series of discrete views, on a theme. It investigates the potential of the post-religious religion which Coupland has knitted into his novels. I attempt to express this potential for belief more directly than Coupland has in order to test it against current philosophical and scientific discoveries and collate it with long-standing cross-religious mystical traditions. Deploying deconstructive philosophy, some tenets of Buddhism, and evoking certain mysteries of quantum physics, I find that Coupland's novels do indeed contain the raw material for a coherent expression of a powerful, transcendent, and connective belief, a

post-religious religion, a belief after God. I argue that fictional narrative, because it is constantly revised and never categorical, a wave-pattern of potentiality rather than a vehicle for single, static, definitive meaning, is the ideal method for expressing and disseminating this new belief. Coupland's very indecisiveness and refusal to settle on a definitive stance makes his deployment of narrative uniquely suited to the task of expressing this new belief.

Chapter One:

Spiritual identity at the end of certainty

> *On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border […] where identities […] do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.*
>
> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1982: 207)

1.1 Flirting with the abject: dynamic strategies for spiritual identity

Douglas Coupland's novels offer a broad critique of specific cultural conditions on the North American west coast. His primarily suburban characters suffer from identity crises, social fragmentation, family dysfunction, uncreative working conditions, a lack of meaning and a lack of political agency. In *Generation X*, *Life after God*, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!* Coupland foregrounds the spiritual aspects of these cultural and ontological crises. Across the twelve-year span of these four novels – first published from 1991 to 2003 – he is repeatedly concerned with articulating new ways to believe that will result in new ways to act. Political agency and spiritual identity are thus interwoven in his work, and form a complex reaction to the crises of age, time, culture and place which he presents in his novels.

Coupland's characters are on the edge of a new world, where the turbulent tides of modern and postmodern, of capitalism and post-industrialism, of fundamentalism, humanism, nostalgic retrospection and uncharted new forms of belief swirl together in complicated currents. In Coupland's work this metaphysical edge is set at the Western coast of America, the furthest reaches to which Europeans have travelled to escape the rigid confines of previous tyrannies before establishing their own. There is nowhere else to move; manifest destiny has run its course. There are no new lands, no new claims to stake, no physical fresh starts. As the foundations of old economic and political systems slowly crumble in theory, these systems assert themselves ever more violently in practice; as the authority of old systems of belief is chipped away by philosophical advances, it leaves a psychic void that demands attention. Coupland's characters subsequently often express a crisis of identity in the face of this complex condition. They are repressed by a rationality that would deny the possibility of transcendence of the fragmented, isolated self, they are made into target markets, they are valued only as consumers or as drones in great global corporations. They feel the work they do is meaningless, their lives lack emotional depth or connection. They reject the normalizing impulses of commercial culture and the categories into which they feel forced, but struggle to find an authentic sense of self with which to replace it.

Psychotherapy is a modern way to explicate identity crises but, as Walter Truett Anderson and Maureen O'Hara (Anderson & O'Hara 1995) note, in postmodernity psychotherapy is faced with its own identity crisis. In the face of deconstructed certainties – the sense of an essential self, the idea of God, the polarities of good and evil, the idea of nationality and a common cause: all those things which have been

employed by psychotherapists to repair the sundered sense of self – they see ironic, constructivist or postmodern humanist approaches as healthy psychological reactions to the challenges of postmodernity. These are forms of relativism but "We don't become relativists of the sort that are supposed to make no judgments. Instead, we become the kind of relativists […] who know that when we make our judgments we're standing on the ever-shifting ground of our own socially constructed worldviews." (Anderson 1995a: 10) Because monolithic certainty is a residue of the past only accessible to war heroes and baby boomers, Coupland's young characters are most often ironists, humanists or constructivists in this vein. Although this reaction to postmodernity is psychologically sound and appropriate to the times, they are often – in O'Hara's therapy sessions and in Coupland's novels – "expressed a bit apologetically. People are aware of having let go of something but not really confident of having found something with which to replace it. Neither they nor the culture nor the mental health establishment has a language for naming such small discoveries as explorations and triumphs." (Anderson and O'Hara 1995: 176) In the face of profoundly unsettling incertitude, humanist relativism seems a weak posture to take, one which does not hold the same definitive weight as bravura revolutionary statements and apocalyptic manifestos.

Psychology, art and politics are still working to articulate a satisfactory protean, humanist identity. Coupland's work shares an affinity with those psychologists who develop postmodern models for identity: James Hillman and Thomas Moore's post-religious focus on soul; ecopsychologists like Theodore Roszak and Robert Romanyshyn; and psychologists who talk of the self-in-relation, an initially feminist idea extensible to a non-gendered subject which formulates female subjectivity as a

process of cooperation rather than the violent separation of the male Oedipal process. (Zweig 1995) While "the bad news about postmodern life is the serious despair, emptiness and social disintegration that sometimes follows the disappearance of all certainties[, t]he good news is the freedom it offers, the great wealth of opportunities to explore and create […] The task of therapists is to turn some of postmodernism's vague celebrations of multiplicity into lived experience." (Anderson & O'Hara 1995: 176)

The psychoanalytical work of Julia Kristeva is particularly helpful in unravelling the contemporary identity crises Coupland presents. There are remarkable parallels between Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories of the subject in process and the development, both within and across novels, of Coupland's characters. Often his characters play out in narrative what Kristeva sets out in theory. Throughout his work, Coupland strives for psychological realism (even within narratives that occasionally become surreal) and his thorough and feasible presentation of the results of their various neuroses and compulsions proves his success. His characters – fictional subjects in process – are ideal candidates for Kristevan analysis, which, critically, transposes and updates Freudian analysis into a linguistic philosophical framework. As I discuss later in this thesis, particularly in reference to work by Jacques Derrida, linguistic philosophy and the meaning derived from aporetic space offers real potential for transcendence of the self and for communal connection.

Kristeva's work is founded on the radical understanding that as individuals we have no fixed identity but that our subjectivity is contrived of language. Kristeva coined the word *parlêtres* (*parler* and *être*) to describe humans: speaking beings for whom

speaking and being are inseparable. Kristeva regularly problematizes, complicates and expands on previous philosophical ideas. The first expansion of her formative structuralist understanding came in her early studies *Semiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969) and *La revolution du langage poétique* (1974) in which she explains that the signifying process is constituted by the interplay between two modes of signification: the symbolic and semiotic modes. Kristeva's conception of the symbolic mode is similar to Lacan's; it is the mode of order, rationality and language, while the semiotic mode is a diversion from Lacan's concept of the imaginary. For Kristeva, the semiotic mode is "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases". (Kristeva 1986d: 93) The less logical forms of expression such as dance, music and experimental poetry, then, can be seen as predominantly, but not entirely, semiotic forms. For Kristeva, there is no strict polarity between the semiotic and symbolic modes, and this is one key area in which she departs from Lacan's theory.

Whereas for Lacan the mature subject is fully formed and assumed into the symbolic realm of order and laws while the imaginary order of the pre-verbal infantile developmental stages is forever lost to consciousness and analysis, for Kristeva there is a constant interplay throughout our lives between the pre-Oedipal semiotic and the symbolic modes. In Kristeva's schema, polar cultural dichotomies, such as binary distinctions between civilization and savagery, between the unconscious and conscious mind, and between feeling and reason, are broken down and intermingled. Far from being entirely and irretrievably repressed, the maternal laws of pre-verbal infantilism remain a constant companion of the constituted individual. Much of Kristeva's work is

founded on the shadow of the semiotic falling across the symbolic realm, of a destabilizing maternal presence affecting our efforts to follow the order of paternal law and reminding us that our identity remains in flux and is never fully constituted. This vision of the human psyche tallies uniquely with Coupland's observations of the challenges of life in postmodernity.

Kristeva deals with "postmodernism's vague celebrations of multiplicity" in a flexible way which applies to lived experience – and particularly lived experience as described in literature. In *Powers of Horror* she touches on a number of writers from ancient to modern and analyses primarily the work of Céline. She also addresses the Bible both as a text with sacred and socio-psychological functions and as literature. She suggests that

> literature is [abjection's] privileged signifier […] far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it [… literature] represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses […] Hence […] its being seen as taking the place of the sacred. [… The writer] is an undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well. (Kristeva 1982: 208)

Kristeva's unique appreciation of literary texts, including biblical ones, in forming and illuminating the internal processes of character is one of the features that set her apart from other psychoanalytical theorists. Kristeva's work, as Anderson and O'Hara suggest is the therapist's task, presents us with the language to examine and celebrate the achievements of post-essentialist identity formation.

Self-marginalization

Generation X and *Life after God*, like most of Coupland's oeuvre, are broadly concerned with the borders of identity, and with identity-formation at the geographic and psychological margins. Kristeva's notion of the process of abjection is similarly defined in terms of boundaries and liminality and can help to illuminate both the intrapsychic and the external, cultural processes in Coupland's characters who develop a complex, dynamic relationship with marginal identity, flirting with the abject. Like Freud's uncanny, Kristeva's notion of the *chora*, the space of maternal abjection, is a constant companion and we experience a simultaneous fear and yearning for our infantile condition: the time when we were subject to semiotic rhythms and not symbolic laws; when we were free of the tyranny of language and law, but also completely dependent on and inseparable from the body of the mother; when we were in a wild and marginal zone which, while liberating, threatens to pull us back in forever.

In *Generation X*, Andy Palmer, the narrator, and his friends Dag and Claire, have exiled themselves from their cities – Portland, Toronto and Los Angeles respectively – to Palm Springs, a small resort town in the Californian desert. Andy says: "We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now." (GX 14) In the city, he says, "We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity." (GX 14) He also relates how he and his friends arrived in Palm Springs "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 endless stress of pointless jobs

done grudgingly and to little applause. […] But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, *much* better." (GX 14)

Andy describes their escape from the city in terms of bodily functions, developing a clear link with the process of abjection. Kristeva sees abjection as a psychological process of identity-formation which starts in early infancy. A very young baby learns to differentiate itself by rejecting – or abjecting – that which is foreign to it, usually its mother's breast or its mother's milk. It spits out the mother's milk, it vomits, it defecates. By realizing what it is not, the infant begins to learn what it is; it begins to learn the boundaries of itself and what lies beyond itself. In Freudian psychology, this process of separation from the mother is a key first stage of identity-formation, followed by the Oedipal stage in which the subject should become fully subsumed into the symbolic order. If these stages are not adequately negotiated, psychosis or neurosis may result. Kristeva departs from Freudian psychology by suggesting that the semiotic and the symbolic always impinge on one another. At first, abject matter is spit and vomit and faeces and the maternal body itself; all of these define for the infant the outside world, but at the same time they remain part of it. As we grow up, our identity remains unsettled by abject reminders of the uncanny and the repressed – whether death, sex, foreignness, nuclear apocalypse or so on – all the unspeakable and unclassable experiences of life which remind us of the tenuous and constructed nature of our identity. "There looms, within abjection," writes Kristeva (and her translator Leon Roudiez) with deliberate poeticism, in something approaching a semiotic mode, "one of those violent, dark revolts of being […] ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the

tolerable, the thinkable [… It] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." (Kristeva 1982: 1–2)

It is on "the fragile border […] where identities […] do not exist or only barely so" (Kristeva, 1982:207) where literature and spirituality and psychoanalysis conjoin, and it is Coupland's repeated and manifold thematization of psychological and geographic borderlands, of intrapsychic and locational liminality, of speaking ghosts and living-dead coma states, of abject waste and irrepressible terror, that fundamentally characterizes his work.

Individually and as a society, Kristeva continues in *Powers of Horror*, we devise rituals to deal with the abject and keep it exiled in the semiotic realm, the realm outside the symbolic order, outside our language and our laws. Ancient pagan cultures performed rites of defilement to ritually exclude the abject, while Judaism developed strategies and rules to contain and legislate the threat. A key strategy in this legislation is the taxonomy of abomination which was devised by the authors of various biblical books, notably Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Another, connected strategy is the construction of taboo. Kristeva argues that observation of taboo is a social mechanism that forestalls sacrifice. "Biblical abomination would thus be an attempt to throttle murder. Through sustained abomination, Judaism parts ways with sacrificial religions. [… M]urderous acts […] become unnecessary when the rules of taboo are disclosed and observed." (Kristeva 1982: 95)

Now that Andy and his friends are out of the city, their systems are freed. They are able to eject the abject waste – symbolic of all the grudging, meaningless work, the consuming and consumptive lifestyles – that clogged their bowels. After Andy's father has a stroke, he stops eating red meat and starts eating organic produce and vitamins. Andy comments that "it took him a brush with death to deprogram himself of dietary fictions invented by railroaders, cattlemen, and petrochemical and pharmaceutical firms over the centuries." (GX 165) In abjecting the food he has been raised to eat, Andy also attempts to abject his history. Coupland's young protagonists are often involved this post-adolescent process of self-definition against their traditions – whether family, politics or economy.

Dag, a drop-out from the Toronto advertising industry, in turn describes how he resigns his job in his "veal-fattening pen" (GX 31) to become a "Basement Person". (GX 31) He drops out of the system, giving up his above-ground apartment, his "silly black matte objects" (GX 32) and his minimalist art, all "to try and shake the taint that marketing had given me […] Marketing is essentially about feeding the poop back to diners fast enough to make them think they're still getting real food. It's not creation, really, but theft". (GX 33) But he finds that the life of a Basement Person is not as liberating as it seemed; it is "strictly codified", "earnest" and "politically correct" (GX 32). He realized he had exchanged one set of rules for another, and that's when "things got pharmaceutical, when they hit *bottom*." (GX 33) He reaches the abject limits of his self-exile. "I started to find humanity repulsive, reducing it to hormones, flanks, mounds, secretions, and compelling methanous stinks. At least in this state I felt that there was no possibility of being the ideal target market any more." (GX 35) Dag sees

defiling himself as the only possible escape from the economy. His is a lonely political act of defiance against a market system which sees him as nothing more than a unit of work or a unit of consumption. The city for Andy and Dag is a symbol of the repressive normalization of consumer culture – the waste, the shopping, the pointless jobs.

Claire, too, ends up in Palm Springs, rejecting Los Angeles and the class distinctions it stands for. Her job on a perfume counter in a department store is a deliberate offense to her rich, large and multi-divorced family with its preppy collection of step-offspring. Andy relates that Claire and her eccentric friend Elvissa "both left their old lives behind them and set forth to make new lives for themselves in the name of adventure. In their similar quest to find a personal truth, they willingly put themselves on the margins of society, and this, I think, took some guts. It's harder for women to do this than men." (GX 100) From a childhood of sickness and hospitalisation, Claire developed an affinity for marginal people: she "spent the formative years of her life conversing with healing invalid souls – institutional borderline cases, the fringed, and the bent ('To this day, I prefer talking with incomplete people; they're more complete')." (GX 41) The idea that a borderline position is a position of healing, and that incomplete people are more complete are further examples of Coupland's sympathy – particularly in his earlier novels – for the liminal character and his idealization of marginal existence. Andy, Dag and Claire's deliberate decision to marginalize themselves, however, to be quiet and not to participate, puts the full responsibility for self-definition onto them. Whether and how they are able to sustain this heavy responsibility remains a key concern of the novel.

Towards the end of the book, Andy presents us with the image of a rabbit-proof fence in Australia which 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." (GX 201) Dag, Claire and Andy have all made the conscious and free choice to inhabit the lunar side of the fence to enact "their difficult destinies […] And lonely and awful as that choice can sometimes be, I have no regrets" (GX 201) says Andy. Now, after the action of the novel, things don't seem "much, *much* better" anymore. They are "lonely and awful". Still Andy has no regrets because his life on the margins allows him some agency over his existence. Here on the margins, he feels that his destiny is still his own.

In *Life after God*, Coupland presents a potent image of liberation in cultural exile: the figure of a homeless drifter. Deserts, forests and montane wildernesses regularly feature in Coupland's work as a geographic antithesis and antidote to urban, consumer culture, a topic I explore in detail in the second chapter of this thesis. In the story entitled "In the Desert", an unnamed narrator is driving illegal steroids to Palm Springs but his moral conscience gets the better of him and he decides instead to bury them in the desert, far off the main road. His car breaks down and he is forced to walk. Night falls and he finds himself being followed by another man, who turns out to be homeless, a drifter who the narrator describes as "crazy […] The drifter didn't even question the fact that a person might be walking lost in the desert at night – as though lost strolls were the most natural activity on earth." (LAG 164) When this man talks, "he wasn't really talking to me, either – he was broadcasting – like a cheap AM radio station […] He talked about a Republican conspiracy; about the Colorado River; about Princess Caroline of Monaco."

(LAG 165) Although the narrator considers himself sane and ordered and in control, he is more similar to the crazy drifter than he would like to believe. Earlier, he tells us that in his car he was able "to receive radio stations from all over the West – those fragments of cultural memory and information that compose the invisible information structure I consider my real home". (LAG 136) The man's broadcasting conversational style resonates with the narrator's sense of identity, with the liminal, nowhere home in which he feels he belongs. The disjointed fragments in which the drifter speaks are like a memory of artificial cultural wholeness. The narrator admits that he has "always tried to speak with a voice with no regional character – a voice from nowhere. This is because I have never really felt like I was 'from' anywhere; home to me, as I have said, is a shared electronic dream." (LAG 140) Although, as we might expect, the narrator sees getting stuck in the desert as a frightening calamity, he has in fact, come closer to what he considers his true home, a nowhere space occupied by drifting loners.[2]

In the end, the drifter shares his scarce food and suddenly talks sanely and rationally for a moment, just long enough to give the narrator directions to the main road. Then "his face dissolved back into its previous craziness […] I felt naïve and middle-class for having hoped – even briefly – that I could bond with the unbondable". (LAG 166–7) For a moment the narrator identifies with the crazy drifter, the abject, unspeakable, unbondable presence which threatens his identity, but soon he re-establishes his boundaries. He is middle-class, a citizen of the rational world, and "The fact of the matter was that [the drifter] was simply a very far-gone desert rat." (LAG 167) This

[2] As I discuss in more detail in chapter 2 below, Paul Virilio suggests that this unanchored, drifting life, always in orbit, is an empowering stance. He says that "possession of territory is […] first and foremost a matter of movement and circulation." (Virilio 2000)

narrator is more concerned than Andy, Dag and Claire with getting back onto the main road. More grown-up, and more resigned and pessimistic than the trio from *Generation X*, he is interested in getting back safely to the urban, middle-class world.

Years later, though, the face of the drifter stays in his mind. Since getting lost in the desert, he tells, "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 in 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". (LAG 171) Each time he sees some terrifying, sublime natural phenomenon, a reminder of the unspeakable abject which threatens our identity, a hint of an apocalypse to come, he thinks of the drifter, perhaps as a talisman to remind himself who he is, by remembering who he is not. But it is more than this. The drifter's face, we are told, "reminds me that there is still something left to believe in after there is nothing left to believe in." (LAG 173) In the modern world belief is dead, and it is only through a marginal figure from a marginal place – the drifter from the desert – that this narrator can access a sense of transcendence, even if that transcendence is apocalypse. The drifter here could serve as some sort of prophetic John the Baptist, and the narrator as a Jesus figure, grappling in the desert between the temptations of the wild semiotic and the civilized symbolic – between the Devil and the Father.

In the climax to *Generation X*, in a chapter significantly entitled "Jan. 01, 2000", Andy describes a natural epiphany, a rebirth, a new start. He is driving through rural Southern California and on the horizon he sees what he takes to be a thermonuclear cloud. There

is much discussion in the novel of nuclear apocalypse, so the reader is led to wonder whether it is indeed some apocalypse he is about to witness, whether all of Andy's soul- and self-searching is about to come to nothing in a nuclear flash. In Coupland's later novel, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, total apocalypse becomes the only conceivable new start to a consumptive world. But here, in this more optimistic novel, as Andy draws nearer, he sees that the smoke rising comes from a controlled fire in a field and he is filled with "profound relief" (GX 205). The event draws onlookers and Andy stops at the side of the road with them to watch the fire. Most of the onlookers were "silently respectful of the accidental wonder before them […] It was a restful unifying experience", (GX 205) a rare experience in a time when people live fragmented and isolated lives. A van carrying mentally retarded youngsters pulls up and the teens spill out to add to the unusual nature of this ad hoc communal event, a neopagan ceremony of sorts. Then a "cocaine white egret" (GX 206) swoops down over the blackened field, searching for displaced insects. The reactions of Andy's "giggly, bouncing teenage neighbors became charmed and unified […] We quickly and excitedly realized that [the egret] was going to swoop right over *us*. We felt chosen." (GX 206) The egret is a clear religious symbol here, something like the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire which appears to the apostles in Acts. But an important distinction is that here, the sublime object is a real creature, a grub-eating, feathered bird that even draws blood from Andy's scalp as it swoops over him. It is physical; it is natural, not supernatural or mystical. For Andy, this is real epiphany. It is also an inclusive new start, one in which all the strangers at the side of the road can share. This generous optimism is interesting to compare with the exclusive post-apocalyptic second chance offered only to the small group of friends in *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

Seeing the cut on his head, one of the retarded teenagers touches the site of the wound, "drooling somewhat as she said, *uurd*, meaning bird, several times. […] It was the faith-healing gesture of a child." (GX 207) The other children join in the embrace. "Suddenly I was dogpiled by an instant family, in their adoring, uncritical embrace [… T]his crush of love was unlike anything I had known." (GX 207) The uncritical embrace is like a return to the womb, the slurred "uurd" signifying a return to pre-verbal existence. Like the drifter in *Life after God*, these children symbolize the liberation of madness, the power of abject alterity to clarify the self. It's an oddly naive and patronizing passage but in the context of the novel it's not intended as such. In many other places in these two novels, Coupland points towards a condition outside language as a possible path to liberation from the rational modern world, repressed as it is by the tyranny of the paternal Word. But in this scene it feels as if Coupland himself is unconvinced by the power of this natural epiphany.

It is worth noting that a story of epiphany, like any religious or secular parable, is a form of cathartic narrative with specific psychological functions. Although Kristeva does not explicitly argue it, the religious-cathartic part of the process of abjection can be extended to incorporate the effects of the Enlightenment and modernist ethos, which have disrupted the ritual power of traditional religion. Their assertion of scientific rationality and denial of the mysteries of religion have neutralized the effect of religious ritual to contain the abject threat to identity. In modern culture, because we deny the frightening, the liminal and the borderline, these very abject manifestations of the semiotic realm re-emerge and threaten to destabilize our fundamental identity. "You are

the first generation raised without religion" (LAG 129) writes Coupland in an epigraph to "In the Desert", a story in *Life after God*. And here is the root, he suggests, supported by Kristeva's psychoanalytical evidence, of many postmodern problems. Without religion, the catharsis of abjection is nullified: the abject is re-externalized, unleashed into the uncontrollable open again: abominations return; taboo is no longer respected and sacrifice once again becomes necessary. For Kristeva, art and literature serve as a secular agent of catharsis in a world beyond belief in the traditional structures of religion:

> The various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions. (Kristeva 1982: 17)

Coupland's writing, like religious scripture before it, is concerned with reactivating cathartic social structures, whether religious or creative. He has no specific cathartic solution in mind from the outset, and the four novels studied in this thesis demonstrate his multivalent experimentation with a variety of new cathartic mechanisms. We witness him experimenting with naturalist neopaganism and formal Christianity; we find him creating postmodern taxonomies of abomination and taboo. Finally, though,

Coupland settles on narrative as the most powerful therapeutic catharsis, ultimately more powerful than the impersonal structurations of religion.

In *Life after God*, the narrator of "My Hotel Year" attempts another misguided but thematically different sort of epiphany. He spends a year in a run-down residential hotel. "I had made a big hubbub about severing most of my ties to the past," he tells, and the drunken brawls and smashing mirrors in neighbouring rooms "made a suitably glamorous backdrop for the belief that my poverty, my fear of death, my sexual frustration and my inability to connect with others would carry me off into some sort of Epiphany." (LAG 25) Faced, like Andy and his friends, with the symptoms of an alienated culture, this man, rather than seeking his epiphany in everyday natural prettiness, seeks transcendence in mundane urban ugliness. After meeting some characters in the hotel who give him deeper insight, but failing to present him with epiphany, he eventually ends his self-imposed exile. "I left the hotel shortly thereafter, and very soon after that, I fell in love. Love was frightening and it hurt – not only during, but afterward – when I fell out of love. But that is another story." (LAG 51) This painful-sounding experience of love satisfies him; at last he feels like he has made an external connection and, importantly, proven himself able to feel something. An inability to feel is an anxiety expressed by a number of characters in the novel, especially the narrator of "In the Desert".

Return to the womb

Coupland's protagonists who stand fearfully on the verge of adulthood, or who, like his desert driver, face an uncertain future often yearn to regress to a state of innocence in which adult anxiety, responsibility and painful experience does not exist. This safe, nostalgic place is illuminated by Kristeva's concept of the semiotic *chora*, an embodiment of the conflict between her semiotic and symbolic realms. When an infant is very young and still cannot separate its self from its mother, it is in a pre-verbal, pre-Oedipal stage, in which identity is fluid and the subject has not yet been formed. The infant is not subject to symbolic language, and its existence is made up of a series of drives, "which articulate what we call a *chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated." (Kristeva 1984: 25) McAfee explains that "the *chora* is the space in which the meaning is produced is semiotic: the echolalias, glossolalias, rhythms and intonations of an infant who does not yet know how to use language to refer to objects." (McAfee 2004: 19) Once again, the key role of language in identity-formation is highlighted.

The concept of the *chora* is particularly illuminating to Coupland's texts when it is imagined as a womb, a maternal space safe from the constraints and responsibilities of adulthood. Throughout Coupland's oeuvre, his characters grapple with what it means to grow up, and often – particularly in the earlier novels – they long for a return to a free, in-uteric state. Later novels, however, more often reflect the terrifying side of the impending *chora*, an anxiety about slipping back irretrievably into that semiotic realm. A psychic embodiment of the semiotic, the *chora* and its metaphoric incarnation, the

womb, is not easily repressed. McAfee comments that what was, in early infancy, the most familiar (Sigmund Freud's *Heimlich* (home-like)) site becomes for an adult an uncanny (*Unheimliche*) reminder of the not-quite-repressed and anxiety about its return. (McAfee 2004: 48) Both Freud and Kristeva would agree that this state of anxiety "is a constant companion of consciousness, a longing to fall back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity." (McAfee 2004: 49) This constant threat of the impingement of disorder is clearly seen in Kristeva's process of abjection and in many of Coupland's themes. To Kristeva, this anxiety is one of society's residual neurotic affects which religion and art have traditionally served to subdue, and this is a central part of the process of abjection she expounds in *Powers of Horror*.

At the start of the final story in *Life after God*, "1,000 Years (Life after God)", Scout, the narrator, eulogizes his past:

> As suburban children we floated at night in swimming pools the temperature of blood […] 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 the warm waters, the distinction between our bodies and our brains reduced to nothing […] like twins with whom we didn't know we shared a womb. […]
>
> Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere. (LAG 219–220)

In this silent – wordless – space prior to formulated identity, there is no distinction between the (semiotic, rhythmic) body and the (symbolic, linguistic) brain. Adult responsibilities, including the imperative to define political and spiritual identity, are rendered irrelevant and meaningless here. In this passage, this maternal space is described in quasi-religious tones, suggesting its sacredness. It is a holy space, but forever lost. Like the puerile, past-fixated protagonists in *Girlfriend in a Coma,* Scout and his friends – "my fellow fetuses" (GX 225) – refusing to enter adulthood, all end up somewhere in their thirties "in the same sort of non-place". (GX 225) This disappointing non-place is all that's left of the swimming-pool womb twenty years later, dried out, empty and forlorn.

All of the narrators in *Life after God* can be seen as various faces of an alienated metanarrator. Through the course of the novel, this metanarrator becomes more concerned with clawing out of insanity into a more mainstream position – back to the main road of "In the Desert". This points forward to *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey, Nostradamus!*, in which liminality becomes a decided source of fear. For characters whose identity is already tenuous, self-marginalization is a dangerous idea. Later Coupland and his older characters seem to suggest that under pressure from addiction, loneliness and trauma, staying sane is difficult enough without trying deliberately to be eccentric.

In *Life after God*, the culmination of the metanarrator's process toward self-abnegation comes when Scout wanders deep into the wilderness and performs a private, pagan

baptism ritual. In this narrative we are shown just how difficult the "lonely and awful" process of radical self-marginalization can be, and the dangers involved in it. The fact that Scout is the only named narrator, and is named repeatedly, is significant. He appears to be performing reconnaissance, like one of an almost military avant garde scouting the edges of a new consciousness. His eccentric and radically ritualized engagement with the wilderness seems a trail for others to follow.

In the middle of his story, Scout remembers a business trip he took to New York one January. It is the eve of the US Presidential inauguration, and he decides, instead of returning to Vancouver with his colleagues, to stay another day. He takes the train down to Washington DC to witness the inauguration, although, he says, "I don't consider myself political; being Canadian, American politics have only a detached appeal." (LAG 256)[3] Nonetheless, he stays with his brother's friend in Washington and watches the inauguration on television, then goes down to the street and sees the President's helicopter flying away from the Capitol building. Despite himself, he finds the experience enchanting.

> It was as if my past life no longer existed – that other life where I theoretically should have been in a jet eight miles above Idaho, headed to Vancouver and the life I was losing my ability to understand.
>
> I felt as if I was living a stranger's life. I was beginning to feel like a person inside a story for the first time in years. (LAG 259)

[3] As I note in chapter two, this sort of national identification reflects Coupland's deliberate Canadian nationalism in the face of the threat of US-American homogenization.

This single moment in which he does something unexpected creates a quantum-physical potential shift into another universe. He has also stopped taking the antidepressants he has taken for years: "all through the night, the concentration of yellow pills in my blood diminished, milligram by milligram, like decaying uranium." (LAG 259) The antidepressant – a symbol of order and control, the subduing weapon of modernist rationality – is described as a radioactive toxin, related to the overbearing nuclear shadow that is also an affect of modernist obsessionality which is the symbolic mode of the United States president. Scout discards the drug, accepting chaos, rejecting the modernist cure for his hysteria. For a moment he feels he has some narrative direction, like a person in a story. But he is drawn in, despite himself, by the ceremonial power of the US President – a potent symbol of establishment and the structures of State and power, of the currents of past in the swirl of meanings at the edge of the world.

On the day before his climactic baptism ritual, he drives then walks as far as he can into the forest and pitches a tent. The next morning he strips off his clothes and walks into the river, surrendering himself to the freezing water. Scout's is a strange and destructive ritual, and ultimately it speaks of the failure of the strategies for liberation suggested in *Generation X* and *Life after God*. Before he goes into the water, Scout says he is "preparing to join the world of trees and their massively parallel sleep" (LAG 283), that he "will fall asleep for a thousand years, and when I wake, a mighty spruce tree will have raised me high, high into the sky." (LAG 285) He tells us his secret is that he needs God "to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love." (LAG 289) Andrew Tate (2002) has read this passage as a definitive

affirmation of Coupland's religiosity, but Scout's God can alternatively be read as a punishing picture of what this narrator is not. Gone is the upbeat self-awareness of *Generation X*; here is a man who has lost all his self-belief. The God he appeals to here is the normative, culturally central God, not the liminal and free-form neopagan divinity we have seen elsewhere. For two novels Coupland has been setting up a complex and dynamic strategy for identity-formation on the margins, but here his character seems to give in to despair and depression. Scout's journey ultimately ends in a complete erasure of the self, in psychological, perhaps bodily, suicide. This is the cost Coupland's most liminal characters must pay to regain personal agency in the face of the consumerist monolith of North American culture. As Scout goes deeper into the river, he hears "the roar of water, the roar of clapping hands". (LAG 290) "These hands," he begins to babble deliriously, losing his language as he returns irrevocably to the semiotic *chora*, "the hands that care, the hands that mold; the hands that touch the lips, the lips that speak the words – the words that tell us we are whole." (LAG 290)

"The words that tell us we are whole." This is the final sentence in the book. The next page has a picture of a hand and the single word, "end". (LAG 291) It is as if, falling back into the maternal body, his pre-verbal infantile space, into the abject zone of near-death, he finally, and too late, realises that it is words – the language of the symbolic order – which make us whole. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva suggests that depression or psychosis may result when a melancholic subject "lacks motivation to engage in the symbolic realm – that is, to speak or write. Words seem pointless, for they are not connected […] to the semiotic *chora* […] Having turned away from symbolic, signifying practice, the melancholic makes do without the self-unity that the symbolic

offers." (McAfee 2004: 63) He has made a mistake by erasing himself, allowing himself to slip back into the semiotic realm, but it is too late. He is at his "end". This passage might be seen as Coupland's final repudiation of the liminal path to liberation.

In these two early novels, Coupland's characters lament the depthless culture in which they live and yearn for transcendence and connection, to have a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. To access these deeper connections, they seek out marginal places and express their yearnings in eccentric, liminal ways. In rejecting the repression of the symbolic order they end up tightrope-walking across the boundaries of identity, in danger always of falling back into the semiotic realm. If the conglomerate of city life, advertising, consumer culture, meaningless jobs, disease and hypersecular rationality signify the repressive Father, the liminal and abject maternal zones – sublime deserts and forests, eccentricity, liminality – offer liberation, but at the same time they threaten a disintegration of the boundaries of the self. Coupland seems ambivalent about the chances of liberation. He presents his characters' various strategies to escape or transcend as viable and sympathetic options, but seems unable to imagine a functional outcome of their radical efforts. While some have no regrets about their choices, some of Coupland's characters step too far onto the lunar side of the fence and are in danger of losing themselves completely in the semiotic *chora* without hope of return. Eccentricity can turn to madness and chaos; self-imposed exile can lead to getting lost in the desert; self-denial can lead to self-erasure; washing yourself clean in the pristine water can lead to drowning.

1.2 Gendering the spiritual subject

Coupland's spiritual women

The figure of Linda, a character in a story told by Claire in *Generation X*, is an early and rich example of the spiritual-feminine character type which Coupland regularly employs. Linda is born into a wealthy but fragile family. Her loving father dies while she is a child, and her mother, "she was a socialite […] she was *on the jet*", (GX 141) is not a nurturing parent. Linda grows up alone and unhappy, "constantly searching for one person, one idea, or one place that could rescue her from her, well, her *life*." (GX 142) Eventually she finds her one idea: the notion of a Himalayan meditation which lasts for seven years, seven months, seven days and seven hours, during which time "the saint-in-training was not allowed to speak one word or perform any other acts save those of eating, sleeping, meditation, and elimination. But it was said that the truth to be found at the end of this ordeal was *so* invariably wonderful that the suffering and denial was small change compared to the Higher contact achieved at the end." (GX 143) Apparently, the monks and nuns who perform this meditation "achieved a state of saintliness – ecstasy – *release*". (GX 143) When Linda turns twenty-one, she inherits the bulk of her father's money, and in fury her mother deserts her – "untethered herself" (GX 143) – for an absurd, opulent lifestyle.

Linda is now free to perform the meditation and she fortifies her house, hires guards and sets alarms to prevent any interruption for the duration. While she meditates, the garden of her estate

> return[s] to the wild […] the lawn quickly became laced with gentler, indigenous flowers and weeds and grasses. Black-eyed Susans, forget-me-nots, cow parsley, and New Zealand flax […] the painful forms of roses […] overtook the gazebo; wisteria strangled the porch; pyrocanthus and ivies spilled over the rockeries […] Small creatures moved into the yard in abundance. (GX 145)

Over the seven years Linda's "hair turned gray, she ceased menstruating, her skin became like a leather pulled tightly over her bones, and her voice box atrophied, making her unable to speak". (GX 145)

On the last day of her meditation, a Himalayan priest who read about Linda's now-famous exploit comes to visit her to tell her she has it wrong. Seven years, seven months, seven days and seven hours in the monks' calendar amounts to just over a year in the Gregorian calendar. The monk looks at Linda's "body, so young still, but converted to that of an old crone. And it could almost creak, so it seemed to him, as she turned around, revealing her face, profoundly emaciated – a terminal face" (GX 146–147). He begins gently to rebuke her: "'You children from Europe … from America … you try so hard but you get everything wrong – you and your strange little handcarved religions you make for yourselves.'" (GX 147) But he sees the look of delighted expectation her face, "like the eyes of emigrants about to emerge through the sliding doors of customs and finally enter the new world for which they have burned all bridges." (GX 147) He kisses her on the forehead and her skull caves in "and turns to

dust – and the piece of light that was truly Linda vacated her old vessel, then flitted heavenward". (GX 148)

Though this story is told by Claire, Coupland's authorial commentary is stamped all over it: in the taxonomic descriptions of plants and animals and in the yearning for spiritual transcendence which so many of his episodes share. Claire, like many of his characters, is a vehicle for expressing an overarching authorial ideology. Nature here, as regularly elsewhere, figures as an expression of the spiritual antithesis to materialist and industrial cityscapes. Coupland's authorial voice is also present in the monk's bemused mixture of admonishment and sympathy for young people's – his generation's – often-misguided efforts at forging a coherent system of belief – their "handcarved religions" – in the void left after the demystification of traditional religions. As we have seen, part of Coupland's project is to express new forms of belief, and here, as often, he takes his reader as far as the threshold of the new world, like the emigrants at the airport, but cannot imagine the unimaginable, unspeakable truths that lie beyond. Although he does not develop the idea, in this parable, Coupland shows for the first time that he is in touch with a contemporary trend that links the mysterious inner reaches of science with new forms of spirit, which I tease out in detail in chapter four. Claire points out that Linda "was bright. She could discuss particle physics, say – quarks and leptons, bosons and mesons". (GX 142) The mysteries of the deconstructed atom seem to point to the mysteries of the reconstructed godhead.

Linda is one of many mystical, suffering women in Coupland's novels, and it is revealing to delve a little deeper into his portrayal of female characters. Elisabeth

Bronfen (1992) and Barbara Creed (1993) have produced interesting studies based in part on Kristeva's ideas. Creed's book, *The Monstrous-Feminine,* is a focussed psychoanalytic reading of horror films based, in the first half, on a feminist extrapolation of abjection, and in the second, on Freud's theory of castration. Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* is a dense, wide-ranging study which applies a psychoanalytically based feminist analysis to the representation of dead women in painting and literature mostly from the nineteenth century. From these works Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine and Bronfen's ideas on the relationship between the obsessional and the hysteric and on the fetishist display of bodies are most applicable to this study. In his novels, Coupland presents a wide range of pregnant women, comatose women, dead women and sacrificial women, and these readings help illuminate the deployment of these characters.

Bronfen suggests that "Narrative and visual representations of death […] can be read as symptoms of our culture. Furthermore, because the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity, culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women […] If symptoms are failed repressions, representations are symptoms that visualize even as they conceal what is too dangerous to articulate openly but too fascinating to repress successfully." (Bronfen 1992: xi) The links here between the cathartic nature of art and the fear-desire of the repressed as discussed by Kristeva are clear. Bronfen applies this cultural psychoanalysis to a broad range of artistic expression, and goes on to show how art's relationship with and representation of dead women are symptoms of cultural psychoses and neuroses at the origin of their creation. Two prime examples of cultural psychosis which is reflected in artistic representation

are the figure of the fetishist speculator and the masculine obsessional which she places in opposition to the hysterized woman.

Michel Foucault suggests that "the hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution and the safeguarding of society." (Foucault 1990:146–7) Hysterical women did damage to traditional institutions designed to be self-perpetuating and to uphold and keep intact the family system (which in turn aided in upholding the institutions). For Bronfen, however, the radically excluded position of the hysterized woman can be re-imagined as an empowered space. "The hysteric," Bronfen writes, "recognises a lack or void in the symbolic order of laws and knows her non-existence. She exists within her cultural system by evoking the presence of a double; a rhetorical articulation of death [… O]ne of her relations is to radical Otherness outside the symbolic, as the site of her truth." (Bronfen 1992: 314) The obsessional, on the other hand, "tries to repress the void of death by erecting clear divisions. He uses language and knowledge in an effort to exclude radical Otherness, lest it allow lacks and gaps, which make him anxious, to appear. [… H]e fears duplicity […] The aim is to keep the ego impenetrable, the fantasies intact, even if this means killing off all living desire". (Bronfen 1992: 314)

Bronfen's hysteric-obsessional dialectic is a genderized and polarized extrapolation of Kristeva's more mutable relationship between the semiotic and symbolic realms. Thematically, particularly in his earlier books, Coupland often sets up similar polarities: between the city and the wilderness, between consumptive consumerism and an

eccentric lifestyle, between the cultural affects of modernism – late capitalism and exhausted industrialism – and fantasies of a liberated future and an idealized Golden Age in the past. Consumerism and pollution and waste are products of the obsessional generational fathers – the cultural imprint of the symbolic Law of the Father, while the eccentric path to mental liberation is founded in the maternal law of the *chora*, pathologized and hysterized as it is. As I will show, however, Coupland often unsettles these binaries, even in his earlier books. In his more recent books, he deliberately complicates character types, so a figure like Reg Klaasen in *Hey, Nostradamus!*, who at first seems to be an archetypal obsessional, symbolic of paternal law and inflexible dogma, becomes sympathetic, rounded and more difficult to classify.

With regard to the fetishist speculator, Bronfen defines fetishism in Lacanian and Freudian terms. She notes that Lacan defines desire as inherently unsatisfied and unsatisfiable because it does not relate to a real object, but rather to an imaginary, fantasy object. "If desire is a state whose fulfilment is necessarily always deferred, then the simultaneous death and preservation of the object of desire indefinitely stabilises the relationship between desiring subject and its object by producing a situation of eternally controlled deferral." (Bronfen 1992: 96) Hence the fetishist suspension of the female body in a living-dead state, as a corpse on display. A famous example of the fetishized corpse is Snow White who, in the Brothers Grimms' version of the tale, is placed in a glass coffin on top of a hill for all to see. (Bronfen 1992: 99–100) Another striking example of the fetishist speculator at work is the display of wax anatomical models – wax Venuses – popular at the end of the nineteenth century. These were lifelike wax models of women, opened up to show internal organs, initially designed for medical

training – by male doctors for male students – but which became popular among the general (male) museum-going public. The Whitechapel Killer in the late nineteenth century would likely have seen a display of wax Venuses in London, as would Peter Sutcliff, the Yorkshire Ripper, a century later. He studied displays of Anatomical Venuses in museums, displaying medical interest and training himself as a Victorian doctor would have been trained. (Showalter 1990: 128–9) These eerie confluences between symbolic display and real pathology illustrate Bronfen's point about the cultural psychosis of the society that produced such representations.

Coupland presents us with women ascetically meditating to death, a woman in a coma, female ghosts in limbo, and we watch the specificity of their eternally deferred demise in slow, painstaking detail. Coupland here does seem complicit in a fetishist portrayal of women's bodies, but to what end? Referring to Freud's notion that fetishism is a way for a narcissist to disavow the unwelcome perception of death signified by castration, Bronfen summarizes that "the purpose of the fetish is to preserve something which the fetishist should have given up or knows is lost. This attitude can also be seen in relation to more global forms of loss or separation." (Bronfen 1992: 96) Judging by the themes in his novels it is these "global forms of loss" – the loss of tradition and destiny, of meaning and agency, of transcendence and spirit which a psychoanalyst would say are all sublimations of his anxiety about death – which Coupland is mourning and struggling to let go. Coupland might be seen as a fetishist, relocating his unsatisfied desire, his will to ever-young jouissance, onto the bodies of his female characters, eternally deferring the uncanny reminders of ageing, death and loss.

In her book, Barbara Creed explains how most readings of horror literature or film have either entirely ignored female monsters or "simply discussed female monstrosity as part of male monstrosity [or] argued that woman only terrifies when represented as man's castrated other". (Creed 1993: 3) She takes Susan Lurie's lead in upsetting the Freudian notion of monstrous women. According to Lurie, "men fear women, not because they are castrated but because they are *not* castrated […] because woman *is not* mutilated like a man might be *if he were* castrated; woman is physically whole, intact and in possession of all her sexual powers." (Creed 1993: 6) She is whole, *despite* the fact that she has no penis. She then applies Kristeva's theory of abjection, particularly the chapters on biblical abomination in *Powers of Horror*, to argue "that when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions. These faces are: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman." (Creed 1993: 7) She goes on to suggest that rather than the monstrous female being the man's castrated other, his fear of women has led him to construct the fantasy of the woman as castrator, who "takes at least three forms: woman as the deadly *femme castratrice*, the castrating mother and the *vagina dentata*." (Creed 1993: 7) At first glance, it might appear that this feminist reading of horror film might have little to do with Douglas Coupland's work, but closer inspection uncovers a number of monstrous women in his novels: withering wise women, castrating mothers, blighted babies emerging from comatose or addicted wombs, possessed women and prophetic women.

In Claire's story, Linda's body becomes monstrous and abject in a number of Bronfen's and Creed's categories. As well as being described as an archaic mother archetype, she

is a body on display which, despite being defended from the prying eyes of the outside world, is open to specularization by the priest, standard-bearer of paternal authority and true knowledge. He is presumably a Buddhist priest and because of Buddhism's perceived tolerance and moral humanism, his irruption into Linda's house might be seen more sympathetically than that of a Christian priest. Despite this, gentle as his paternalism is, the priest's is still the voice of correctness and reason; he tries to correct Linda's mistake born of her hysterical will to self-marginalisation, which in turn is a neurotic result of her dysfunctional family life. As a fetishist's object, her deferred demise is presented for us to wonder in, and to displace our anxieties about mortality. In the end, Linda does not really die, she transcends and merely leaves her used shell behind. Her death is deferred, and Coupland's readers can read on comforted by this absence of death.

Linda's story prefigures *Girlfriend in a Coma* and one of its major characters, Karen McNiell, who in turn, Jefferson Faye notes (Faye 2001: 506) was based on Karen Anne Quinlan, who at the age of 21, in 1975, fell into a coma after mixing tranquilisers and alcohol at a party and subsequently became a fulcrum of the right-to-die debate in the Reagan 1980s. With Patty Hearst, discussed below, Karen Quinlan is a mid-70s archetype of girlhood on the unknowable edge of womanhood, a complex symbol of metamorphosing identity and society. Karen McNiell's eighteen-year coma can be seen as a period of meditation similar to Linda's. At the start of the novel she has a vision of the end of the world and her coma is in some ways a terrified bodily reaction to the future.

On the December night on which Karen goes into her coma, she and Richard have just had sex for the first time on Grouse Mountain (and conceived Megan in the process). Karen goes through various stages of possession in this period: first by the visions, then sexually by Richard, then by the media when they show a gory interest in her case, by the baby growing in her body, and of her body by the hospital during her coma. First, though, on their way down from the mountain, the ski lift gets stuck. "In the pitch dark, Karen and I sat bouncing, stuck, suspended above raw nature". (GC 7) This limbo between the mountaintop and the suburbs, between "raw nature" and the operating machines of civilization, the late-teen moment between virginal innocence and experience and the compromise of the future, is where Karen's life stops.

While Richard tries to make awkward post-coital small talk, Karen smokes moodily, mulling over the visions she has had and how she might speak their inexpressibility to Richard. When she tries to talk to him about them, he reacts flippantly. He is more concerned with getting back onto the ground – out of the pendulous limbo of the chairlift, away from the liminal space where they hang, and back to the rational earth. Richard says, "[S]he turned her head away from me and looked into the forest that lay to the right, trees visible to us only as a darker shade of black." (GC 7) In his non-fictional account of Vancouver, *City of Glass*, Coupland describes Grouse Mountain: "Not a week goes by now without a night-skiing dream – such a mythical flight-like sensation, to be swooping down the sodium-lit swathes of the runs, young and problemless and pure! [… T]he 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 of Glass* 46) Both in his fiction and his non-fiction, the "hinterlands" just to the edge of

the civilized swathe of the ski run, are a site of unspeakable holiness. Richard, as a teen, is unable and unwilling to investigate these hinterlands, but Karen, another young woman with an affinity for the transcendent margins, is compelled by them. Karen's empathy lies with the numinous presence of the forest; this sacred, mysterious – semiotic – place is the origin of the visions, and she knows she is being drawn in, away from the ordered world. The next morning, she is in a coma and her body becomes public terrain.

First, there is great media interest in her case. The newspapers and television stations use her as a warning to teenagers about the dangers of drugs and drinking. Much to their frustration and despite their best efforts, Richard manages to keep them out of the hospital and the only picture they have for their editions is one from the school yearbook. The media interest gradually abates, but Karen becomes part of the hospital, her non-responsive body turned and washed like a figurative piece of furniture. Nine months after the coma starts, Megan is surgically delivered from Karen's static womb. Years later, while visiting his friends' special-effects studio Richard comes across a fake corpse that reminds him of Karen in her emaciated comatose state. "[I] saw a dummy that I probably ought not to have seen: a plastic female body almost identical to Karen – bony, taut, skeletal, and yellowed, made of polyurethane foam, with long straight brown Orlon hair parted in the middle. […] A fish inside my stomach wriggled and thrashed and I looked away." (GC 89–90) Richard's sickened reaction to the individual trauma of Karen's coma is a precursor to a general cultural reaction to the mass terror which is the backdrop of *Hey Nostradamus!* Before the millennial trauma of Columbine and 9/11, fake corpses served as a buffer between life and death, but now

they have become abject reminders of the full-scale invasion of our conscious lives by what should remain repressed, by the return of real death to haunt our lives.

When Karen wakes from the coma, she ponders the remarkable clarity of her mind, but at the same time "she tries to move an arm and the effort is torture. Her nose itches but her tendons are too unexercized for her to reach and scratch. Her body is in complete but dreadfully creaky shape." (GC 128–129) The word "dreadfully" here sounds like a quaint adjective, but Karen's body is a picture of abjection and the dread it conjures. Its creakiness also recalls how meditating Linda's body "could almost creak". While Karen is comatose, Richard avoids telling Megan anything about her, worried that she will be frightened of the emaciated body and unable to understand her limbo state. But when Megan is seven, they go to see Karen. Megan, to Richard's surprise and relief, is unafraid and casually accepting of her corpse-mother. There is a supra-natural empathy between the monstrous mother and the monstrous daughter who has unnaturally been born of her. Later, Megan describes Karen as her "sacred mother". (GC 227)

Karen's is one of the many pregnancies in these novels. Megan herself, during the apocalyptic year, gives birth to Jane who is born blind and brain-damaged, presumably a result of the toxic atmosphere of the end of the world. When Jared offers them all a second chance, however, and biblically heals each character in turn, he heals Jane's brain and lets her see, metaphorically healing her future. Another of Jared's healing gestures in this phase of the novel involves impregnating Wendy through a ghostly act of intercourse. Her baby will cure Wendy's loneliness forever. Barb in *Hey Nostradamus!* is another character who has a therapeutic pregnancy. When her husband

and Jason's brother Kent is killed in a motor accident, in a rather strange, unintentionally parodic scene involving an elopement to Las Vegas and the murder of a witness, she convinces Jason to sleep with her immediately. They conceive twins whom she sees as her lasting connection to Kent. Earlier Cheryl was impregnated by Jason within the first month of their sexual relationship. This exceptionally virile man and these exceptionally fertile women are probably intended to be read as a metaphor for inter-generational hope. Megan is a representative of the ensuing generation and Jane of the distant future; it is important to Coupland that the new beginning for the world involve hope for the future, not just direction for the present, so babies rather naively feature as a new wave of innocents who are set to have another – hopefully better – attempt at engaging with the future.

It is interesting to note how Coupland generally idealizes young women – teens to thirtysomethings – but portrays older women as alcoholic, weak or mean-spirited. Like Linda's mother, Karen's mother Lois is an self-obsessed and unsupportive woman. This is encapsulated by her attitude towards food and her daughter's body. Karen, Richard relates, "had grown up with a bizarre relationship with food. Lois, a former Miss Canada runner-up (1958), saw food as alien, alive, requiring passports, visas, and security guards before allowing entry into the mouth. […] Karen was dragged, holus-bolus, into Lois's cockamamie nutritional vogues." (GC 38) Lois's attitude towards food recalls biblical abominations, obsessively taxonomized and legislated. Her mouth is the entrance to a foreign country, with strict boundaries set up and patrolled to defend the clean and proper self from abject intrusion. This image brings to mind the episode in *Hey Nostradamus!* when Cheryl and Jason slip across the border to Las Vegas to get

married. In 1988, they didn't even have their IDs checked, but now, post-2001, the borders of the United States are another obsessively constructed boundary of self, like Lois's mouth, defending itself neurotically against any foreign intrusion. The same defence of tribal identity was, of course, at the root of the original biblical codification of abomination and taboo. Another monstrous woman, Jason's mother in *Hey Nostradamus!*, does nothing to stop years of his father's abuse until after the school massacre. While these might be seen as inequitable representations of women, this treatment is not restricted to female parents and can rather be seen as a function of Coupland's overarching concern with generational differences: the parental generation, fathers and mothers, is culpable for the condition of its children.

Often Coupland's spiritual women are figured as sacrifices towards humanity's enlightenment. If sacrifice has been rendered necessary again by society's secularization and its lack of respect for taboo, Coupland's women, with their visions and their possessions and their self-consuming meditation become both a reassertion of spirit in a secular society and the sacrifice that is needed for catharsis to take effect. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, for Jared's second chance and Richard's spiritual revolution to succeed, Karen must take herself to a mountain top, laden with humanity's failure to believe and to act. Like a Christ figure, she cannot choose not to, or the whole of humankind will die. Similarly, in *Hey Nostradamus!*, Cheryl becomes a sacrifice, metonymic of all the school massacres and terror attacks which have taken place, that gets people praying to God and wondering about transcendence and belief and meaning again. She and Karen, like the Virgin Mary, must absent their bodies, which are too subject to age and

corruption to be suitable messengers of sacredness. In their ghostly incarnations, they must oversee and narrate the progress of surviving humanity from limbo.

Coupland's spiritual men

In "My Hotel Year" the salmon is used as a metaphor for Donny's soul. His version of belief is a pathological urban reappropriation of neopagan primitivism. "Donny was always getting stabbed," tells the narrator. "[He] actively invited stabbing into his life. He said that stabbing didn't hurt nearly as much as you'd think and that it was actually kind of cool, and that when it happened, 'man, when that blade first digs into you it makes your soul leap out of your body for just a second, like a salmon jumping out of a river.'" (LAG 46) A self-destructive shaman, Donny accesses transcendence through the skin, in a less performative manner than modern urbanites who partake in ritual or fashionable piercing and scarification. He was getting bored of getting stabbed, though, and "in the end his big goal was to get shot." (LAG 47) Walking around the city centre, Donny and the narrator come across an indigent fortune teller. Donny initially refuses to have his fortune read, but a few weeks later, he is seen "cheerfully being told his fortune". (LAG 50) The fortune teller now has a hand-penned sign advertising, "*I PROMiSS I wonT TeLL YOu YOuR gOING TO DIE*. […] 'It's all I ever wanted to hear", says Donny. (LAG 50) Donny's fetishist rezoning of the locus of his jouissance from normal sexuality to corporeal pain underlies a wish to deny the discomforting presence of death.

At the end of this short tale, Donny achieves his big goal. He is killed during a botched drug deal: shot twice in the back of the head and once in the back. "I guess his salmon jumped out of the river and on to land and the river itself flows on", muses the narrator. (LAG 51) The salmon here is a rare vision of natural grace in a violent, squalid urban environment. The narrator's philosophical acceptance of death is contrary to the fetishist's fixation and closer to a Buddhist conception of the natural flow of life. The salmon also serves as a symbol of wildness, wilderness and Canada and, in their instinctive and dogged swimming upstream to procreate, of a sense of traditional destiny, purpose and family values. In *City of Glass*, Coupland describes a cluster of salmon in a pool near the Cleveland Dam as "one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever seen." He goes on to note: "Salmon stocks are dwindling, and nobody's quite sure why. This loss can sometimes feel as if there's a hole in the collective soul." He mentions that the Cleveland Dam has stopped the Capilano River, a large-scale example of a macro-industrial blight on nature. In a retrospective lament, Coupland suggests that whatever is affecting the salmon population has to do with human technological advances and interference with the sublime wilderness, and as such it is anti-soul. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Richard pays a similar visit to a salmon hatchery: "I saw a thousand salmon waiting to spawn, whose only wish, whose only *yearning*, was to go home." (GC 106) In these passages, Coupland suggests that soul – symbolized by these natural, would-be pristine fish – is made up of our essential drives and our essential being. Just as salmon return every year to spawn, the image implies, the soul has a home to which it bears.

For his own part, Reg remembers standing in the Fraser River as a child, "watching eagles in the tall snagged trees browse for salmon, but I wasn't in the river just for the

scenery – it was piety. I believed the maxim that should I lose my footing, God would come in and carry me wherever the river was deepest. The water felt like an ongoing purification". (HN 231) This recalls Scout's self-abnegating baptism ritual and associates it with an obsessional fundamentalist impulse rather than an embracing neopagan one. Reg continues, "the Fraser is now probably full of fish rendered blind by silt from gravel quarries, its surface pocked with bodies that somehow worked themselves loose from their cement kimonos." (HN 231) If the salmon represents the soul, it is under threat from by metonymic industry's correlative secularism and materialism.

As discussed, *Generation X* and *Life after God* investigate self-marginalization as a strategy towards spiritual and ideological reconfiguration. In these earlier novels, characters investigate the potential of self-imposed exile from mainstream society – whether mentally or geographically. In *Hey Nostradamus!*, on the other hand, marginalization is forced upon their characters, but marginality and loneliness remain central to Coupland's themes throughout his work. In *Life after God*, we are told that Donny, the hustler in "My Hotel Year", "would do anything with anybody, but mostly people didn't want to do much, he said. A sixteen-year-old girl asked him to sit in a hot tub with her with no clothes; an older yuppie-type businesswoman paid him $250.00 just to go see *Batman Returns* with her." (LAG 44) Instead of sex, his customers simply want company; they pay a stranger for intimacy.

These passages presage Coupland's concern with social disconnection as a contemporary condition but in *Hey Nostradamus!* (and *Eleanor Rigby* into which is

segues[4]) this concern becomes a central motif of the novel. Here, Coupland's characters are pushed to the fringes against their will by exile, abuse, fear of intimacy and loneliness. Heather reflects on her life before meeting Jason and then after he has disappeared. Jason was "a miracle in my life," she says,

> I was his witness. I made him real, and he made *me* real. I remember being single for so very long – I remember making mental lists of compromises I was willing to make in order to get me to 76.5 years without snapping. […] Once he entered my life, I promptly forgot all the years of putting on a brave face […] I completely forgot the hateful sensation of loneliness. (HN 215)

When Jason goes missing, however, she fears that there is "no way I'd ever meet anybody again, and in real life I'd become the invisible blank of a person I pretended to be [at work]." (HN 206)

[4] *Girlfriend in a Coma*, ending with a biblical quotation, elides into *Hey Nostradamus!* which starts with one. *Hey Nostradamus!* is similarly connected to Coupland's next novel, *Eleanor Rigby*, via a biblical quotation. Reg's confession concludes *Hey Nostradamus!* with the words "Awake! Everyone listen, there has been a miracle – my son who once was dead is now alive. Rejoice! All of you rejoice! You must! My son is coming home!" (HN 244) This is a paraphrase from the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:32), and in this context it speaks of a parent's loneliness salved by the reappearance of his wayward son. In *Hey Nostradamus!* it is too late for Reg to hope for his son's return: Jason is presumed dead, but this theme is directly continued in *Eleanor Rigby* when Liz Dunn's son who she gave up for adoption at birth returns to her and relieves her isolation. Having re-established loneliness as a central malaise in *Hey Nostradamus!*, Coupland goes on to investigate it in depth and from a more secular position in this next novel.

For his part, Jason's enforced marginalization is a result of domestic abuse. When Jason is five, Reg sees him idly looking at a game show on TV, and its "rhinestoned blond 'temptress' […] showcasing a fridge freezer set". (HN 59) Reg makes Jason kneel and "say a prayer for my future wife […] I had no idea what she was supposed to look like, so I asked Reg, whose response was to scoop me up and wallop the bejeezus out of me". (HN 60) War films remind Jason of his domestic life; they make him remember his father shouting "*You're nothing, you hear me? Nothing. You're not even visible to God. You're not even visible to the devil. You are zero.*" (HN 70) For two weeks after the massacre, Jason is suspected of involvement in it, and the taint never quite clears. His house is painted with graffiti and eggs are thrown at it. The *Youth Alive!* group gathers delightedly to accuse him, and he and his mother are forced to move to another province. "I was what you'd now [in the wake of 9/11] call a person of interest, living in a legal netherworld, neither free nor in custody." (HN 90) This marginalized state is the furthest one can get from liminal liberation; the phrase "person of interest" deliberately calls to mind the US's anti-terrorism campaign and shackled, uncharged, unrepresented, officially invisible terror suspects in Guantanamo Bay, an image Coupland would have been well aware of while writing this novel.

For his part, Reg is initially introduced to readers by Cheryl and Jason who condemn him for his cruelty and his inflexibility. But as time passes, Reg proves himself capable of change and doubt. When Reg is hospitalized Jason collects some personal items for him at his apartment. It is eleven years since he has seen or spoken to his father, and Jason is surprised that Reg even knows his new telephone number. Although Reg's apartment is dark and depressing, a "garage-sale jumble, all of it so blank, so totally

anti-1999", (HN 96) there are photographs of Jason and his mother, among the first redeeming details of Reg's life or character that emerge. Jason is also surprised to see a picture of Reg and an unknown woman, "an ample and cheery woman – in a pink floral dress. His arms were around her shoulders, and, alert the media, there was a *smile* on his face. The heart of a man is like deep water." (HN 97)

Heather, who did not know Reg when Jason was a child, sees him in a sympathetic light. After Jason's final disappearance, they see each other regularly, and Reg speaks to Heather openly about his doubts and the reasons for his past behaviour. From time to time Reg even drinks and smokes: "Might as well. Always wondered what it was like." (HN 159) This is a sign of his ceding of the neurotic control he has held over his life in the past, an ascetic and inflexible discipline he kept, it emerges, as a rigorous example for his sons. Now they are both gone. "I must say," Heather says, "it truly is hard to imagine Reg as the ogre Jason's always made him out to be. Okay Heather, be honest. You *know* darn well why Reg changed: losing Jason was the clincher." (HN 154) A complex older figure with a narrative voice, Reg is unique among Coupland's protagonists in his early novels and prefigures his further interest in middle-aged and older characters in his more recent novels. The contours of Reg's character only emerge halfway through the novel after he is initially set up as a flat type in a deliberate effort on Coupland's part to have his readers reassess their – and his own – prejudgements of older characters. This development can be seen as a function of the author himself getting older. He was just over forty when *Hey Nostradamus!* was published, and while his focus continues to include younger characters in this and his subsequent novels,

older characters now start to take central roles in more recent novels like *Eleanor Rigby* and *The Gum Thief*.

1.3 Finding the future in the margins

Lost, ghostly, in the wilderness, on the mountain-top: for Coupland's questing characters, spirit is to be found in wild places, on the periphery of suburban, contemporary society. Self-marginalization is a secular version of monastic hermeticism, a route to connection with a transcendent presence which is unmediated by capitalist advertisers or rationalist psychologists. The figure of Laurie in "Patty Hearst" (*Life after God*) is a fine example of a self-marginalized character in Coupland's novels, and a powerful example of the transgressive potential of the liminal position. The story tells of the narrator's search for his sister, Laurie. He follows a trail of rumoured sightings northwards into the British Columbia wilderness, but ultimately fails to find her.

The title of the story directly links Laurie to Patty Hearst, the granddaughter of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. In 1974, Patty Hearst was kidnapped by a left-wing group known as the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), but soon came to agree with their aims and methods and joined the SLA. "Laurie always wanted to be Patty Hearst," (LAG 194) the narrator tells. She always "painted a good picture, one of Patty Hearst […] as a sacrifice to middle-class longing – looted by the forces who would strip our world of tennis shirts and French lessons and gourmet mushrooms: 'You are given up for dead, best left in an uninterpreted dream. But then one day you reemerge […] You have become a terrorist, an urban guerrilla, cracking the atom of the culture that created you'". (LAG 195) Laurie – seventeen years old at the time – idealizes Patty Hearst's revolutionary metamorphosis, like a butterfly out of the

adolescent pupa. It symbolizes the passage of a child out of the womb and into an adulthood of self-actualizing agency, the Oedipal destruction of her childhood mould. Laurie's escape from her suburban family into the mysterious margins, the rainy wilderness, is a revolutionary act just like Patty Hearst's.

The narrator remembers his sister in a series of "snapshots". In one of these, he recalls picking her up from a job where she had dressed as a clown and handed out balloons at a franchise restaurant. "She has ditched work," he remembers, "and has hopped in the wagon with me – dopey wig, makeup and all – and we have cruised around and smoked cigarettes, Laurie having dispensed the finger to those who have incurred our wrath on the road." (LAG 190) The fact that she does not remove the clown outfit and her shameless use of offensive gestures shows how eccentric transgression is her favoured mode. The clown figure with whom she is associated is similarly a privileged observer, satirizing society incisively from the margins.

In another incident, the narrator remembers finding a senile woman lost in town. "Laurie sat with the woman on the back patio the whole time and held her hand until the ambulance came and picked the woman up." (LAG 212) Laurie shows empathy towards the demented woman, a sympathy with madness and alterity which, Coupland suggests, is a useful trait in a world after "the culture that created you", a world after her parents' modernist certainty, a world after God. Showing an affinity for Hearst's self-effacement, Patty begins to wear "the ugliest garments […], the outfits growing more and more extreme, her body dirtier and dirtier, her behavior more and more outrageous […] Laurie's kind of behavior […] was unclassifiable". (LAG 198) Once she goes

missing, she becomes "like the family undead person, never alluded to – erased – as though she never existed." (LAG 201) Still, however, she haunts special family occasions: "her presence […] is especially felt on Christmas morning when [it] floats around the yard outside the windows, mocking, fleeting". (LAG 201–202)

Laurie's tale is, at face value, a parable about the common adolescent process of rejecting the law of the Father and becoming self-identified. But with its hints of madness, of radical absence and of terror, it also clearly links this process with the more complicated and terrifying ever-presence of the abject. Much as Laurie forcibly removes herself from the symbolic womb-space of adolescence, the mad, semiotic realm accompanies her on her escape. Coupland (along with Kristeva) suggests that escape from the rule of the parents, the culture that forms his characters, leads to a new, unhinged existence. The 1970s, for Coupland the final decade of personal and American innocence,[5] a time when unironic revolutionary stands like Hearst's were still possible, are over. A new, uncertain world awaits, and embracing its madness and eccentricity seems a viable response to this new age.

In a thematically central chapter of *Generation X* entitled "Re / Con / Struct", Andy tells "a secret story, a story I won't even tell Dag and Claire" (GX 53–54) about a man called Edward, who lives alone. At first he lives his solitary life with dignity, garnishing his meals with care and washing up tidily. But one day, Edward relaxes and has a beer, and soon one beer turns to many then to junk-food-and-whiskey dinners. "He began to forget what it felt like to pass firm stools […] poor Edward – his life seemed to be

[5] Examined in chapter 2.2.

losing its *controllability*. One night for instance, Edward was at a party in Canada but woke up the next morning in the United States, a two-hour drive away, and he couldn't even *remem*ber driving home or crossing the border." (GX 55) Edward veers from one dysfunctional condition – the obsessional mode of control – to another, a debased, abject state reminiscent of Dag's period as a Basement Person. The dysfunctional relationship with urban existence, we remember, is connected with an inability to eliminate corporeal waste comfortably and functionally. Things get so bad that he ends up unconsciously in the United States: in the face of rampant cultural imperialism, a terrifying danger awaiting a Canadian who lets down his guard.

Edward takes refuge in his opinion that "he was a very smart guy in some ways. He had been to school, and he knew a great number of words. […] Words, words, *words*." (GX 55) In response to his crisis, he builds himself a hermetic, private study made of words. The room is book-lined and furnished in a British colonial style, and for ten years he impounds himself inside it with only the company of his smart-named spaniel, Ludwig, and an unimposing housemaid. This is a visualization of the orderly realm of the symbolic order, made of words and padded by words, tended by a silent woman, and safe from the insanity and uncontrollability which threatens him from outside the walls, which are the intricately but precariously constructed borders of his identity. For ten years he reads, and for ten years he lets nobody in, until one day his word-hewn imagination turns on him: despite his efforts the irrepressible abject insinuates its way inside. Ludwig becomes a vicious Rottweiler, and millipedes and earwigs emerge from behind the books and litter the floor.

Edward is forced to leave his hermitage. What confronts him outside is an amazing new world.

> In all the time he had been sequestering himself, being piquant in his little room, the *rest* of humanity had been building something else – a vast city, built not of words but of relationships […] an ugly/lovely world […] Its boulevards were patternless, helter-skelter, and cuckoo. Everywhere there were booby traps […] And yet in spite of this city's transfixing madness, Edward noticed that its multitude of inhabitants moved about with ease, unconcerned that around any corner there might lurk a clown-tossed marshmallow cream pie […] And directions were impossible. But when he asked an inhabitant where he could buy a map, the inhabitant looked at Edward and though he were mad, then ran away screaming. (GX 57–58)

This passage is a rich vision of postmodernity. Edward, bearer of a modernist, rationalist ethos, emerges into a bewildering yet strangely vibrant world which even seems functional according to its own inner logic, its own (semiotic) rhythms. Recalling Connie Zweig's citation (1995) of the self-in-relation psychoanalytical model, this is a world built on relationships, not on words, nor on predefined, static notions of identity. Edward's quest for a map is seen as mad, but this, he decides, is what this world needs: directions. Even though Edward "had to learn all the ropes with a ten-year handicap" (GX 58) caused by a decade of reading instead of relating, he vows to build a tall tower which "would stand as a beacon to all voyagers". (GX 58) There would be a rooftop patio lounge and "he would have a little pink booth, out back near the latrines, that sold

(among other things) maps." (GX 58) Although coherence in this world seems to come from embracing the ever-shifting madness, with the absurdity and slapstick that lurks around every corner, newcomers still need a map, just as the narrator of "In the Desert" needs a lucid moment from the crazy drifter to get him back on the path to the main road.

At the start of this chapter, Andy says that this story illustrates why he doesn't want to go through life alone. He has been talking about romantic love and about his and Claire's failed attempts to fall in love with each other, but this story speaks of the effects of social isolation more than of romantic loneliness. This story is too secret even to tell his friends, a fact which lends it extra significance. It is a parable so defining to him that he would not want it to be ridiculed or for his friends to have a cool or ironic reaction to it. It sums up some of Andy's deepest motivations. Before telling the story, Andy says that he studies languages and that Japanese is his speciality. For English-speakers, Japan is often figured as a symbolic Other. The Japanese alphabet and grammar, and the related social norms and traditions, are often entirely foreign, similar to Edward's strange new world. But Andy, as a student of languages, is in a position to translate and guide others through strange new symbolic lexicons.

Richard Doorland, in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, is one character who will benefit from Andy's map. He puts himself in the position of a captive whale who is released back into the ocean, "its limited world instantly blowing up when cast into the unknowable depths, seeing strange fish and tasting new waters, not even having a concept of depth, not knowing the language of any whale pods it might meet. It was my fear of a world

that would expand suddenly, violently, and without rules or laws". (GC 107) This is how Richard feels as he stands reticently in door-land, on the threshold, faced with an explosion of uncharted forms of knowledge and language.

If books and writing and reading are words in stasis, languages – speaking and narrating – are words in action, words-in-relation. Walter Anderson writes

> I am coming to believe that the key to survival and success in this world will not merely lie in becoming a good constructivist: It will have to do with an ability to be multilingual. The functioning person in the postmodern world needs to be able to think rationally and understand science, able to appreciate and draw on a social heritage, and able as well to drink from the well of ecological and spiritual feeling. (Anderson 1995b: 116)

Andy's definitive secret – more compelling, I think, than Scout's (that he needs God) – is that he will sell maps in the new world. As a writer, a storyteller, a speaker of tongues, he will bridge the gap between the stable clarity of the symbolic order and the liberated madness of the semiotic. He will make postmodernity clear. This, I suspect, remains Coupland's project.

Chapter Two:

Mapping Coupland's spiritual landscape

> *It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory […] today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts.*
>
> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994b: 1)

If part of Douglas Coupland's agenda is to map the postmodern condition for initiates, he starts with the landscape, imagining a rich terrain of deserts, forest wilderness, cities and, most particularly, suburbs. Andrew Tate nicely notes a locational trajectory across Coupland's work from the margins to the mainstream: "If the youth culture emphasis of Coupland's early fiction easily fits his designation as reluctant spokesperson for a nameless generation, it might now be more appropriate to read him as a literary advocate of a *space* that similarly lacks a unique identity: his work is generating an ambivalent poetics of the North American suburbs." (Tate 2007: 116) In this chapter, I explore the quasi-religious presentation of space in the novels I have chosen, paying specific attention to key examples which show how spiritualizing physical terrain is intrinsically a political act. Coupland's geographic imagination is connected to the state of postmodern crisis he presents and is also steeped, less consciously perhaps, in more historical North American attitudes towards land and expansion.

Jean Baudrillard has famously stated that it is "the map that precedes the territory […T]oday it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the […] *desert of the real itself*." (Baudrillard 1994b: 1) This statement refers to Jorge Luis Borges's extremely short story, "On Exactitude in Science" (Borges 1998) which was first published in 1946, and which reads in full:

> In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. (Borges 1998: 325)

This tale is a prescient vision of postmodernity's mistrust of rationalism, science taken to its logical and ultimate extreme. Baudrillard calls it "the most beautiful allegory of simulation". (Baudrillard 1994b: 1) The cartographers in the story, wanting to mediate, rationalize and control every inch of the world's surface, ultimately attempt to replace reality with their simulated version of it. The next generation is "not so fond of the

Study of Cartography as their Forebears", and gives up their hyper-rational map to the elements, and only the tatters remain in the deserts, inhabited by animals and beggars.

Borges's Western margins, the margins to which Coupland's characters escape, is that last place on earth where those scraps of the rationalist map still flutter. Coupland's view of this map is extremely complex, and reflects in the complicated state of his fictional subjects. On one hand, they might come to the desert in order to find those scraps of rationalist order and certainty; here, they might ignore the changes and the flux of the world. But on the other, it is clear, even here, that the map is in tatters, and what it overlays is more real (in a psychoanalytical sense; semiotic), and less intelligible, a hint of the untameable, unchartable sublime. Perhaps, like Borges's following Generation, they actively discard and fray that map which they find Useless, scratching below the surface to see what lies underneath the simulation. It is in this idealized wilderness that they may seek their lost authenticity, in other words, await the return of the repressed real. But all the while, radios and cars and stories bring news of the contemporary world, the world where madness and uncertainty, irony and pastiche are the currency, and try as they might, Coupland's characters cannot escape it. Occasionally, however, instead of retreating to the fake past in fear, they find themselves drawn progressively into the future and the possibilities it holds.

Coupland's map, then, is a multi-layered one: an idealized picture of the desert sands and the forest trees; overlaid by the modernist, rational map which once promised order but was thrown to the winds; and scribbled over again by the chaotic doodling – and the immense creative potential – of the postmodern world. This is the world Coupland

writes, a world where each of these maps coexists. Like a dam irrupting into a forest wilderness, like a patch of sacredness in the profane city of Las Vegas, the three layers constantly shift from foreground to back. Map-making, as Borges suggests, is a political endeavour. It turns the mythical, untamed wilderness without lines and without labels into domains, kingdoms, states, tribal lands, and zones for industrial parks, shopping malls and houses. It grants ownership and exploitation rights; it draws battle lines. It turns geography into territory. It turns land into landscape by the power of the masterful gaze and acquisitive verbal description.

While Baudrillard's ideas serve as a focus in this chapter, the work of his contemporary, Paul Virilio, can be read fruitfully alongside his. In an interview with John Armitage, Virilio says that "territory and movement are linked. For instance, territory is controlled by the movements of horsemen, of tanks, of planes, and so on. Thus my research on dromology, on the logic and impact of speed, necessarily implies the study of the organization of territory. Whoever controls the territory possesses it. Possession of territory is not primarily about laws and contracts, but first and foremost a matter of movement and circulation." (Virilio 2000) Many of Coupland's characters drive through the vast deserts and forests of North America, cutting a swathe through them, making their mark like the cartographers of old, but now their pens are cars on roads, their mark is movement. Motile[6] politics is exemplified by the treks of colonial expansion around the world, but specifically in Coupland's context in North America. I discuss in this chapter how Coupland's conservative imagination of landscape,

[6] This is a deliberate use of the word which deploys Virilio's conception of speed as conquest to liken masculinist expansionist politics to the instinctive rush of sperm cells, always in motion to stay alive, seeking to be the first and only to the predetermined goal.

particularly of putatively pristine and uninhabited wildernesses, where his characters often go – and as often fail – to find their lost sense of authenticity, betrays a colonial ideology which genderizes territory and renders it passive terrain open to masculinist expansion and exploitation. Just as making a map politicizes land, so writing about landscape adds a social and ideological layer to the physical trees, rocks, mountains and buildings that are described.

2.1 Spiritual geography: edge, centre and in between

Forest and desert

At the beginning of *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland's first book, Andy tells how in the late 1970s, when he was fifteen years old, he flew to "Brandon, Manitoba, deep in the Canadian prairies, to witness a total eclipse of the sun." (GX 3) When the eclipse came, he lay on the ground in a field, "there experiencing a mood that I have never really been able to shake completely – a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination – a mood that surely must have been held by most young people since the dawn of time as they have crooked their necks, stared at the heavens, and watched their sky go out." (GX 3–4) This portentous passage has proven to convey a mood Coupland has never really been able to shake: it points towards his continued and ambivalent interest in the transcendent and spiritual meanings of the natural and human environment, and in how the meanings his characters are currently able to construe from these geographic omens compare with those of generations past.

From the outset, Coupland suggests that this mood can best be accessed away from the everyday suburban environment; his characters move into the forest or the desert to gain some perspective on their lives and their place in the world, indeed to regain some sense, even if ironic, of the spiritual. Andy says that Claire, Dag and he "left our lives behind us and came to the desert – to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process." (GX 10) For his part, Dag tells how scientists building nuclear bombs in the Nevada desert, "mad with grief over their spawn, would come and get

sloshed in their Ford saloon cars in which they'd then crash and burn in the ravines; afterward, the little desert animals came and ate them. So tasty. So *bib*lical. I *love* desert justice." (GX 76) This passage directly recalls the desert animals in Borges's story and the unhinged desert drifter who features in *Life after God*, who pick over the scraps of the Cartesian map in the western desert.

When Claire's family visits her in Palm Springs, she overhears a profane discussion between two of her brothers:

> 'Ignore the wind, Davie. Don't cosign nature's bullshit. It'll go away.'
> 'Hey … is it possible to damage the sun? I mean, we can wreck just about anything we want to here on earth. But can we screw up the sun if we wanted to? I don't know. *Can* we?'
> 'I'm more worried about computer viruses.' (GX 40)

This banter is typical of the materialist Global Teen generation of Andy's brother Tyler, five years younger and living in a different world, apparently[7] entirely comfortable with urban capitalism. Later, Andy notices Claire sitting at an edge of a mineral pool staring at the sun. "In her small voice she was talking to the sun and telling it she was very sorry if we'd hurt it or caused it any pain. I knew then that we were friends for life." (GX 44) Claire's naive apology to an anthropomorphized sun appeals to Andy. She does not mean to be overheard, and the apology does not seem to be ironic, and this lack

[7] In a short-lived unguarded moment, Tyler privately admits his fear of the future to Andy: "[I]t scares me that I don't see a future. And I don't understand this reflex of mine to be such a smartass about everything. It *really* scares me. […] I can't allow myself to show it. And I don't know why." (GX 173)

of irony – a distinctly different tone from their younger siblings' – and her gentle nod to an ancient paganism makes him feel bonded to her. They are both searching for a lost innocence in these nostalgic remnants. Claire also starts collecting decorative elk antlers. "A few days later," Andy tells, "she informed Dag and me that she had performed a small ceremony to allow the soul of the tortured, hunted animal to go to heaven. She wouldn't tell us what the ceremony was." (GX 85)

Critics might see Claire's solemn rituals as a pastiche of prior religious sacraments. As Fredric Jameson suggests: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse […] Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour." (Jameson 1998b: 5) Andy's appreciation of Claire's environmental sympathy and her efforts at resuscitating ritual in the face of her family's profanity, however, is not presented ironically by Coupland. From a critical position outside the text, Jameson might see Coupland's presentation of ritual as inadvertent pastiche, but Coupland takes this patchwork ritual, even though it is composed of the "dead language" of religion, seriously. Nonetheless, he has not completely lost his sense of humour: he applies satiric parody to lampoon the vacuous yet menacing conversation of Claire's brothers with successful comic effect.

Life after God is Coupland's novel most concerned with a spiritual interpretation of the landscape. In this novel, his narrators drive north from Vancouver into the British Columbian forests or through the Californian desert. These landscapes – majestic,

numinous, sublime, barren, dangerous and frightening – allow them to escape the performance of their daily lives and reflect on their spirits. I have discussed Scout's pilgrimage in detail in chapter one, and have shown how the self-marginalizing strategy of identity-formation is finally repudiated in his story. Other stories in the novel, however, help to illustrate further how Coupland represents forests and deserts as places where spiritual metamorphosis is apt to occur.

In "My Hotel Year", the British Columbian forest is also a welcome and idealized escape from disillusioning reality. The narrator and his friend, Cathy, take the bus up to the Cleveland Dam high in the mountains and walk up a dirt road into the forest. In Vancouver, they live in a squalid inner-city hotel, but here the narrator makes much of their collision with nature: "we cut through the underbrush of salmonberry bushes, grasses and juvenile firs. [Cathy's] big hair was filled with spider-webs and fir needles and dead huckleberry leaves. [… W]e stood there, deep in the woods, frozen in mid-motion, trying to stop time." (LAG 36–37) Like the narrator of "Little Creatures", this narrator sees union with the wilderness as a way to affect time, to stop time's inevitable flow and its accompanying corruption and disillusion. Cathy's big hair, an artificial city style, represents that which is unnatural, that which bars itself from the transcendent, and here, in this place where transcendence is at least a possibility to be imagined, it is tangled up in nature.

Robert McGill, (2000) primarily reading *Girlfriend in a Coma* with support from *Life after God*, develops a dichotomy between culturally leached California, a realm of simulacra, and the mountainous, forested wilderness of British Columbia as a sublime

antidote to this baseless hyperreality. He writes that "British Columbia's mountain ecology provides metaphors of endurance that suggest alternatives to the apocalypticism of the westward teleology." (McGill 2000: 265) While the westward expansion of manifest destiny eventually runs its course, its objectives stall, and the end of the world is reached, the mountains serve as symbols of an immutability. The city of Vancouver lies in the middle of this south-north trajectory of salvation, the gateway to the possibility of sublime transcendence. He argues that Vancouver has, however, to a significant extent been culturally conquered by the US and has become a version of Los Angeles, even standing in for that city in TV programmes. For example, characters in *Girlfriend in a Coma* work on a TV series about the paranormal, a reference to *The X Files*, an actual television series which in its later seasons was shot in Vancouver to save costs. McGill's synthesis of Baudrillard's system of simulation is somewhat shallow, however, and leads his otherwise very illuminating essay into generality. McGill tries too hard to fit Coupland's thematization of space into a neat binary framework of sublime wilderness versus simulated cityscape and loses sight of the thorough-going ambivalence in his work. In the terrain Coupland maps, malls and hotels spring out of the scrub, dead consumptive rubbish lies strewn in the deepest deserts, dams block apparently untouched forest rivers, cities have no centre and are made of glass instead of brick. When McGill writes about California, he writes about the simulations of Los Angeles and overlooks the Californian desert (while Baudrillard addresses both the city and the desert in different and complex ways in McGill's source, *America*). This is a serious omission since the Californian desert features as a location in a number of Coupland's novels, including *Generation X*, *Life after God* and – less centrally, but still significantly – in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. It would trouble McGill's

schema to acknowledge that many of Coupland's characters see the desert as a spiritual antidote to urban life, in much the same way as they approach the British Columbian forests, but the desert does not function as a simple motif set up in opposition to the secular urban environment. It is a double wasteland: both an apparently barren void ideal for hearing spiritual echoes, and a graveyard for the detritus of materialist culture.

"In the Desert", for example, is a complex vision of the Californian desert, at once almost spiritual in its archaic emptiness, and closely linked with the urban consumerism from which it buffers its residents. One can see that often, in the very act of escaping to the desert, in an effort to reclaim the lost certainties of the simpler, less cluttered past, Coupland's characters foreground the very chaos they are trying to escape. In this way, the desert buffer from the postmodern city serves as a spectral reminder of all that frightens them. Slavoj Žižek makes this point with reference to first-world nations' attempt to isolate themselves from the third world where, in his opinion, the terrifying Real resides. This blinkered isolation became impossible after the terror attacks on the United States in September 2001. "The shattering impact of the bombings can be accounted for only against the background of the borderline that today separates the digitalized first world from the third world 'desert of the Real.' It is the awareness that we live in an artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction." (Žižek 2002: 387) The abject third world, just like the chaotic city on the other side of the desert, haunts the ragged artifice of modernist certitude in which technologically advanced subjects seek to hide themselves.

The narrator of "In the Desert" drives a shipment of illegal steroids from Las Vegas to Palm Springs across the Mojave desert. While driving, he says, "new scenery continually erases what came before; memory is lost, shuffled, relabeled and forgotten. […] A fast moving car is the only place where you're legally allowed to not deal with your problems. It's enforced [meditation][8] and this is good." (LAG 142) This man's road trip across the desert brings to mind Baudrillard's, which he describes in *America*. "The mental desert form expands before your very eyes," he writes, "and this is the purified form of social desertification. Disaffection finds its pure form in the barrenness of speed. All that is cold and dead in desertification or social enucleation rediscovers its contemplative form here in the heat of the desert." (Baudrillard 1988: 5)

Baudrillard's vision of speed serves to recall Virilio's suggestion that "possession of territory is […] first and foremost a matter of movement and circulation." (Virilio 2000) Coupland's drivers and flyers engage with their environment in a neo-colonialist way. Once they had a home in their small patch, supported by deep roots. Now, more mobile than ever, they drive away when their homes disillusion them. Staying in motion, they are no longer rooted to their small plot, but buzz around like electrons in a probability wave, everywhere and nowhere at once, staking temporary and superficial claims to broad swathes of land. Coupland's generation has replaced that pre-modern anchorage to a single family home with a freedom to move that allows them a new form of ownership. They make their map out of motion. It is not coincidental that Steve

[8] In the 2002 Scribner paperback edition of *Life after God*, "meditation" is misspelled as "mediation". This might be taken as a telling unconscious wish to return to modernist, secular processes of control – corporate and manageable mediation – rather than the pre- or postmodernist disattachment and ceding of control the concept of meditation conjures.

Redhead has entitled his study of Virilio *Paul Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture*. (Redhead 2004) This is a phrase Coupland coined in his full title of *Generation X, Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, as Redhead acknowledges in passing. (Redhead 2004: 152) Many of Coupland's subjects yearn for political agency against the monolithic economic systems which efficiently and strategically retain their possession of economic territory – target markets – in this accelerated culture. Virilio points to the revolutionary potential of life on the streets. "The revolutionary contingent," he writes, "attains its ideal form not in the place of production, but in the street, where for a moment it stops being a cog in the technical machine and itself becomes a motor […] a *producer of speed*." (Virilio 1986: 3) The streets are an ideological no-man's land, where would-be revolutionaries are emancipated from the control of their economic masters, and are even able to become landowners in this new, motile economy. As Coupland's drivers realise, their emancipation lasts as long as they stay moving, out on the roads.

Motion also serves to clear the mind of repressive, mundane thoughts. Baudrillard shares the narrator's view that driving through the desert deepens and renders contemplative the alienated, socially enucleated life bereft of connection in which so many of Coupland's characters find themselves. "The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world," Baudrillard continues, "immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, and ecstatic form of disappearance." (Baudrillard 1988: 5) On his drive to Palm Springs, spurred by his introspective contemplation on the drive, Coupland's narrator has a change of heart. He decides not to deliver the drugs but to get rid of them in the desert.

"I suppose I simply should have ditched the box along any old dirt side road, but my state of mind was such that only a proper burial would suffice." (LAG 153–154) He drives deep into the desert and notes how even here, the desert is "littered with shotgun shell casings and smashed beer bottles […] To judge from the occasional desiccated mattresses, broken couches and refrigerators around me, others had passed this way with similar notions of disposal." (LAG 155) The ambivalent presentation of the desert is clear here: it is not pristine or untainted by the excess waste of material culture, but at the same time it is a fitting site for ritual and transcendence of the mundane.

"Fire, heat, light: all the elements of sacrifice are here," Baudrillard says elsewhere, "You always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice." (Baudrillard 1988: 66) He refers to the desert as "our mythic operator", an antidote "against the excess of signification, of intention and pretention in culture." (Baudrillard 1988: 64) He repeatedly refers to the "magical" (Baudrillard 1988: 3, 67) and "mysterious" (Baudrillard 1988: 66, 67, 68) nature of the desert. Clearly, like Andy and his cohorts in *Generation X* and the narrator of "In the Desert", Baudrillard finds moving to the desert, and in the desert, an act of political and even quasi-religious resistance to the hegemony of superficiality. Of course, a central principle of this thesis is that the political and religious in much of Coupland's work are inextricable; surprisingly perhaps, Baudrillard's awe-struck vision of American desert geography and geology brings us to the same, complementary conclusion about *America*, couched as it is in Greek spiritual terms of έκστασις, standing outside, eccentricity, marginality and transcendence.

Philippa Berry explains that Greekness is recently being remembered as part of a "post-religious or quasi-religious *bricolage*". (Berry 2004: 174) She notes how lately Heidegger's thought has been retranslated and dechristianized, and that the Greek rather than Roman, Christian or pagan modes of belief in his philosophy is being foregrounded. Pursuant to this,

> In [the] reconfiguring of the holy as an imperfectly differentiated ('jewgreek') mode of the 'sacred,' Derrida articulates a recurring theme in the postmodern thinking of 'religion.' And in the contributions of other thinkers to this emergent discourse, […] Jewish conceptions of the mysterious unrepresentability, withdrawal, and absence of the divine interwoven with Greek motifs – a quasi-divine *ekstasis*, and of a mysterious place of nonorigin, Plato's *chora* – […] resonate. (Berry 2004: 174)

This eccentric, marginal impulse calls to mind the liminal strategies for identity discussed with reference to Julia Kristeva's theories in chapter one. It is in this desert, we remember, that the narrator meets the mad desert drifter, the lone voice in the wilderness, a version of John the Baptist, a forerunner of the metanarrator's salvation which culminates in Scout's self-abnegating baptism ritual. "The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality," Baudrillard writes. "Words, even when they speak of the desert, are always unwelcome." (Baudrillard 1988: 71) Fundamental to the desert drifter's story is his location outside everyday language, his suggestion of a semiotic alternative to domination by symbolic law. Baudrillard similarly notices a link between a Kristevan pre-verbal, semiotic condition

and the desert, but he says, "The only question in this journey is: how far can we go in the extermination of meaning, how far can we go in the non-referential desert form without cracking up and, of course, still keep alive the esoteric charm of disappearance? [… A]im for the point of no return. This is the key." (Baudrillard 1988: 10) He apparently revels in the radical freedom from repressive structures this desert existence offers, but also threatens to fall irretrievably into the semiotic order – to overstep "the point of no return" – as some of Coupland's characters have been tempted to do. Baudrillard's road trip can be read alongside that of the narrator of "In the Desert" and Scout, and (at the risk of sounding conservative) he could well be similarly warned against taking radical self-erasure beyond the point of no return.

The narrator of "In the Desert" says that as he drove, "the Nothingness was very much on my mind. I kept on being surprised by the bigness of the landscape – just how far *nothing* can extend to". (LAG 135) Across his novels, nothingness appeals to Coupland as a peri-spiritual state, a quasi-Buddhist state of disattachment which facilitates meditation and renders divinity approachable. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Linus also becomes a drifter for a time in the Mojave before returning to Vancouver. Richard admits that he "was envious of Linus's venture into nothingdom, but also ticked off that he hadn't had a revelation in all of his wanderings." (GC 76) Richard expects that transcendent meaning should result from a spell in the desert and is upset when it does not. If God does not live in the desert after all, Richard fears, where might he be? Is God dead? Cheryl Anway's meditative mantra, "GOD IS NOWHERE/ GOD IS NOW HERE/ GOD IS NOWHERE/ GOD IS NOW HERE" (HN 9) also relates nothingness to the presence of God. Cheryl denies that in these words she was making any informed

statement about the nature of God, but after her death her words become a buoy for the community's floundering faith. Cheryl's intent in writing her formula was intentless: "all I was doing was trying to clear out my head and think of nothing, to generate enough silence to make time stand still." (HN 9) Like Cathy at the Cleveland Dam, another young woman at the threshold of adult life, Cheryl approaches her conceptual wilderness – an unenculturated blankness, a nothingness – to make time stand still.

In "In the Desert" we are told by the narrator, "I have always tried to speak with a voice that has no regional character – a voice from nowhere. This is because I have never really felt like I was 'from' anywhere […] I realized my accent was simply the accent of nowhere". (LAG 140) This explains in part his affinity for the desert. Coupland is part of a long tradition of imagining the desert as a spiritual place. Mystical searchers traditionally encounter God in the desert; Moses, Saul/Paul and John the Baptist are a few famous biblical characters who have done so and whom Coupland writes into the subtext of his deserts. But like Linus, his characters more often find nothing when they look. Linus's unsuccessful quest accurately represents a crisis of faith in the post-religious age. Berry draws together some recent philosophical strands which link a quest for divine to the "conceptual desert":

> Edmond Jabès places a parallel or complementary emphasis upon the spatiality of this (non)relationship to a divine other that is precisely defined by its lack of definition, its absence. It was Jabès, most importantly, who seems to have been the first of these thinkers to select the 'non-place' of the desert as a highly suggestive metaphor for our postmodern, post-religious situation. This non-

> specific site is spatially situated between all oppositions, yet through its emptiness and radical dereliction it is also temporally differed from such polarities […] Jean-Luc Nancy observes that now, 'our experience of the divine is our experience of desertion. It is no longer a question of meeting God in the desert: but of this – and this *is the desert* - : we do not encounter God, God has deserted all encounter.' (Berry 2004: 176)

Cheryl deliberately looks for nothing and finds it; this – situated as it is in Coupland's more recent work – points towards a new way of looking. Chapter four of this thesis is dedicated to an examination of the potential for reconstructed religion in Coupland's post-essential milieu. This potential is rooted in three of Coupland's overarching concerns: narrative and the aporetic space between words, the dark potential locked in the subatomic realm, and the geographic and psychological margins discussed in the first two chapters of this thesis. These are the nowhere spaces in which Cheryl revealingly seeks God.

Cities of the edge

In his later novels, Coupland less often presents the desert or montane forest wilderness as a site for communication with the inner self, the soul or the divine, and becomes increasingly concerned with the ambivalent postmodern-urban experience, particularly in the suburban city of Vancouver. His use of Palm Springs as the primary location of *Generation X* and Andy's secret parable about Edward which I discuss in chapter one,

however, show that he has always been concerned with the liminal urban space, the city at the edge both of consumer civilization and the future. Palm Springs is a liminal microcosm of the Los Angeles / Toronto / Portland from which his characters have escaped, perched on the edge of the desert. Coupland revisits the trope of the desert-edge city in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!* when he uses Las Vegas as a minor location for symbolic activities which indicate a revision of Coupland's relation to the wilderness theme.

In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, when Linus spends a "few years gadabouting the southern United States", (GC 71) he sends Richard a postcard that reads:

> You asked why I'm doing this and that's a reasonable question. I think I couldn't see me hitting into the everyday world any longer. […] I don't know if there's some alternative out there, but I spend most of my time wondering what it might be. […] Life seems both too long and too short. This being said, I had a good day today. The clouds were pretty and I bought a sack of clothes at the Goodwill store for five bucks. (GC 71)

Las Vegas, a city washed up at the edge of the desert, part commercial and part pretty wilderness, appeals to Linus while he is on his quest. Las Vegas offers him – as it does to Andy, Claire and Dag – an escape from the everyday world, its strictures, demands and pressures, and it allows Linus to wonder about the alternatives, even if he doesn't find them. This in itself is an improvement for Linus over everyday life.

While Linus in his impecuniosity frequents the Goodwill store, a sun-leached copy, the discarded excess, of thriving consumerism, and does not mention gambling in his postcard, Las Vegas is built on casinos. Baudrillard also drove through Las Vegas on his quest for alternatives: "Death Valley and Las Vegas are inseparable;" he writes,

> You have to accept everything at once, an unchanging timelessness and the wildest instantaneity. There is a mysterious affinity between the sterility of wide open spaces and that of gambling, between the sterility of speed and that of expenditure. […]
>
> It would be wrong-headed to counterpose Death Valley, the sublime natural phenomenon, to Las Vegas, the abject cultural phenomenon. For the one is the hidden face of the other and they mirror each other across the desert, the one as acme of secrecy and silence, the other as acme of prostitution and theatricality. (Baudrillard 1988: 67)

Here, Baudrillard shares Coupland's sense that the desert and the new city are not opposites. Just as junk is strewn in the deepest desert, sand sweeps across the neon city. They are different angles of the same idea; they are thresholds where ancient and instant mix, where the sacred and profane whirl together. This multivalence, the fact that it constantly bears it abject twin with it, makes it the perfect place for the remnants of Borges's map. For Linus, this is what makes this city of the edge a place away from the everyday world with its strictly enforced symbolic polarities, its rational rules and its gates shut firmly against transcendent notions. Elsewhere Baudrillard reiterates, "The secret affinity between gambling and the desert: the intensity of gambling reinforced by

the presence of the desert all around the town. […] Gambling itself is a desert form, inhuman, uncultured, initiatory, a challenge to the natural economy of value, a crazed activity on the fringes of exchange." (Baudrillard 1988: 127–128) Linus has left behind his promising career in a search for alternatives which, just like gambling, is a crazed activity and a challenge to the natural economy of value that must take place on the fringes. His search is a gamble against the odds of normalizing consumerism; in an effort to escape his culture, he tries his luck with the uncultured desert form. He loses. If Linus brings something to the desert to sacrifice, it is himself: he is emptied out and impoverished, and ultimately returns home, unwillingly and without any revelation, to the everyday world.

In *Hey Nostradamus!* Cheryl recounts her trip to Las Vegas to marry Jason:

> It was over a hundred degrees outside, my first exposure to genuine heat, Jason's too. My lungs had never felt so pure. In the taxi to Caesar's Palace I looked out at the desert – real *desert* – and tried to imagine every parable I'd ever heard taking place in that exotic lifeless nothingness […] I wondered how the Bible ever managed to happen. They must have had different weather back then […] Instead of feeling brand new, Las Vegas felt thousands of years old. Jason got out and we both knelt and prayed. Time passed; I felt dizzy and the cabbie honked the horn. (HN 29–30)

Cheryl explicitly imagines the desert as a biblical setting, and also sees the desert – perhaps with a Vancouverite's verdant sensibility – as a purifying blankness, the head-

clearing nothingness she hoped to approach by writing her time-stopping mantra. Unlike in Cathy's experience of the wilderness, however, time passes here in the desert, which is exhausting and leaching, vertiginous and ageing. It makes Las Vegas seem ancient, as does Cheryl's vision of the city as an archaic biblical archetype, perhaps – ironically, since the teens are rushing there to keep their premarital virginal purity intact – even as Sodom. In the casino, she says, filing past the slot-machine gamblers on their own desperate quest to cheat the system of exchange, "I don't think I'd ever seen so many souls teetering so precariously on the brink of colossal sin." (HN 34)

Later, Jason also revisits Las Vegas to marry Barb before he has sex with her, duplicating his childhood ritual in some rite of exorcism, and he reviews Las Vegas in the light of his own experience. Ten years on, in 1998, Las Vegas seems cleaner and more corporatized:

> In the decade since my first trip there, Las Vegas had been rebuilt from the ground up. Pockets of authentic sleaze peeked out here and there, but the city's aura was different, more professional. I could look at all the new casinos and imagine people sinning away like mad, but I could also envision management meetings and cubicles and photocopiers tucked away in the bowels of the recently spruced up casinos. (HN 142)

The 90s have evidently had a corrosive effect on the subversive potential of this fringe city to challenge "the natural economy of value"; the crazed activity of gambling has been subordinated by mainstream, tertiary capitalist activities: construction,

entertainment and tourism make more profits now than the slots: capitalism has colonized even the liminal, wild-zone city and made it into another corporate outpost. Describing this shift as a global tendency, Jameson writes of "the entrance of capitalism into a new third stage and its consequent penetration of as yet uncommodified parts of the world." (Jameson 1998d: 90) Las Vegas has become like any other city, like part of Linus's everyday world, to such an extent that Jason can describe it as "spruced up": that definitive new-world British Columbian tree, the spruce, now serves to describe the prior divine-echoing, treeless, barren nothingness of the ancient city. Finally, Coupland's interesting term "authentic sleaze" serves to upset the categories of pristine, pre-modern authenticity and contemporary waste culture, showing how his overlapping map of the contemporary condition merges and dissolves playfully between categories and avoids certitude. The city has now become so varnished in its corporate veneer – a new version of the rationalist map overlaying every surface – that the only glimpses of authenticity that poke through it are pockets of sleaze.

Minneapolis, another city of the edge, is where God is scheduled to die. In a small story in the middle of *Life after God*, "Things That Fly", a depressed narrator returns to his parents' suburban home to recuperate after a relationship break-up. He listens to the TV in the next room:

> CNN was saying that Superman was scheduled to die later this week – in the sky above Minneapolis, and I was momentarily taken out of myself. I thought this was certainly a coincidence, because I had just visited the city of Minneapolis a month ago, on a business trip: a new crystal city, all shiny like

> quartz rising over the Midwest corn fields. […] I haven't even *read* a Superman comic in two decades – [but] the thought still made me feel sad. (LAG 61)

Later, he realises that he has misheard: Superman is "supposed to die over *Metropolis*, not Minneapolis. But I was still sad. I have always liked the idea of Superman because I have always liked the idea that there is one person in the world who doesn't do bad things. And that there is one person in the world who is able to fly." (LAG 66) At the end of the story, the narrator says, "I got just plain lonely and just so fed up with all the badness in my life and the world" and after a plaintive prayer, "God gave me these words, and I speak them here." (LAG 69) This is followed by a page break: the message God gave is not recorded. It is unspeakable. Later that night the narrator tells that he "dreamed that I was back in Minneapolis, back next to the corn fields. I dreamed that I had taken a glass elevator to the top of one of the city's green glass skyscrapers, […] and I was running around that floor […] frantic […,] trying to find a way to protect Superman." (LAG 70) Superman is a post-religious Christ-figure in this story, a last vestige of human, yet superhuman, redeeming purity in the world. The Superman comics are a Jamesonian pastiche of biblical scriptures, religious ritual practices commemorating the life and works of the saviour which the narrator has not observed for decades. The neglected saviour's immanent death, and along with it the end of the secret messages he imparts, makes this simple narrator sad. His elision of God and superhero in this story suggests that both are media images, one as fictional as the other. Both are literary characters which serve cathartic purposes.

It is interesting to note that Minneapolis was also a transit point in Baudrillard's journey, and he too was taken by its liminality. Whereas the narrator of "Things That Fly" envisions it as a city positioned on the edge of cornfields, just as Las Vegas is at the edge of the desert, Baudrillard, more dramatically (and with less of a Canadian feeling for snow), refers to Minneapolis as "at the edge of the ice-sheets, at the horizon of the inhabited world […] Speaking of the silence of the masses and the end of history". (Baudrillard 1988: 13) For Baudrillard (while he deftly negates the existence of Canada in its entirety), Minneapolis is a stop-over, a hop between New York City and Los Angeles, the twinned centre of the world. (Baudrillard 1988: 23) Minneapolis itself is the twin city of St. Paul; far from the centre of the world, but new cities of the edge.

Thence, he travels to Los Angeles, and considers, like Jameson, the meanings of LA's Bonaventure Hotel, an example for them of the confusions and innovations of postmodernism. Jameson writes about the difficulty of mapping the "postmodern hyperspace" epitomized by Los Angeles's deliberately confusing postmodern architectural icon, the Bonaventure Hotel, which

> has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world. […T]his alarming disjunction between the body and its built environment […] can itself stand as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma, which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global, multinational and

> decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (Jameson 1998b: 15–16)

For his part, confronted with this metonymic piece of architecture, Baudrillard asks, "Is this still architecture, this pure illusionism, this mere box of spatio-temporal tricks? Ludic and hallucinogenic, is this post-modern architecture?" and comments, "No interior/exterior interface. The glass facades merely reflect the environment, sending back its own image." (Baudrillard 1988: 59) Jameson, struck by this same effect, infers a reading of postpoliticism from the building, which

> is content to 'let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being' (to parody Heidegger); no further effects – no larger protopolitical transformation – are either expected or desired.
>
> This diagnosis is, to my mind, confirmed by the great reflective glass skin of the Bonaventure, whose function might first be interpreted as developing a thematics of reproductive technology. Now, on a second reading, one would want to stress the way in which the glass skin repels the city outside […] the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighbourhood. (Jameson 1998b: 13)

Dissociated from its neighbourhood, the building is also aloof from the political imperatives of the community into which it is inserted. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Baudrillard also sees the western end of America, the teleological end, as the end, also, of revolutionary potential, a condition with which Coupland grapples in

various ways across his oeuvre. But here, stepping outside the hotel, Baudrillard is bemused when he sees how "A camouflaged individual, with a long beak, feathers, and a yellow cagoule, a madman in fancy dress, wanders along the sidewalks downtown, and nobody, but nobody looks at him. […] Now that the mad have been let out of the asylums everyone is seen as a potential madman." (Baudrillard 1988: 60) This description of Los Angeles resonates with Edward's vision of the new city he feels obliged to map for visitors: "Its boulevards were patternless, helter-skelter, and cuckoo," we remember. "Everywhere there were booby traps […] And yet in spite of this city's transfixing madness, Edward noticed that its multitude of inhabitants moved about with ease, unconcerned that around any corner there might lurk a clown-tossed marshmallow cream pie […] And directions were impossible." (GX 57–58)

Edward's story and "Things That Fly" are important precursors to Coupland's later dedicated interest in imagining the postmodern city. In 2000, he published his non-fictional and idiosyncratic account of Vancouver, *City of Glass*,[9] in which he, like Baudrillard and Jameson, expresses an ambivalent reaction to postmodern architecture and city planning and sees them as reflective of more general postmodern cultural trends. Coupland's title most likely deliberately nods to Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*, first published in 1990, a Marxist dissection of Los Angeles which comments similarly on a number of Coupland's anxieties about the American west coast, from the acquisitive rush for gold and land through to its teleological stall. Davis calls Los Angeles "first and above all the creature of real-estate capitalism: the culminating

[9] A title shared by Paul Auster's novella first published in 1985, and then in *The New York Trilogy* in 1987. In a shimmer of reflective surfaces, Auster's "City of Glass" presents New York City as a map of its central character's mind.

speculation, in fact, of the generations of boosters and promoters who had subdivided and sold the West". (Davis 2006: 25)

In *City of Glass,* Coupland laments recent architectural trends in Vancouver: the huge "monster houses" which "began popping up all over Vancouver. They were huge – vast – most often stuccoed, had very few outdoor details, and were skimpy to the point of sterility when it came to trees and gardens. […] They were awkward, frequently designed in the worst post-modern style, and weren't at all concerned about their communities" (*City of Glass* 90); and the shopping malls he refers to as "charmless concrete dumps […] eyesore[s]". (*City of Glass* 98) While lambasting much of the city's postmodern architecture, he valorizes the aims of modernist architecture, which gave rise to what he suggests is the most successful indigenous architectural style in Vancouver, the post-and-beam house, developed in the decades after the second World War. The post-and-beam house, he writes, "was designed to spur on the modernist idea of a better human society through better design, and not just in a lots-of-fresh-air-and-exercise manner. The simplicity and lack of pretense was meant to imbue inhabitants with an appreciation for the simpler, more natural and progressive ideas […] they *work*." (*City of Glass* 98) But while modernist architecture is based on the principle of newness and innovation, postmodern architecture is characterized, among other traits, by a recycling of historical forms, or as Jameson less charitably puts it, "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past", (Jameson 1984: 65–66) and it is here that Coupland sees some hope for the architectural future of the city: "Now in the first millennial decade, the official style of architecture is 'ski lodge' […] lots of eaves and river rock and shingled walls. There is hope on the horizon: many builders have realized

that nothing guarantees resale value more than good design. Finally!" The environmental harmony of the post-and-beam style (which, it could be argued, is actually a reiteration of the original pioneers' wood cabins) is being recycled in the new ski-lodge style. Gone is what Coupland sees as the modernist motivation of creating a better human society; the exigencies of capital now drive the more harmonic design but the result remains the same: more attractive houses.

Coupland's ambivalent attitude towards new architecture mirrors what I take to be his attitude to postmodernity more broadly. His initial impulse is to endorse the ethos of modernism, in architecture as much as in political and religious belief. The aims of modernism "*work*," he stresses. But perhaps he should rather say, "they *worked*", because his characters show that he is acutely aware that past certainties no longer carry the weight they once did; we are now incredulous, famously, of the grand narratives. (Lyotard 1984: xxiv; Anderson 1995a: 4) We can no longer take the modernist gestures of simplicity and lack of pretence at face value. And prefer as he might to stick to the old formulae, Coupland's impulse to comforting conservatism is also countered by delight in the playfulness and the protean, flexible style of the new order. The postmodern city is Edward's vibrant, unsettling city; the postmodern subject needs to adapt to its oddly functional madness.

While acknowledging the threat of globalization and ill-fitting design on his city, in *City of Glass* he suggests that Vancouver, in its very postmodern complexity, is the model for the conceptual new city. He contrasts Vancouver with other western-edge cities like Los Angeles: "Many of the factors that stripped the innocence away from other cities

never occurred here: freeways were never built and a soul-free edge city never arose because Vancouver has no edge. It hits the mountains on one side, the ocean on the other and the U.S. border on the third". (*City of Glass* 34) Vancouver is a city *of* the edge *with no* edge and as such is ultimately where Coupland's characters can practice and re-form their marginal politics, belief and identity. "I think that most Vancouverites at some point throughout their week invariably sit back and quietly wonder what message it is we're being sent by living here […] It's wondering about this one intangible unanswerable question that, more than any other thing, defines a person as a Vancouverite", Coupland writes, (*City of Glass* 107) signalling a fundamental shift in his sense of Vancouver. His characters no longer need to travel outwards to desert or wilderness, to find exotic cities of the edge, or to embark on a vision quest for alternatives like Linus did in order to access the liminal mindset they seek. Now, they can find it in their own city. If liminality is a necessary position for politico-spiritual subversion or transcendence, then Vancouver, the suburban city, Coupland now suggests, is just as apt a place as Palm Springs or Las Vegas, the Mojave desert or the northern wilds to find it. Hence, as Tate suggests, his more recent work's generation of "an ambivalent poetics of the North American suburbs." (Tate 2007: 116)

Despite Coupland's clear interest in urban sociology, the inner city is interestingly absent in much of his fiction. Even his novels which directly criticize corporate working environments, such as *Microserfs* and *JPod*, are set in peri-urban office parks, the postmodern home of soft industries like computer programming and advertising. In the four novels on which I focus here, Dag's stories of his Toronto advertising career and Andy's and Claire's more oblique engagement with Portland and Los Angeles

demonstrate how the city experience in *Generation X* remains a sublimated horror which should only be spoken about in cathartic parable. “My Hotel Year” from *Life After God* is the only story set in a downtown location. Other than this, when the action takes place in Vancouver – and it most often does – it takes place in Vancouver’s suburbs.

2.2 “A museum of fifteen years ago”: Suburbia as a time

Coupland presents his characters’ suburban adolescent identities as a fantastic semiotic realm; their yearning to return to this state, as detailed in chapter one, is a dangerous and ultimately impossible wish. Coupland deepens this concern with the recent past as a lost moral condition by presenting his suburban locations as “a museum of fifteen years ago” (GX 96) which commemorates and mourns the last days of a putative modernist Golden Age, and the mid-1970s as the moment of the Fall into the confusions of postmodernity. There is nothing essentially unique about their rebellious searching against the grain of previous generations, but Coupland’s X-generation characters uniquely inhabit the multi-layered map Coupland draws. Their specific subculture – that of questing, middle-class, young, white, West-Coast suburbanites – is a battleground between postmodern forms, expressions, anxieties and styles and the older-fashioned, nostalgic attachment to the past and a search for essential meaning, truth and order. Coupland’s characters are thus specifically suited to engaging with the interplay between postmodernity and traditional ideology – and uniquely alone and guideless in coming to terms with the crises of faith and space and history this complex condition precipitates.

“You should see my parents’ place, Dag,” Andy says. “It’s like a museum of fifteen years ago. Nothing ever changes there; they’re terrified of the future.” (GX 96) He goes on to describe a particular family photograph:

> Fifteen years ago, on what remains as possibly the most unhip day of my life, my entire family, all nine of us, went to have our group portrait taken at a local photo salon. […T]he nine of us spent the next fifteen years trying bravely to live up to the corn-fed optimism, the cheerful waves of shampoo, and the airbrushed teeth-beams that the resultant photo is still capable of emitting today. We may look dated in this photo, but we look *perfect* too. In it, we're beaming earnestly to the right, off toward what seems to be the future but which was actually Mr. Leonard, the photographer. (GX 153)

This portrait serves as an iconic symbol of Coupland's attitude towards the suburban past. A moment was frozen in time in the mid-1970s (fifteen years before the release of *Generation X*), and its apparent innocence is now lost. This photograph is mirrored by that other snapshot of the past, the teen-embryos in "10,000 Years (Life After God)" floating in their suburban swimming pool: "Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the pioneers – life after God – a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven." (LAG 220) As to this womb-like *chora* state, it is impossible to return to the optimistic moment the Palmers' photo was taken. This is the adolescent moment before innocence turned to hard experience – both for Coupland's protagonists and the youthful culture metonymized by Karen Quinlan and Patty Hearst, the moment before the potential of an unknown future became the consequences of choices made; it is the moment before certainty turned to confusion.

Elsewhere, Andy generally considers old photographs,

> the sort of bleached Kodak snapshots taken decades ago and found in shoe boxes in attics everywhere. You know the type: […] When you see such photos, you can't help but wonder at just how sweet and sad and innocent all moments of life are rendered by the tripping of a camera's shutter, for at that point the future is still unknown and has yet to hurt us, and also for that brief moment, our poses are accepted as honest. (GX 20)

Andy describes photographs as shared cultural knowledge – "You know the type" – and this description is a postmodern style in itself. When we read of the Palmer family photo, we think of "corn-fed", ruddy-cheeked boys in Norman Rockwell paintings; we see the Brady Bunch arrayed up a flight of suburban steps with their "cheerful waves of shampoo". The Palmer photo is inextricably woven with these cultural artefacts. This is postmodern intertextuality not in Kristeva's more specific psycholinguistic sense, but in the more general sense which Jameson describes as, "a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and […] the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history." (Jameson 1984: 67) Here, Jameson condemns the intertextual style, and the replacement by cannibalizing historicism (Jameson 1984: 65) of a history which even he ironizes with his use of quote marks around "real". I would suggest, however, that intertextuality – this assumption of common cultural knowledge – enriches the image of the family portrait: I do indeed know the type; it is a function of globalization and the televisual archive – a new form of collective memory – that someone ten years younger than Coupland and Andy, and raised at the other end of the world – can understand at least some of the cultural layers Coupland weaves into the portrait. Now intertextuality is

much more embedded in cultural products than it was in 1984 when Jameson published his critique, its mechanisms are no longer jarring and readers are conditioned to make such cross-references automatically when reading postmodern material. The Palmer family portrait is a picture of the last moment of Andy's confident security, the time when the poses could be accepted as honest, even if indeed they were not. Norman Rockwell and his ironies died in 1978. Clean-living Marcia Brady has now published a tell-all memoir (McCormick 2008) of her drug addiction and depression, and the sex lives and family anti-values of her co-stars. (Her Brady brother slept both with her and their mother.)

As discussed, Andy's life beyond the portrait is similarly imbued with moral confusion, compulsion, dislocation, a lack of traditional faith, and the inevitable compromises involved in growing up, and while he appears dismissive of his parents' fear-motivated stasis, he and his friends also pine for that impossible return to the certainties of the past. This ambivalence is encapsulated in Texlahoma. (GX 45–52) "Texlahoma is a mythic world we created in which to set many of our stories," explains Andy of the planetoid he and his friends have imagined. "It's a sad Everyplace […] Life is boring there, but there are some thrills to be had […] Texlahoma is an asteroid orbiting the earth, where the year is permanently 1974, the year after the oil shock and the year starting from which real wages in the U.S. never grew ever again. […] It's a fun place to spend one day, and then you just want to get the hell out of there." (GX 45–46) Texlahoma – a distillation of any isolated rural community in Texas or Oklahoma, affected by the failure of the modernist mode of heavy industry but buffered from the postmodern capitalist trends of soft industry, advertising, media and fashion – is also a

museum of fifteen years ago. It epitomizes the dullness of Andy's parents' generation who – like characters in Claire's Texlahoma story – are doomed to repeat history endlessly and content themselves with small, wistful and repressed dreams of escape from their insignificant orbit. Andy's generation attempts to take meaningful action to "get the hell out of there"; hence his escape from his own Texlahoma in Portland to Palm Springs, Portland's physical and climatological antithesis.

Texlahoma is also, however, an embodiment of the comforting regularity which is now lost to Andy and his friends. Claire's story involves a litany of childhood artefacts of 1974, "an array of Snoopy plush toys, Jem dolls, Easy Bake ovens, and Nancy Drew mystery novels. […] scuffed up Holly Hobby, Veronica Lodge, and Betty Cooper stickers", (GX 48) which point to the womb of adolescence. The critique this story carries is lodged in nostalgic terms, something Coupland confirms with a footnote: "Legislated Nostalgia: To force a body of people to have memories they do not actually possess: *'How can I be part of the 1960s generation when I don't even remember any of it?'* " (GX 47)

Jameson situates nostalgia as a symptom of postmodernity related to the "omnivorous and well-nigh libidinal historicism" (Jameson 1984: 66) I have alluded to above. He suggests that leanings towards nostalgia in film (and by extension in certain novels) "restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the 'generation'." (Jameson 1984: 66) By creating Generation X, Coupland might be seen as guilty of nostalgic

generation-fabrication. But repeatedly faced with claims that he is the "voice of a generation", Coupland has apparently said, "I speak for myself, not for a generation. I never have." This comment is cited on various web pages, though there appears to be no original source remaining. His footnote on "Legislated Nostalgia" shows just as convincingly that he is wary of defining generations, and feels that people of his and his protagonists' age are too easily and gratuitously classified by people of other ages. Coupland most often tries to present individualized characters and a sensitive reading of *Generation X* reveals that even Andy, Claire and Dag have different approaches to belief, action and the future from each other. That said, Coupland's individuals often have many shared ideas and styles which allow them to be contrasted en masse with characters like Tyler and Claire's family, the confident, superficial and spiritually apathetic youth, and Tobias and Martin, the acolytes of high capitalism.

"Fashion change", Jameson suggests, is an "iron law" that crystallizes false nostalgic notions of past periods and generations. Using a literal sense of the word, one notes that clothing fashions do play an important role in *Generation X*: in an epigraph, Coupland quotes 27-year-old Tracey describing someone's apparel: "the dress was early '60s Aeroflot stewardess […] *And such make-up!* Perfect '70s Mary Quant, with these little PVC floral appliqué earrings that looked like antiskid bathtub stickers from a gay Hollywood tub circa 1956." (GX vii) This is supported by a footnote, "Decade Blending: In clothing: the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood: *Sheila = Mary Quant earrings (1960s) + cork wedgie platform shoes (1970s) + black leather jacket (1950s and 1980s)*." (GX 17) In these descriptions, Coupland suggests that an idiosyncratic mix of period fashions,

rather than being an example of empty, false, nostalgic posturing as Jameson would have it, and rather than classifying someone as a faceless member of a taxonomic group, develops an individual, personal style. Sheila "=" this distinctive fashion formula. The equals sign grants Sheila definition. (As discussed, however, Andy and his friends are quick to compartmentalize the attitudes and styles of their parents; not much effort is put into individuating them and they are seen as a conglomerated generation. In later novels, however, parents are presented in more depth. Lois and George in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and Reg in *Hey Nostradamus!* particularly, become more complex, discrete characters.)

Jameson goes on to contend that "for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire – not merely the stability and prosperity of a pax Americana, but also the first naive innocence of the countercultural impulses of early rock-and-roll and youth gangs". (Jameson 1984: 67) The 50s do feature as a long-lost object of desire in some places in the novel. Phil and Irene MacArthur, the owners of the Palm Springs bar at which Andy and Dag work, "live in a permanent 1950s. They still believe in a greeting-card future. […] We tolerate Irene and Phil's mild racist quirks and planet-destroying peccadilloes […] because their existence acts as a tranquilizer in an otherwise slightly-out-of-control world." (GX 128–129) The MacArthurs' attitude is both a ridiculous throwback and a comforting reprieve from the new world's demands for constant flexibility and political sensitivity. A depressed narrator in *Life after God* is similarly comforted by his mother "in the kitchen making 1947-style cream cheese sandwiches", (LAG 60) while in *Hey Nostradamus!*, Jason describes Reg's apartment as "so blank, so totally anti-1999 as to evoke thoughts of

time travel back to, say, North Platte, Nebraska, circa 1952." (HN 96) This dull-sounding, mid-American locale reminds us of Texlahoma, but by the time *Hey Nostradamus!* is written, Reg's stubborn attachment to the past, his inability to interact with the present – his own nostalgia rather than the younger protagonists' – is greeted with anger and is no longer comforting.

Most often, though, it is the 1970s which are Coupland's lost object of desire. There certainly was no pax Americana in the 70s (as indeed there was not in the 50s, despite Jameson's assertion: the Korean War and the territorial jockeying of the Cold War involved US forces, and the country was in the grip of racist violence), and while there was popular revolt over the Vietnam War, Coupland does not seem interested or nostalgic about revolutionary times. More simply, the 70s were when Coupland was an adolescent. If so, then what makes Coupland's expressions of nostalgia any different from those of any writer commemorating or mourning his lost adolescence? The 1970s brought a collapse in large-scale, modernist industry in the US: car factories and corporate farms, smelters, sawmills and mines went out of business, and many people lost work. The Three Mile Island nuclear reactor melted down, and inflated oil prices caused by middle-east instability caused a domestic energy crisis. The modernist map of the world frayed and tattered in the 1970s, to be replaced in the 80s by money brokerage and the start of the soft silicon industries. A postmodern economy began to dominate over the industrial one. Coupland's protagonists came of age in this unique period. Andy notes that Texlahoma, 1974, was stuck in the year after the oil shock, and in the period when people's incomes started to decline in real terms. As a postscript to *Generation X*, he presents readers with a chapter of "Numbers" comparing economic

and social indicators from the 60s and early 70s with those of the late 80s. The information demonstrates that in the Reagan era, US-Americans under 30 have less money, are less able to buy their own houses, and are less likely to marry than their counterparts of fifteen years before. The numbers also show that they must cope with this lack of social and economic security at the same time as they must deal with hyperinflation, an onslaught of television advertising, and unprecedented fears of environmental devastation and nuclear annihilation. These circumstances compound Generation X's troubled passage into adulthood. Coupland clearly believes that his nostalgia is justified.

One day Andy, Dag and Claire drive out of town for a picnic in hell. "Hell is the town of West Palm Springs Village – a bleached and defoliated Flintstones color cartoon of a failed housing development from the 1950s." (GX 17) The vacant ghost suburb symbolizes the lost promise of the post-war 50s, when every returning GI would have a housewife in every kitchen fitted with an oven and a refrigerator and a car in every garage. The post-war economy was the birth of American suburbs. In the US, the Eisenhower and Truman administrations worked hard to convert military industry into domestic industry and to shift demobilised labour into house-building, a half-hearted public works programme, and factory work. (Garraty & McCaughey 1989) The result was new consumer goods, new cars and new houses. Suburbs rose to accommodate the new products, and soon middle-class workers were living outside the cities and commuting in to their city offices in their new cars. The suburbs, intended to be havens of tranquillity for nuclear families, often caused more frustration than city-living, working men spending hours in commutes and non-working women – who had manned

the factories during the war – bored, isolated and powerless.[10] The failed development at which Andy and his friends picnic is symbolic of the failure of the industrial dream and the decline of modernist economy, after which there is only a blank, guideless space: "the three of us merely eat a box lunch on a land that is barren – the equivalent of a 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." (GX 19) The shreds of the real in the simulated desert.

"A blank space at the end of a chapter" presages God's message in "Things That Fly". When God speaks to that narrator, it can only be expressed as a blank space at the end of a chapter. Writing about the Vietnam War – "the first terrible postmodernist war" (Jameson 1998b: 16) – Jameson cites Michael Herr's *Dispatches* as a new way of speaking about the experience of this new sort of war:

> Some of us moved around the war like crazy people until we couldn't see which way the run was taking us anymore, […] As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha, ha, La Vida Loca. In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw

[10] *Revolutionary Road*, the recently repopularized novel by Richard Yates first published in 1961 and set in 1955, is a compelling picture of post-war American suburban distress. As discussed in more detail in chapter 3.3, Baudrillard writes about the more recent effects of cities built around cars rather than people and based on the logic of the far-flung hypermarket, and the postmodern tendency towards decentralization. (Baudrillard 1994b)

> together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going. (*Dispatches* 8–9, cited in Jameson 1998b: 17)

The dark antimatter of Edward's city, this new, postmodern, loca, insane, sort of war – "this new and virtually unimaginable quantum leap in technological alienation" (Jameson 1998b: 16) – needs a new form of expression and imagination. This new war is inexpressible in old terms; Herr's language is different from any other account of war before it; prior ideolects of war no longer operate, just like prior ideolects of action and belief. Like some of Coupland's protagonists, one has to render oneself mad to apprehend the madness, to allow the singular, fragmented experience to metastasize into a compound notion, into a sexy meta-map of the malignant new terrain. Baudrillard also sees the Vietnam War as a cultural watershed. He suggests that the Americans dealt with it "as though it were a cartoon, as something remote from them, a television war". (Baudrillard 1998: 108) Its hyperrealism is one of the features that made it, in Jameson's terms, "the first terrible postmodernist war".

Andy, on the other hand, sees the Vietnam War as part of that nostalgic mid-70s moment, a moment *of* history, rather than *after* the arguable demise of history. After visiting his family for Christmas, Andy visits the Vietnam War memorial in Portland. "The site is both a remarkable document and an enchanted space," he tells. "All year round, one finds sojourners and mourners of all ages and appearance in various stages of psychic disintegration, reconstruction, and reintegration". (GX 174) The memorial appeals to Andy as a place where cathartic rituals are performed, and which connects the various dislocated, fragmented and lost people who come there. Contemplating the

war, he thinks, "they *were* ugly times. But they were also the only times I'll ever get – genuine capital *H* history times, before *history* was turned into a press release, a marketing strategy, a cynical marketing tool." (GX 175) While succinctly summarizing an entire school of media theory, Andy's euphemistic memories of the Vietnam War serve as a display, along with the family portrait, in that museum of fifteen years ago.

Also like the Palmer family portrait, comatose Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma* is a snapshot of the 70s. She falls – with the decade – into her coma on 16 December 1979. As the first few months pass and "The year became 1980" (GC 42), interest in Karen's coma begins to wane and only Richard still pays her regular visits. "The seventies were over," narrates Richard. "With them left a sweetness, a gentleness. No longer could modern citizens pretend to be naïve. We were now jaded; the world was spinning more quickly." (GC 45) Karen begins to fade from everyone's lives like the 70s and the gentle naivety they embody; she is a relic tucked away in a back room, "only an idea". (GC 45) During Karen's seventeen-year hiatus, the other characters and Vancouver itself are subjected to a process of subtle yet devastating attrition. For Hamilton, Pam, Linus and Richard, the 80s are filled with cocaine, alcohol and aimless wandering, while Wendy loses herself in her work as a doctor. After the mid-90s they all return to the same Vancouver suburb, unconsciously readying themselves for Karen's return. Vancouver itself has changed from the city they knew when they were at high school. Sitting on the stuck ski-lift gondola on Grouse Mountain in 1979, Richard and Karen "looked at the lights of Vancouver before the 1980s had its way with the city – an innocent, vulnerable, spun-glass kingdom." (GC 14)

Unlike the Palmer photo, however, Karen comes to life again in the 90s. Karen's mind is unchanged; when she awakes she is able directly to compare the 90s both with the decade in which she fell asleep and with her horrified prescient visions of the future she has now entered. After she wakes,

> Karen has taken many drives […] and has seen the changes progress has wreaked. She's seen the city of Vancouver multiply and bathe itself in freighter loads of offshore 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. Karen rather likes the new city and she rather likes the small things in life which are new: blue nail polish, hygiene products, better pasta. (GC 151)

Despite the use of the word "wreaked", Karen's view parallels Coupland's ambivalence in *City of Glass*, caught between celebrating the new and lamenting the last old. Though she may rather like the new city, Karen is scathing of the people in the new world. She tells Hamilton, "There's a *hardness* I'm seeing in modern people. […] Life's so serious now. […] nobody even has *hobbies* these days. […] They work, watch TV, and sleep. […] People are frazzled and angry, desperate about money, and, at best, indifferent to the future. [… W]hat's happened to *time*? Nobody *has* time anymore." (GC 153–154) Hamilton's rejoinder is that "there's nothing *else* to choose. In the old days there was always a Bohemia or a creative underworld to join if the mainstream wasn't your bag – or a life of crime, or even religion. And now there's only the *system*. All other options have evaporated." (GC 154) Hamilton reflects on the paradox that given the multiplicity

of options in the new world, there appears to be no real choice; all the varieties on offer are of no consequential difference. What the corporate system encourages us to desire are those things that will maintain its hegemony; the only options we have are the trappings of an essentially repressive system. (Bauman 1992: 198–200) Furthermore, Karen's critique and Hamilton's corroborating ineffectual defence is characterized by a confusing disjuncture between the city and its people, between the world and the people who build it. "Friends and family want to protect Karen and her innocence from the modern world," we are told, "the changes that have occurred since her sleep began. Her innocence is the benchmark of their jadedness and corruption. The world is hard now. The world doesn't like simplicity or relaxation." (GC 138–139) The simplicity and relaxation – perhaps the potential for meditation or transcendence – which Karen symbolizes are such cherished ideas that people want to protect her and these notions. But the world is hard; the impersonal world dominated by the economic system will not abide these liberating ideas. It is as if the world is not made up of people.

Another reading, however, could suggest that Karen's sharp awareness of the disjuncture between the 70s and the 90s is due to her not having grown up. At the start of her tirade to Hamilton she admits, "Maybe it's because I'm with an older gang now." (GC 153) Karen is a seventeen-year-old in a thirty-four-year-old's body. She has missed the necessary accretion of "jadedness and corruption" which growing into adulthood entails. Hamilton's resigned pragmatism is a response to the ordeal of his twenties. Perhaps, after all, teenagers in the 90s are still teenagers; it might be that they have hobbies and free time.

Hey Nostradamus! expands on the theme of the urban development of Vancouver during the 80s and 90s, and Heather, for example, is more pessimistic than Karen about the changes wreaked on the city. She describes Cecelia's house as "a 1960s subdivision that had been missed by every scourge of redevelopment since. [… C]hez Cecelia was a tear-down, but so is most of North and West Vancouver." (HN 209) This is a criticism of "property-flippers" – part of the scourge which Mike Davis similarly laments in Los Angeles – who buy, renovate and sell houses to increase their resale value, and thereby price the original community out of the neighbourhood. We recall that Richard flipped properties in the late 80s: "I took that first house," he says, "spackled, sanded, and painted it, then flipped it for a twenty-five-thousand-dollar profit. […] My behaviour wasn't greed, it was … it was me doing anything but speaking honestly with myself." (GC 69)

The museum of fifteen years ago commemorates an idealized past to which no return may be made. Once that artifice has lost its meaning in Coupland's post-millennial novels, all his characters are left with is the sullied present and a terrifying future. At the beginning of *Hey Nostradamus!*, Cheryl mentions that "It was a glorious fall morning. […] T]he city had yet to generate its daily fog blanket." (HN 3) Even in Cheryl's 1988 – imagined by Coupland in 2003 – Vancouver has fallen: it is polluted, no longer that pristine "innocent, vulnerable, spun-glass kingdom." (GC 14) The final and definitive moment of Vancouver's decline from a innocent golden age, though, is the school massacre that takes place that autumn day.

2.3 Repeating destiny at the edge of the world

Apoliticism might be a feature of a life in the swimming-pool paradise; here, on the land, there is no such luxury. Land is inhabited and contested, colonized by bodily and imaginative force. Coupland's characters are most often situated on the western edge of North America, the geographic end of manifest destiny. In the past, pioneers would move away from conflict and pressure into what they perceived to be pristine terrain, but now the land has run out. While Coupland sets out to map a liberal, humanist imaginative terrain, it is illuminating to analyze his attitudes towards migration and history more closely. In doing so, it becomes apparent that in many respects his sense of the land and its inhabitants remains tied to the theological and ideological remnants of manifest destiny.

Historically, white Americans' westward progression is inextricable from their Protestant Christian spiritual belief. It is founded on the myth of manifest destiny, the motivating notion that God has provided new land for the European Christian pioneers to settle and populate. But colonial expansion comes at the cost of innocence. Settlers must clear and subdue the land, and baptise, civilize or eradicate the indigenous people whose presence mocks the founding myth. Utopia becomes another spiritual battleground. Eventually, the project of settling the new land becomes chained to the wheel of the old, imported ideological systems. Pam opines in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, lamenting the lost innocence of her city and life on the western edge, "There's nothing new anymore. Everything just gets older and older and more worn down." (GC 238) As Robert McGill puts it,

> Any new world, then, has within it apocalyptic inevitability. […] Historically, colonizers facing the deterioration of utopia into apocalypse were able to move on to new spaces, but settlement of the American Pacific coast marked humanity's arrival at the geographic end of the world. […] There are no more terrestrial possibilities for new Edens. And as Banham observes […] 'The Pacific beaches are where young men stop going West, where the great waves of agrarian migration from Europe and the Middle West broke in a surf of fulfilled and frustrated hopes'. (McGill 2000: 256)

If the West is the terminus of this teleology, the East is where Eden, the origin, lies, that profoundly complex symbol of failure, sin, and the irretrievable paradise-*chora*. McGill opens his essay with a quotation from another Canadian novel, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: "Vancouver is the suicide capital of the country. You keep going west until you run out. You come to the edge. Then you fall off." (McGill 2000: 252) It is telling, perhaps, that the only pointer towards the east-west trajectory of manifest destiny in *Generation X* is almost unutterable: "[we] look eastward, I shiver and pull the blanket tighter around myself, for I am colder than I realized" Andy says. (GX 8) All of Andy's musing over his personal genesis culminates at this spot, in the terrifying, tantalizing mythological *chora*, and at this stage in Coupland's output the concept cannot be approached in its depth.

The narrator of "Little Creatures", when his daughter asks him where people come from, tells her that people come "from back east". (LAG 5) The metanarrator's

reflection echoes Andy's utterance. The question is not dismissed, but rather avoided. "I wasn't sure if you meant the birds and the bees or if you meant the ark or what have you. Either direction was a tad too much for me to handle just then," (LAG 5) the father says, figuratively pulling a blanket around himself, buffering himself from the import of the question, knowing that when it comes to answering it he, like Andy, is colder – more off-track – than he realises. In many ways, the rest of *Life After God* is an attempt to answer the question of origins posed in this opening story. As discussed, the novel thematizes the psychological basis of identity in detail, and the significance of this theme is duplicated by Coupland's overt consideration of historic origins.

His drive from Las Vegas to Palm Springs becomes for the narrator of "In the Desert" a microcosmic post-historical reprise of the pioneers' trek:

> I began wondering exactly what was lying at the end of the road for me, […] Precisely articulating one's beliefs is difficult. My own task had been made more difficult because I had been raised without religion by parents who had broken their own pasts and moved to the West Coast – who had raised their children clean of any ideology in a cantilevered modern house overlooking the Pacific Ocean – at the end of history, or so they had wanted to believe. (LAG 143–144)

His parents undertook a modern rendition of the westward journey to escape and "break" – a more vigorous term than the expected "break with" – their own pasts and religion. They believed that they were at the end of history.

Francis Fukuyama notoriously posited the end of history in an essay published in *The National Interest* in 1989 and expanded into a book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (Fukuyama 2006) first published in 1992. Fukuyama's book is a celebration of the political victory of liberal democracy over "earlier forms of government [which] were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, [while] liberal democracy [is] arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions." (Fukuyama 2006: xi) The "earlier forms" he refers to are specifically fascism and Marxism. He suggests that the history to which the end had come was "not the occurrence of events, even large and grave events, but History: that is, history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process […There will] be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions [have] been settled." (Fukuyama 2006: xii) Armed with the "twin principles of liberty and equality" (Fukuyama 2006: xi) in a free market, all that is left for humanity is to implement them correctly. "The original article,' Fukuyama notes in the introduction to his book, "excited an extraordinary amount of commentary and controversy". (Fukuyama 2006: xi) Not least of this was a chapter of scathing critique in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994) in which Derrida notes how Fukuyama glosses over all the systemic inconsistencies and weaknesses in liberal democratic politic systems, and challenges the fundamental relevance and structural logic of Fukuyama's gesture.

The end of history, for the wary critics of postmodernity like Jameson, Baudrillard and Coupland himself, implies the end of revolutionary potential. In "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?" Jameson describes the metaphorical 60s as the last great moment of

innovation and protest: "what we call the sixties […] was amongst other things an extraordinarily rich moment […] in the invention of new kinds of performances […T]he politics of the sixties, all over the world […] was defined and constituted as an opposition to the American war in Vietnam, in other words, as a world-wide protest." (Jameson 1998d: 74–75) Baudrillard similarly sees this period as the end of political potential: "The fifties were the real high spot for the US […], and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power. In the seventies power was still there, but the spell was broken. That was orgy time (war, sex, Manson, Woodstock). Today the orgy is over. […] Power has become impotent." (Baudrillard 1988: 107) These passages recall the frozen, nostalgic image of the recent past discussed above.

Each of these writers is complicit in personalizing history to match his own subjective narrative. Their nostalgic focal points are primarily linked to their own youth – the 70s for Coupland and the 50s for Jameson and Baudrillard – rather than to anything unique or specific in culture. "Many young people today (of the type 'readers-consumers of Fukuyama' or of the type 'Fukuyama' himself)" complains Derrida, "probably no longer sufficiently realize it: the eschatological themes of the 'end of history,' of the 'end of Marxism,' of the 'end of philosophy,' of the 'ends of man,' of the 'last man' and so forth were, in the '50s, that is, forty years ago, our daily bread." (Derrida 1994: 14) Derrida reminds us, while also feeling a certain offended nostalgia about his 1950s, that there is nothing new in eschatonostalgic longing.[11]

[11] Slavoj Žižek writes about another innocence-shattering moment for a new generation, the 9/11 terror attacks. Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), presents this attack as the end of its boy-protagonist's innocence and his too-early entrance into adulthood. For a new

In Coupland's Vancouver, ends of all sorts are commingled. It is the geographic end of the world, manifest destiny's telos, and for this metanarrator's parents at least, it is the end of history: the West coast was the place where they ended up to stop moving and to stop changing. Jared's failed revolutionary experiment suggests that radical change may now be beyond the power of individual will. Baudrillard agrees:

> This country is without hope. Even its garbage is clean, its trade lubricated, its traffic placated. [… H]istory or revolutionary theory […] come here to die with the discreet charm of something from a previous existence. All that remains of a violent and historical demand is this graffiti on the beach, facing out to sea, no longer calling upon the revolutionary masses, but speaking to the sky and the open space and the transparent deities of the Pacific:
>
> PLEASE, REVOLUTION!
>
> (Baudrillard 1988: 121–122)

Young, idealistic and outspoken (and dead), Jared might have written that graffiti – a 1990s reprise of 1960s political idealism – exhorting his community to act. In his subsequent disavowal of Jared's "elaborate schemes to elevate human consciousness" (HN 118) Coupland has turned the rebellious rallying cry out to sea, rendering it

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generation of writers like Safran Foer and Chris Cleave, the 9/11 attacks are the temporal focus of nostalgia for lost innocence. It appears that this adolescent process will be recycled constantly in fiction, simply with updated content. Žižek suggests that the lesson of the 9/11 bombings was that "America's 'holiday from history' was a fake" (Žižek 2002: 389) just as the Vietnam War demonstrated to earlier generations who also sought a "holiday from history".

impotent. The narrator of "In the Desert" struggles to come to terms with life after the end of history, with life after God. For him, belief and its articulation remain important. It is this pressure to manage life in an age after agency, in which the imperatives of capitalism are the only recognisable rules, that often leads Coupland's characters to directionless lassitude.

In his essay, "Canada in a Coma", Jefferson Faye argues that Coupland's characters and narratives are deliberately empty and aimless, and that he "is deeply aware and vehemently critical of the damage done to Canada by imported 'American' culture. […] 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." (Faye 2001: 502) Faye charts a repetitive geographic loop between California and British Columbia in Coupland's first five novels up to *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and argues that, in his focus on US rather than Canadian culture, "Coupland is demonstrating the means by which cultural sovereignty is undermined and eventually eliminated through passive complicity." (Faye 2001: 510) This "passive complicity" in Coupland's characterisation, Faye argues, is a direct critique of this population's cultural-economic condition.

I would suggest that, apart from his complicit, passive-rebellious characters, Coupland adopts a more overt counter-imperialist strategy: Canadian nationalism. In the non-fiction of *City of Glass* and his *Souvenirs of Canada* and much of his fiction, he is careful to detail Vancouverite and Canadian specifics and set them against US-

American cultural artefacts. Naming Canadian locations, objects and activities protects them against homogenisation. This trend is notable as early as *Life After God*, in which Scout deliberately recalls the details of his drive up north: "Lions Gate Bridge […] Burrard Inlet […] Horseshoe Bay […] Nanaimo […] Trans-Canada highway […] Duncan […] Lake Cowichan and the pulp-mill town of Youbou." (LAG 281) This is not a generic drive, it is not a US-American drive; it is a specific British Columbian journey. Earlier in the novel, the narrator of "The Wrong Sun" imagines a nuclear blast with similar geographic specificity.

> The flash may occur over the tract suburbs of the Fraser River Delta, over Richmond and over White Rock; the flash may occur over the Vancouver Harbour, over the strait of Juan de Fuca, over the Pacific Ocean; the flash may occur over the American border, over Seattle, over Bremerton, over Tacoma, Anacortes, and Bellingham. But the Flash […] is always flashing to the South – always to the South. (LAG 86–87)

The flash here is a product of the South, and contrary to the Canadian wilderness of the North. It comes from the United States, and can be read – apart from literal apocalyptic destruction – as a more subtle obliteration: as the wave of cultural annihilation that threatens the Canadian West, and against which threat Coupland cites place names as a ritual talisman.

"Are you scared – about going south?" asks Wendy. "Richard, obligated to visit Los Angeles, says yes." (GC 170) McGill suggests that if Los Angeles signifies apocalyptic

simulation, Vancouver serves as a gateway to the northern sublime antidote. He notes that in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, "as soon as the apocalypse begins, the migration shifts northwards." (McGill 2000: 262) Both Richard's and Pam's parents die at the border, trying to cross back into Canada. "This may be merely a journey to another frontier utopia and therefore another deferral of the end", McGill suggests. "Alternatively, the shift northward may be a shift away from the apocalyptic paradigm. While Vancouver is in some aspects a prototypical Los Angeles, Coupland identifies the city as less superficial and artificial than its southern counterpart in more profound ways. […] A Canadian may be in [a good] position to recognize and expose that simulacrum." (McGill 2000: 263) In *City of Glass*, Coupland more overtly expresses his ambivalence about the looming presence of the US: "Mount Baker is important to the Vancouver psyche in that it stands there, huge, record-breaking and serene, shooting off just enough steam every few years to let us know that if it really wanted to, it could bury us. It's a metaphor for the United States: seductive but distant, powerful and at least temporarily benign." (*City of Glass* 91)

In Coupland's Vancouver, however, the United States is not the only source of troubling change: his attitude towards immigrants and British Columbia's indigenous population reveals Coupland's latent sympathy with his colonial heritage. Recalling Karen's and Heather's concern with the changes wreaked on Vancouver, Coupland explains in *City of Glass*,

> We have no idea what this place is going to be like next *year*, let alone in a few decades.

> A case in point are what locals call 'see-throughs,' the glass condominium towers, pale blue or pale green, that have come to dominate the city skyline since 1990. They were built as contingency crash pads for wealthier Hong Kong citizens who were bracing themselves for the worst in the 1999 changeover of rule from England to China. The transition went smoothly, and thus the towers remain just as empty as they appear.
> […] These glass towers strike many visitors as a key element of the city's character. […] To Vancouverites, these towers signify a few things: the power of global history to affect our lives, the average citizen's alienation from the civic political process – they're large totems that say 'F-you' to us. At the same time, these towers symbolize a New World breeziness and a gentle desire for social transparency – a rejection of class structures and hierarchy. (*City of Glass* 126)

In the last part of this description Coupland tries to remain buoyant, as if in this book he is some sort of official tour guide to his city and he should not sound too negative. Like Edward, he is trying to sell maps to the postmodern city, but like Edward, he too is caught between fearing and embracing the future. Despite its intended positivity, the overriding sense in this passage is of fear and anger. The glass high-rises – the condominium towers – are a foreign invasion figured as a phallic rape of the skyline with words like "dominate" and "F-you"; the "average citizen" is powerless to advise or object. It is a new wave of immigrant conquest, the land and its settlers are feminized by a thrusting, invasive masculine force, this time from the East, teasingly and uncannily from over the water, and this time the white middle class – the "average citizens" who

used to hold power over civic political process – are rendered the disempowered victims.

His reaction to the foreign influx, specifically of Asians, into Vancouver is at best ambivalent: a mixture of a will to express a liberal tolerance, and paranoia.

> Most Vancouverites, Asian or not, were concerned that the British handover of Hong Kong to China in 1999 was going to be a disaster. Consequently, the […] boom in Vancouver ground to a halt, but to be honest, everybody breathed a sigh of relief because there was too much happening too quickly and we all needed some digestion time. The fantastic restaurants, fortunately, remain in abundance.
>
> The next big drama is probably going to be Taiwan, but who knows when. (*City of Glass* 22)

The reference to "the fantastic restaurants" is probably intended to be an upbeat, liberal note. Perhaps Coupland, Vancouver's unofficial spokesman, is magnanimously ratifying the Asians' presence in his city. It ends up, however, an insulting indicator of Coupland's attitude that the best – possibly the only significant – cultural or economic contribution by the Asian population to Vancouver is its restaurants, rather than, for example, its medical, professional or intellectual contribution. Later, reiterating his concern with the impending "drama" in Taiwan, he describes his conglomerated fear of living in Vancouver: "Should [the native land rights] issue come to a head the same week that various Asian scenarios go critical and the Big One hits, Vancouver is going

to be one heck of an interesting place to be." (*City of Glass* 131) This last quotation points also to Coupland's fearful attitude towards the First Nations – British Columbia's indigenous inhabitants – themselves.

Robert Allen Warrior is a literary and religious scholar who revealingly connects North American indigenous politics with the myth of manifest destiny. He argues that the theological motivation of historic treks of liberation like the westward trajectory of white American pioneers, and of more recent liberation theology movements particularly in South and North America, is based on the biblical book of Exodus in which Yahweh delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and into the promised land. Warrior argues, however, that for subjugated people to identify with the Israelites in this narrative is misguided: "The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the Promised Land." (Warrior 2001: 190) Once the Israelites are safely guided to Canaan, the God of Israel then makes a stipulation of their covenant that the Israelites shun, convert or destroy the local inhabitants. This covenant is detailed in Exodus, Judges and Joshua, but most emphatically in Deuteronomy:

> When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations – the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you – and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty

> with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. (Deuteronomy 7: 1–3)

The extent to which this theology informed the brutality of American colonial expansion is suggested by the fact that "Puritan preachers were fond of referring to Native Americans as […] Canaanites – in other words, people who, if they would not be converted, were worthy of annihilation. By examining such instances in theological and political writings, in sermons, and elsewhere, we can understand how America's self-image as a 'chosen people' has provided a rhetoric to mystify domination." (Warrior 2001: 194) Warrior goes on to reject the solutions of "the alien gods who have wooed us (Christians, Jews, Marxists, capitalists)" (Warrior 2001: 194) and the "liberals and conservatives alike [who] have all too often […] decided to come to the rescue, always using *their* methods, *their* ideas, and *their* programs. The idea that Indians might know best how to address their own problems is seemingly lost on these well-meaning folks." (Warrior 2001: 190)

Illuminating the uncomfortable relationship between a majority colonial population and a marginalized minority indigenous population, Coupland writes in *City of Glass*:

> Growing up in Vancouver, you end up with a slightly schizoid relationship with First Nations cultures. In elementary school, you colour in totem poles and make Haida-style masks. […] You're told, 'This is your culture, this is part of your heritage.' But then you get older and realize that, well, it's actually somebody *else's* heritage, and you have no claim to it at all. [… T]hen what

> should be your relationship with it? Do you respectfully keep your distance? Do you try and get involved? (*City of Glass* 131)

Warrior's sort of sarcastic and politicized attack on the European missionary impulse, even if it is liberally intended as Coupland's seems to be, might validate Coupland's inclination to maintain his respectful distance from First Nations issues, but it is notable that Coupland's language remains bedded in expansionist terms: for him, engaging with First Nations culture is equivalent to having a "claim" over it. He feels he must choose between possessing or ignoring the First Nations, and for him the liberal option is to ignore them: "First Nations history in Vancouver goes back four or five thousand years, maybe longer," he mentions in one short article, and in the same breath, "eastern Canadians […] arrive in town only to undergo a psychic disaster […] *This place is too new!* If you're a Vancouverite, you find the city's lack of historical baggage liberating." (*City of Glass* 58) Speaking of the Vancouver film industry, Coupland complains that "What really irks is that there's so much *potential* for a really great indigenous film scene reminiscent of Ealing Studios or Pinewood Studios in England of the 1950s and 1960s." (*City of Glass* 6) By overlooking an important meaning of the word "indigenous" here, Coupland renders native Columbians invisible with his Eurocentric, nostalgic vision of indigeneity. Interestingly, McGill himself, in his critical essay, betrays a similar blind spot when he writes that "Historically, colonizers facing the deterioration of utopia into apocalypse were able to move on to new spaces, but settlement of the American Pacific coast marked humanity's arrival at the geographic end of the world". (McGill 2000: 256) McGill's use of "humanity's" instead of, for instance, "Europeans'" shows that, despite his concern about US cultural imperialism,

he shares with Coupland a lack of sensitivity for Canadian colonization and the country's post-colonial context.

Coupland renders the indigenous population of British Columbia invisible in his fiction too. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Jared visits Linus on a hilltop and they survey the post-apocalyptic landscape. Linus says

> 'I guess this is what the continent looked like to the pioneers back when they first came here, eh Jared? A land untouched by time or history. They must have felt like they were walking headlong into eternity, eager to chop it down and carve it and convert it from heaven into earth. […]'
> 'Yeah. The pioneers – they believed in something. They *knew* the land was holy. The New World was the last thing on Earth that could be given to humankind'. (GC 236)

Recalling the "apocalyptic inevitability" to which McGill refers, changing heaven to earth was apparently the task, not the inevitable and undesirable result, of colonial expansion. This apocalyptic reading of manifest destiny seems devised to suit Jared's rather opaque revolutionary plan. More startling, however, is Jared's suggestion that the New World was "untouched by time or history", and "given to humankind" by God. Jared's utterance is a remarkable assertion that humans were not already present in British Columbia and that the land was virgin territory to be taken as a gift from the Europeans' God. Seen in isolation, this statement might likely be seen as a parody of Jared's bombastic ideas, but in the context of Coupland's tendency in *City of Glass* to

ignore the existence of the First Nations and his own colonial context, we can read this passage as uncritical endorsement of this view.

Similarly in *Life After God*, the narrator of "Patty Hearst", driving northwards into the forested mountains to Whistler, tells: "I thought of the pioneers that came before me, discovering this world that even now is so new – building railways up into virgin canyons; bridging rivers that flowed from unknown sources". (LAG 207) Once again the imagery of expansion is imagined in the sexualized terms that invigorated the original European settlers: phallic industry driving up into virgin canyons; once again the land is pictured as pristine and untrammelled. Surely, though, if the First Nations have lived in the area for "four or five thousand years, maybe longer", the canyons were not virgin and the rivers' sources were well known. Coupland's imagination of the land as genderized territory open for conquest betrays his attachment to religiously justified expansionist myths.

Although Coupland's invocation of place is a strategy in a counter-cultural assertion of Canadian nationalism, nationalism of any sort – counter-hegemonic or not – is always circumscribed to the exclusion of other groups. In the course of these novels, Coupland demonstrates just how like Edward he is. His reaction to the future veers between expansive evangelization and a paranoid hermeticism which can only imagine apocalypse as a solution.

Chapter Three:

Killthemall: Douglas Coupland's apocalypses

> *It seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.*
>
> Fredric Jameson, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity" (1998c: 50)

3.1 The ideology of Canadian literary apocalypse

When Karen wakes from her coma in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Richard says, "The people in the room feel enchanted – *chosen*." (GC 121) Coupland's emphasis of that final word – *chosen* – is laden with religious and political significance. He alludes to the Israelites, the Old-Testament God's chosen people; he alludes to the North American white pioneers who reprise their journey into a new promised land. *Girlfriend in a Coma* takes this journey to its logical, apocalyptic conclusion, imagining the end as entropic and one witnessed by a chosen very few: Richard Doorland and his friends. This novel appears to carry with it the colonial politics of expansion and manifest destiny, rendering the original population of British Columbia invisible, imagining the land as feminized territory open to exploitation, and his white, middle-class protagonists as the chosen people who are to benefit from the formation of the new world. Robert McGill writes of the "apocalyptic inevitability" of "any new world" (McGill 2000: 256) and finds that

"Coupland insists with Frank Kermode that the apocalypse is not only imminent but *immanent* in new worlds". (McGill 2000: 256)

In an illuminating study, Marlene Goldman investigates apocalypse in Canadian fiction, focussing on individual works by Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Thomas King and Joy Kogawa. These are examples, she says, of a uniquely Canadian approach to the North American apocalyptic paradigm which has "pervaded Canadian literature from its beginnings". (Goldman 2005: 3) She summarizes the narrative of apocalypse as envisioning "the end of the world and the creation of a heavenly world reserved for God's chosen people", (Goldman 2005: 4) but asserts that "the myth of a decadent earthly world abruptly and violently transformed into a perfect heavenly world never accurately defined the Canadian experience – an experience perhaps best described by Jacques Cartier, who likened the country to 'the land God gave to Cain.'" (Goldman 2005: 3) Canada, a harsh and vast and often untameable land, is not the utopia the pioneers from the old world sought, and has grown a distinctive literature in response to its harshness. The works Goldman has chosen to study, "rather than tell the story from the familiar perspective of the saved, […] adopt a characteristically Canadian approach and convey the experience of the disenfranchised, those denied entry into the new paradise and condemned to die." (Goldman 2005: 4)

To support her claim for this "characteristically Canadian approach", Goldman cites Atwood's observation of "Canadian writers' fascination with marginalized groups […and the] 'superabundance of victims in Canadian literature'" and Linda Hutcheon's assertion that "postmodern writers typically adopt an 'ex-centric' position: 'the margin

or the border is the postmodern space *par excellence* […] perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation [… giving voice to] the story-telling of the non-combatants or even the losers'". (Goldman 2005:4) Summarizing her thesis, Goldman writes:

> The aim of this study is to demonstrate how contemporary Canadian authors translate the features of apocalypse into their fiction and, in accordance with the country's ongoing concern for the ex-centric and the victim, highlight the traumatic experience of those barred from paradise. In contrast to the traditional biblical apocalypse, contemporary Canadian fiction refuses to celebrate the destruction of evil and the creation of a new, heavenly world. Instead, these works highlight the devastation wrought by apocalyptic thinking on those accorded the role of the non-elect. (Goldman 2005: 5)[12]

As discussed, Coupland is not interested in politically marginalized members of Canadian society: the First Nations, for instance, are effectively invisible to him. At the same time, however, his embryo-children in *Life after God*, we remember, grow up in paradise, and it is the economic and social pressures of the adult world which serve to bar them from that utopia. The fact that Coupland casts his middle-class, affluent characters in the role of disenfranchised victims serves to complicate Goldman's

[12] Goldman acknowledges that "of course, not every Canadian writer has challenged the apocalyptic paradigm" and points to some "relatively straightforward apocalyptic narratives" from the mid-twentieth century, in which "a fortuitous disaster facilitates the emergence of a new, ideal order". She suggests, though, that "these narratives, with their non-ironic and optimistic view of apocalypse, represent a short-lived phase in Canadian literature." (Goldman 2005: 7)

scheme. While his characters rail against their increasing economic disempowerment, their marginalization is often a self-imposed choice.

In the introduction to her book, Goldman only briefly discusses *Girlfriend in a Coma*: "In its portrayal of humanity's corruption and the world's anticlimactic, comatose end – not with a bang but a whimper – the novel recalls US fiction's preoccupation with the tension between apocalypse and entropy", (Goldman 2005: 10) which is the antithetical state to the divinely inspired and ordered apocalypse of manifest destiny. In Goldman's view, Coupland does not take that "characteristically Canadian approach" of siding with history's political victims: the disenfranchised, those denied entry to the promised land – Robert Allen Warrior's Canaanites – and this makes him philosophically a US-American writer. Given Coupland's concerns with marginal characters and his ambivalent relationship with Canadian nationalism, however, I'd suggest that Goldman's thesis is highly applicable to his work and can be expanded to incorporate it. Coupland remains intensely engaged with life on the geographic and economic margins; many of his characters – from *Generation X*'s dropouts to the residents in "My Hotel Year" and the traumatized battlefield-clearer in "Gettysburg" all the way through to Linus and Jason and Heather – fill the role of Hutcheon's "losers"; psychological and social eccentricity remains a crucial concern, presented over the span of the novels as decreasingly desirable, more of a burden and a liability than a liberation.

In an illuminating "grammar of apocalypse", Goldman draws a distinction between prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology, a distinction on which "many texts base their protest against the traditional apocalyptic narrative – which calls for the

eradication of this world in favour of the heavenly New Jerusalem". (Goldman 2005: 15) "Simply put", she explains,

> prophetic eschatology envisioned God accomplishing divine plans within the *here and now* […] On the other hand, apocalyptic eschatology maintains […] the belief that God will bring an end to the profane world and create an entirely new one. […] Apocalypticism also eschews prophetic eschatology's portrayal of God working through human agents in favour of God's reliance on supernatural forces to end history as we know it. (Goldman 2005: 15)

In these terms, apocalyptic eschatology is the conservative form of apocalypticism, despairing of humanity's capacity for progressive change and wishing for a total end to the culture which has led to such despair. Prophetic eschatology, still with faith in humans' ability to adapt and advance despite all challenges, is seen as ideologically progressive.

In her essay "Apocalypse Coma", Veronica Hollinger places *Girlfriend in a Coma* on the conservative side of this division. "*Girlfriend in a Coma* strongly supports [Fredric] Jameson's observations about the postmodern loss of a sense of a viable future," writes Hollinger, (Hollinger 2002: 169) criticizing Coupland's and Jameson's anxieties about the future as retrospective and conservative. She contrasts *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the "neoconservative salvation history complete with ritual sacrifice", (Hollinger 2002: 168) with *Neuromancer*, the 1984 ur-cyberpunk novel by Canadian William Gibson, which she regards as "a virtual manifesto for cool antiapocalypticism, a hip refutation of

apocalyptic anxieties." (Hollinger 2002: 160) While *Neuromancer* embraces a future of cyborgianism, technological revolution and simulation in all its gritty and dystopian uncertainty, *Girlfriend in a Coma* seems to long for a putative Golden Age when there were depths and meaning and authentic originals, and is willing to imagine the destruction of the entire human population in its desire to revisit that mythical, semiotic[13] past. Indeed, impossible utopia is often the driving telos of apocalyptic eschatology.

Hollinger also notes how many philosophers and cultural theorists who later came to be seen as the cartographers of postmodernity took an antiapocalyptic position:

> Many of these reports from the edge were careful […] to discourage any cultural investment in scenarios of radical catastrophe and transformation; for the most part, they argued strongly against the perceived seductions of apocalyptic logic and rhetoric […] Lyotard's […] definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives' [suggests …] an intellectual refusal of the logic of apocalypse, which is nothing if not the logic of a totalizing master narrative. (Hollinger 2002: 161)

It is interesting that Hollinger refers to these dispatches as "reports from the edge". As Goldman explains, "whereas the term eschatology is often believed to mean 'the last things,' the original meaning of *eschaton* is actually 'the furthermost boundary,' 'the ultimate edge'." (Goldman 2005: 14) As Jacques Derrida elucidates, "The

[13] Used in the sense of Julia Kristeva's womb-like *chora* state discussed in detail in chapter one.

eschatological tells the eskhaton, the end, or rather the extreme, the limit, the term, the last, what comes *in extremis* to close a history, a geneaology, or very simply a countable series." (Derrida 1982c: 68) As we have seen, this is Coupland's stomping ground. Just like the high philosophers before him, he is concerned with describing conditions at the edge, now, fifteen years later; with imagining "what comes next" in that no-longer-so-countable series from a less certain, more ambivalent vantage point. Hollinger writes that *Girlfriend in a Coma*

> enacts a precise repudiation of the Derridean universe of absolute futility and freedom and a particularly contemporary (re)turn to the anxious comforts of apocalyptic logic. […] If *Neuromancer* was *the* speculative fiction for the mid-80s, *Girlfriend in a Coma* demonstrates the distance between that moment of relative cultural confidence and its own moment in the late 1990s. (Hollinger 2002: 165)

Hollinger aptly notes how popular literature reflects an increased moral and social conservatism towards the end of the twentieth century, but her evocation of Derrida as the flag-bearer for antiapocalypticism is perhaps oversimplified. Derrida certainly is concerned about the essentially apocalyptic tone of all pronouncements of the end, which have

> taken the form of a going-one-better in eschatological eloquence, each newcomer, more lucid than the other, more vigilant and more prodigal too than the other, coming to add more to it: I tell you this in truth; this is not only the

> end of this here but also and first of that there, the end of history, the end of the class struggle, the end of philosophy, the death of God, the end of religions, the end of Christianity and morals (that [*ça*], that was the most serious naïveté), the end of the subject, the end of man, the end of the West, the end of Oedipus, the end of the earth, *Apocalypse Now* […] the end of literature, the end of painting, art as a thing of the past, the end of psychoanalysis, the end of the university, the end of phallocentrism and phallogocentrism, and I don't know what else? And whoever would come to refine, to tell the extreme of the extreme […] that person would, whether wanting to or not, participate in the concert. (Derrida 1982c: 80–81)[14]

Here Derrida warns that anyone pronouncing the end of eschatology or of totalizing conceptions or of binary categories is involved himself in making categorical, totalizing statements. Rather than position him on one polar side of a debate, however, we can better understand Derrida as anti-totalizing-statements rather than antiapocalyptic. He forces us to deepen the debate and complicate the very binary categories of conservatism and progressivism themselves by saying things like "Nothing is less conservative than the apocalyptic genre". (Derrida 1982c: 89) Hollinger's criticism of Coupland's reticence and his lack of cool confidence in the future is nonetheless entirely valid – he is reticent and uncool. Perhaps, though, his is merely a fitting tone for the times, an age on the edge, after certainty and before what comes next.

[14] This passage recalls Derrida's criticism of Fukuyama in *Specters of Marx* mentioned in the previous chapter.

Lee Quinby, in *Anti-apocalypse,* also takes a political stance on apocalypse. She argues that religion and politics converge more than they are separable: "Politics has always been a feature of Christian millenarianism, and fundamentalist belief surely feeds nontheological perceptions." (Quinby 1994: xii), and, basing her approach on Michel Foucault's method of genealogical criticism, she describes apocalypticism as "a regime of truth that operates within a field of power relations and prescribes a particular moral behaviour." (Quinby 1994: xv) The three "modes of comprehending and narrating truth" (Quinby 1994: xv) she delineates are particularly interesting in terms of Coupland's work, which straddles all of these modes in a complex apocalyptic amalgam.

The first of these three modes is "divine apocalypse […] the discourse of religious fundamentalists who see divine design and judgment as that which will bring on the end of the world and provide a heavenly home for an elect group." (Quinby 1994: xv) This could describe Jared's apocalyptic vision, and in its elitist elements, concurs with Goldman's description of non-Canadian apocalypse. The second mode is

> technological apocalypse, which has two subcategories: technological devastation and technological salvation. The first holds technology responsible for human and world devastation, through such threats as nuclear crisis, environmental degradation, and mechanized dehumanization. The second position presents technology as the means whereby humanity and the earth will be perfected as a heaven on earth. (Quinby 1994: xvi)

With his concerns, particularly in the early novels, about nuclear war and environmental degradation, and in all his novels about the dehumanization caused by soulless working conditions and urban development, Coupland would clearly be described as a "technological devastation" apocalypt. Just like Hollinger, Quinby sees this approach as retrospective and conservative. The third mode, writes Quinby,

> is ironic apocalypse, which is expressed through absurdist or nihilistic descriptions of existence. […] Time moves toward entropic inertia. A version of this view is sometimes identified as postapocalypse by its proponents. This is the dystopian view that history has exhausted itself. The irony is that we live on beyond morality or meaning. (Quinby 1994: xvi)

This ironic mode is the one Coupland manages to muster at his most upbeat, the mode which defined *Generation X*. The stories Andy, Claire and Dag tell each other are in many ways absurdist and nihilist. While characters like Pam and Hamilton in *Girlfriend in a Coma* are ironists, they are at odds with the main characters' narrative ethos. *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Life after God* take the end of the world very seriously; their characters feel that there is something at stake in their choice of actions at the end of the world. While *Hey Nostradamus!* is very different from *Generation X*, Coupland comes back to an ironic perspective in it; his characters may be resigned to having little effect in the world, but this submission rather than the frustrated or depressive battling of the middle novels seems the most comfortable tone for Coupland. It is a tone that is related to tolerance and open-mindedness rather than rules and strict definition. Quinby, on the other hand, criticizes this resigned attitude, suggesting that ironic apocalypticism comes

with a "sense of futility [which] is every bit as dangerous to individual liberty as is the righteousness that accompanies divine and technological apocalypse [… It] inclines people toward a world-weary passivity [… and] renders people less inclined to political activity, despite their explicit acknowledgement of the need for social change." (Quinby 1994: xx–xxi)[15]

***

Another interesting point from Goldman's introduction is her brief discussion of the ideological poetics of the two modes of eschatology she describes: "In contrast to prophetic eschatology," she writes, "which is delivered in plain language to the community as a whole, apocalypse is usually esoteric in nature and constitutes a secret reserved for a select few, chosen by God." (Goldman 2005: 15–16) Between *Girlfriend*

[15] Quinby rounds off her discussion of the modes of recent apocalypticism by criticising the "extreme version of ironic apocalypse [which] has appeared, enjoying special vogue among academics in the United States, even though its chief spokesman, Jean Baudrillard, is French. […] Despite his critique of contemporary apocalypse as anachronistic, Baudrillard is a quintessentially apocalyptic thinker […] His already-too-late theme reinforces the antiactivist, apathetic stance of all ironic apocalypticians." (Quinby 1994: xxii) Her critique may well have grounds, but analysing the assumptions of this last statement raises some salutary questions. Why should Baudrillard's nationality affect the reception or validity of his ideas in the United States? Isn't Quinby able to generalise about "all ironic apocalypticians" only because she has just defined the term, and what value then does the statement hold? Aren't totalizing statements like this contrary to the assumptions of antiapocalyptic thought? Similarly, aren't her strict classifications of the groups of tones rather simplistic? I discuss below how Derrida (for whom, despite his own generally antiapocalyptic stance, Quinby spares a word of criticism: his "own tone seems unduly resigned", (Quinby 2004: 54) she says, effectively filing him on the edge of her "ironic apocalyptician" category, perhaps because he is French) suggests that philosophers and historians may get hoist by their own theoretical petard. One imagines that Goldman would not make the same generalisations about French philosophers, attuned as she is to the plight of dominant culture's non-elect victims. Goldman is Canadian; Quinby is US-American.

in a Coma and *Hey Nostradamus!*, Coupland's eschatological attitude trends from an elitist, apocalyptic tone to a more democratic one. Contrast the esoteric abstraction of Jared's exhortations to consider "*What* is *destiny? Is there a difference between personal destiny and collective destiny?*", (GC 270) "to reject and destroy the remains of history", (GC 271) and to think "of your new epoch as post-historic" (GC 272) with Cheryl's tone when she says that she'll "be trying to watch [Jason] from beyond, whatever beyond may be." (HN 42) Both of these characters speak from a place beyond death, and Cheryl's agnostic but quiet faith in some sort of beyond, and the simple, unaggressive words she chooses to express her doubt, come across as democratic and inclusive. In Goldman's terms, her sense of the end is prophetic.

The tone of *Girlfriend in a Coma* is apocalyptic through most of the novel. It despairs of humanity's capacity for progressive change and, complicatedly, needs both a disastrous end like the Old Testament flood and Karen's bodily sacrifice as an analogue of the New Testament Christ's to present humanity with a new start. Despite his quasi-charismatic-Christian demands that his reborn friends "testify", (GC 270, 279) Jared's vision is more neopagan than monotheistic. His repeated his utterances about "Destiny", (GC 264, 270) the "Great Beyond" (GC 261) and "the universe" (GC 232) are all vague euphemisms for God to which a secure monotheist would likely not resort. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, there is no God to "bring an end to the profane world and create an entirely new one": humans are not smitten by flood, fire, earthquake or lightning; they simply fall asleep. The cause of humans' demise is their own stasis; it is left to the plants and animals to take back the earth. The revolution Jared proposes is a secular, environmental one only dressed for effect in quasi-religious terms. To him, secular

politics needs to be conducted with evangelical fervour to be constructive. Morality is not understood as something defined by external or divine laws: "Acts of kindness, evidence of contemplation, devotion, sacrifice. All these things that indicate a world inside us." (GC 256–7) These fundamental relational laws are *inside* us. Jared's morality is the personal, relative morality of a neopagan or an atheist. Even Jared's exclusive acquaintance with life after death is Godless: "Heaven's like the world at its finest," he tells Megan. "It's all natural – no buildings. It's built of stars and roots and mud and flesh and snakes and birds. It's built of clouds and stones and rivers and lava. But it's *not* a building. It's greater than the material world." (GC 230)

This vision of heaven can be read simply as one of a pre-industrial earth. Fantasies of environmental disaster are manifestations of reactionary apocalyptic wish-fulfilment. They, like other forms of apocalyptic thinking, betray a despair of humanity's ability to change for the better, and see the earth's revenge on humanity and its technology as the only plausible and fair future. "It seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism;" Jameson writes. "Perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations," he incisively concludes. (Jameson 1998c: 50) Coupland's career-long vacillation and *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s ambivalence show just how difficult he finds it to imagine a positive future. Ultimately, after trying various apocalyptic options, none of which force any change in human behaviour, he settles on what Goldman might call a prophetic tone: "We'll be adults who smash the tired, exhausted system," insists Richard, freshly inspired by Karen's second self-sacrifice. "We'll crawl and chew and dig our way into a radical new world." (GC 281) As in Goldman's definition of

prophetic apocalypticism, it will be humans who will fight to effect this change; no longer will they wait passively for God or Nature to wipe the slate clean. Elsewhere Jared asks, "In an efficient, adult and professional manner will you dismantle and smash everything that stops questioning?" (GC 272) Coupland stresses that the reformative task is an adult one. In his earlier books, adulthood and growing up are often figured as the source of misery and the end of magic and contentment; this shift at the end of *Girlfriend in a Coma* points forward to the new perspective on the complexities of adulthood evidenced in *Hey Nostradamus!*

When it comes to broad questions of identity, psyche, spirit, destiny and death, Coupland's tone is ever-shifting. It is difficult to pin him down as conservative, reactionary, progressive, religious or secular: this is what fascinates and so often frustrates his readers and critics. The solutions he proposes in one novel are repudiated in the next. Over the span between *Generation X* and *Hey Nostradamus!*, however, the trajectory of his most sympathetic voices seems to chart a circle from humanist agnostic searching, via depressed apocalyptic certainty, and back again to a form of secular humanism.

3.2 Recycling nuclear waste

Generation X and *Life after God* are saturated with nuclear anxiety and images of nuclear holocaust. Coupland's fantasies of the end, like the late-twentieth century's prevalent apocalyptic tone, serve as tools of social and psychological catharsis.

In a chapter entitled "New Zealand Gets Nuked, Too", Dag telephones Andy from Scotty's Junction, Nevada, "where atom bomb scientists, mad with grief over their spawn, would come and get sloshed in the Ford saloon cars in which they'd then crash and burn in the ravines; afterward, the little desert animals came and ate them. So tasty. So *bib*lical. I *love* desert justice." (GX 76)[16] When Andy asks him what he's doing there, Dag replies, "You wouldn't understand". "Then make a *story* out of it," says Andy. (GX 77) Dag tells Andy a story about a young man called Otis who (like Dag) lives in Palm Springs. Otis sees Palm Springs as "his own personal New Zealand" (GX 78) because the specific wind currents would ensure that fallout from a nuclear strike on Los Angeles would bypass Palm Springs and make it as safe in a nuclear war between the northern superpowers as far-distant New Zealand.

One day, Otis receives a postcard from a friend; the photo on the front is

[16] Interesting, perhaps, is that in the editions I have used this key nuclear episode starts on page 76 of *Generation X* while page 76 of *Life after God* describes "another nuclear episode" in the narrator's childhood. We recall that 1976 is the time-place of the "museum of fifteen years ago" discussed in chapter two. As will be discussed, nuclear proliferation for Baudrillard, like the mid-70s for Coupland, symbolizes a lamentable death of modern certainty.

> a 1960s picture of a daytime desert nuclear test shot, taken from a plane. […]
> ‘*Something* disturbed him about the photo, but he couldn’t quite figure out *what*.
> ‘Then Otis figured it out: the scale was wrong – the mushroom cloud was *too small*. Otis had always thought nuclear mushroom clouds occupied the *whole* sky, but this explosion, why, it was a teeny little road flare […]
> ‘Otis panicked.
> ‘“Maybe,” he thought to himself, “I’ve spent my whole life worrying about tiny little fire crackers made monstrous in our minds and on TV. Can I have been *wrong* all this time? Maybe I can free myself of Bomb anxiety – ”
> ‘[…] after a thorough inspection [he realized] that yes, *atomic bomb mushroom clouds really are much smaller than we make them out to be in our minds*. And he derived comfort from this realization – a silencing of the small whispering nuclear voices that had been speaking continually in his subconscious since kindergarten. There was nothing to worry about after all.’ (GX 78–79)

It is clear that in this story Dag is describing his reasons for being in Scotty’s Junction, fictionalizing them in the character of Otis. Dag is embarrassed to admit openly to “Bomb anxiety”, but as Derrida suggests, shame about apocalyptic fear is actually quite understandable. He notes that “*Apokekalummenoi logoi* are indecent remarks.” (Derrida 1982c: 64) The language of apocalypse, the unveiling it refers to, the baring it necessitates, are indeed indecent, not to be discussed in polite (or successfully self-repressed) company. Like Dag, in his early novels Coupland disguises his own nuclear anxieties.

One of Coupland's most overtly biographical characters is the narrator of "The Wrong Sun", who, just like Coupland, was born in 1962 on a Canadian Air Force base at Baden-Söllingen. (LAG 76) In October that year, the Bay of Pigs standoff takes place, a political crisis which brings the US and the USSR closer than ever to nuclear war. The palpable fear on the base leaves a lasting impression on the infant. In Dag's story, the nuclear voices have been speaking to Otis since kindergarten. This fact conjures images of children huddling under desks in nuclear attack drills and presages the terrified children in *Hey Nostradamus!* hiding under their tables when the school massacre begins.

What panics Otis in this story is not the fear of total devastation but the possibility that he may have wasted his whole childhood and adolescence worrying about nothing. The mushroom cloud on the postcard is too small to justify a lifetime of anxiety. Also, he panics because he may now have lost his only link with a transcendent possibility. In "The Wrong Sun" we are told that "In modern middle-class culture the absence of death in most people's early years creates a psychic vacuum of sorts. For many, thoughts of a nuclear confrontation are one's first true brush with nonexistence." (LAG 85) Nuclear awe replaces religious awe in modern middle-class culture. If the basis of this awe turns out to be mere "fire crackers", it repeats the profound shock of the death of God. Instead of having a credible link to nonexistence, we are left with the terrifying thought that we are marooned forever in a world of material existence. A cartoon later in *Generation X* reiterates this point. A man stands at an office window shielding his eyes against a radiating point of light in the sky outside. "Oh no!" he says, "It's finally happened! The

blinding flash of light!" Then a moment later he says, "Phew! It was only lightning." (GX 152) Coupland makes light of the office worker's paranoia; his terror is baseless.

It is notable that the mushroom cloud – already too small – is depicted on a postcard, a little image that can fit in the palm of one's hand. This, and the cartoon, is massive fear minimized and tamed, domesticated. In "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)" Derrida, while calling on us to recognize the historical continuity inherent in the nuclear crisis, also warns against this domestication of fear:

> There is perhaps no invention, no radically new predicate in the situation known as 'the nuclear age.' Of all the dimensions of such an 'age' we may always say one thing; it is neither the first time nor the last. The historian's critical vigilance can always help us verify that repetitiveness; and that historian's patience, that lucidity of memory must always shed their light on 'nuclear criticism,' must oblige it to decelerate, dissuade it from rushing to a conclusion […] But this dissuasion and deceleration I am urging carry their own risks: the critical zeal which leads us to recognize precedents, continuities, and repetitions at every turn can make us look like suicidal sleepwalkers, blind and deaf *alongside the unheard-of* […] This critical zeal, would seek […] in history […] the wherewithal to neutralize invention, to translate the unknown into a known, to metaphorize, allegorize, domesticate the terror, to circumvent […] the inescapable catastrophe […] One may still die after having spent one's life

> recognizing, as a lucid historian, to what extent all that was not new. (Derrida 1984: 21)

Like the postcard, which makes the age's most terrifying symbol a palm-sized relic, historians try to put all our current anxieties into perspective by showing that, indeed, we have been through it all before and history and humankind have come out on the other side. In a less scientific way, Coupland's fiction metaphorizes and allegorizes the terror that plagues both him and his audience. By writing about the nuclear horror, Coupland separates the idea from its unspeakable referent, renders it psychically manageable, effectively recycling the unusable terror into novels, into therapeutic sound bites. His writing is cathartic, both of his own fears and of those of his readers.

While, on one hand, Derrida is keen to suppress hysterical anxiety about nuclear war, on the other, he suggests that perhaps there is something unique about the prospect of nuclear war:

> Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness, what it prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive – that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism. (Derrida 1984: 26)

Derrida is not here suggesting the total annihilation of humankind or the earth, but of the current legal-linguistic technology which supports the production of literature. Unlike the form "literature", arts and science could re-establish themselves after a nuclear holocaust on the basis of "real referents external to the archive itself". (Derrida 1984: 26) Plastic and graphic arts are tangible and science refers to physical phenomena. He continues,

> the burden of every death can be assumed symbolically by a culture and a social memory (that is even their essential function and their justification, their *raison d'être*). Culture and memory limit the 'reality' of individual death to this extent, they soften or deaden it in the realm of the 'symbolic'. The only referent that is absolutely real is thus of the scope or dimension of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity. (Derrida 1984: 28)

In several episodes, Coupland tests this boundary between memorializing and symbolically processing the dead and the lost past, and imagining the untellable end of the entire archive through this only absolutely real referent of total nuclear holocaust. Literary referents, on the other hand, are only simulations in the archive, imagined stories, scenarios, characters and objects which have no real-world antecedent and therefore could not be recompiled if the archive were to be destroyed utterly in some great – as yet only imagined – holocaust. The holocaust remains "fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk about it and write about it […] nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred

itself; it is a non-event." (Derrida 1984: 22) If this fabulous concatenation were actually to occur, the cathartic power of literature to render the unspeakable iterable would be lost.

Nuclear apocalypse needs to be written about in a special, evasive style to avoid accidentally triggering the name YHWH and destroying the archive. Both Derrida and Coupland have mastered this style. In "No Apocalypse, Not Now", Derrida announces that the technology he has chosen to deliver his speech, his payload, his essay, is

> the genre or rhetorical form of tiny atomic nuclei (in the process of fission or division in an uninterruptable chain) which I shall arrange or rather which I shall project toward you, like tiny inoffensive missiles: in a discontinuous, more or less haphazard fashion. This will be my little strategic and capitalistic calculation, in order to say, potentially, without being too tedious and as quickly as possible, as many things as possible. (Derrida 1984: 21)

Generation X, and particularly *Life after God*, consist too of short, apparently simple text-objects that seem on the surface to be tiny atomic nuclei; haphazard, tiny, inoffensive missiles projected towards the reader. But one can argue that they are actually strategically designed, oblique missives calculated to say as much as possible about the unspeakable. The postmodern formal modes Coupland employs, therefore, seem ideally suited to expressing much about the unspeakable condition of his contemporary subjects.

In the 1980s, when Derrida wrote his nuclear essays, the holocaust and the consequent end of literature seemed a titillating plausibility. “No Apocalypse, Not Now” originates in a conference on nuclear criticism held in 1982 and was published in 1984. Ronald Reagan’s election to the US presidency in 1980, the end of the policy of detente, and the conception of the US’s Strategic Defense Initiative orbital nuclear defence programme in 1983 ushered in another particularly tense period between the superpowers, one that simmered beyond Reagan’s presidency and into George H.W. Bush’s, which lasted until 1992. It is in this Cold-War atmosphere that Derrida was most concerned with nuclear confrontation and in which Coupland became an adult, formed his first themes and imagined his first novels.

In the 90s, however, the chance to witness a real end slipped from our grasp. Already in “The Wrong Sun”, so imbued with nuclear fear and graphic apocalyptic imagery, the narrator admits that the nuclear holocaust is not likely to happen:

> When you are young, you always expect that the world is going to end. And then you get older […] and you are forced to re-evaluate your stance on the apocalypse as well as your own relationship to time and death. You realize that the world will indeed continue, with or without you, and the pictures you see in your head. So you try to understand the pictures instead. (LAG 85)

This narrator describes it as a natural function of getting older, but the political changes that coincide with his growing older will also have played a significant part in easing his apocalyptic fears. His post-Cold-War sensibility is illuminated in a broader context by

Baudrillard's posteschatological writing. Writing in 1992, Baudrillard sighs, "Alas, the balance of terror suspended the ultimate event, then postponed it for ever(?) and, now deterrence has succeeded, we have to get used to the idea that *there is no end any longer, there will no longer be any end*, that history itself has become interminable." (Baudrillard 1994a: 115)

This conflict in Derrida's and Baudrillard's work between the recycled historicality of all war and the possibility that nuclear holocaust might just be something new elucidates the tension behind Otis's panic in Dag's story. Otis wants to believe that nuclear fear is greater and more worthy of awe than anything history can provide. The idea that nuclear bombs are just the same as any other bomb – or indeed purely fictitious – and that history will go on and on with depressing regularity, that he will remain safe in "his own personal New Zealand" forever, is the real basis of his dread. In that case, Coupland writes him a happy ending because, we remember, "New Zealand Gets Nuked, Too".

This anxiety about the imperturbability of history leads to fantasies of the end, and may well be another motivation for Coupland to write his apocalypses with such graphic verve. Contrary to Jameson's critical remark that apocalyptic thought shows a weakness of the imagination, apocalyptic fantasies might be a product of a vigorous imagination. Here Jameson alludes to a lack of political and practical imagination, and he probably discounts the possibility of any practical power in fictional imagination. For Coupland, however, imagination provides him the agency and means to end the inexorable advance of capitalism and cultural imperialism and to avoid the inevitable "modern

sex/death formula; mysterious lumps; the mental illness of friends; the actual death of loved ones – all of life's painful gifts", (LAG 85) which he cites as our only remaining and less intense brushes with nonexistence once nuclear war is ruled out. In this story growing up and the domestication – of fear, of youthful fantasies and of daily life – it entails is a disillusioning process.

The narrator of "Gettysburg" has a disillusioned wife who is nostalgic for their youth, "when life was a strand of magic moments strung together […] She doesn't know how to reclaim that sense of magic anymore." (LAG 108) Meanwhile he identifies himself with the postapocalyptic, traumatized war veteran whose story he tells. This subtle equation between ageing, losing a sense of magic – which is also a sublimated sense of awe and terror – and the end of the war, renders fear of nuclear annihilation a source of transcendent magic. As Baudrillard concurs, "Only [the] *event strike* constitutes a true historical phenomenon – this refusal to signify anything whatever, or this capacity to signify anything at all." (Baudrillard 1994: 21–22) The fear of this nuclear strike – the transcendent "true brush with nonexistence" – is something Coupland's characters lose when they grow older. They narrate apocalyptic fantasies, then, to compensate for "the absence of death" in their cultural milieu.

Derrida sees the will to cast fantasies about nuclear endings as a strong libidinal desire: "Some might call [non-localizable nuclear war] a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. […] Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? [D]reaming of it, desiring it?" (Derrida 1984: 23) Derrida tells in a

syncopated, breathless, orgasmic style of the seductions of the apocalyptic tone: "The apocalyptic tone naturally wants to attract, to get to come or arrive at itself, to seduce in order to lead to itself […] The end is soon, it is imminent, signifies the tone. I see it, I know it, I tell you it, now you know it, come." (Derrida 1982c: 84) Sex and death are famously related; as Coupland ironically and banally reduces it, "the modern sex/death formula" is one of "life's painful gifts". Reminding us that the root meaning of apocalypse is revelation and uncovering, Derrida also relates the apocalyptic urge to the body and to those shameful secrets and indecent remarks:

> *Apokaluptō*, I disclose, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal the thing that can be part of the body, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the genitals or whatever might be hidden, a secret, the thing to be dissembled, a thing that does not show itself or say itself, that perhaps signifies itself, that cannot or must not first be handed over to its self-evidence. *Apokekalummenoi logoi* are indecent remarks. So it is a matter of the secret and the *pudenda*. (Derrida 1982c: 64)

Apocalypse, now, is the surrogate YHWH, whose name may not be spoken except to bring the firmament – or, as fundamental for a novelist, the literary archive – down.

Ultimately, apocalyptic fantasies can also become vehicles for destructive urges and totalitarian tendencies. In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard writes

> Since the messianic convulsion of the earliest Christians, reaching back beyond the heresies and revolts, there has always been this desire to anticipate the end,

> possibly by death, by a kind of seductive suicide […] And what, indeed, is terrorism, if not this effort to conjure up, in its own way, the end of history? […] And, terrorism apart, is there not also a hint of this paraousic exigency in the global fantasy of catastrophe that hovers over today's world? A demand for a violent resolution of reality, when this latter eludes our grasp in an endless hyper-reality? For hyper-reality rules out the very occurrence of the Last Judgement or the Apocalypse or the Revolution. (Baudrillard 1994a: 8)

For Baudrillard, rather than ending, history has gone into reverse. We conjure new old-fashioned wars like the Gulf War, to prove to ourselves that real war still exists, (Lane 2000: 130) but in vain. The war is a televisual simulation. Baudrillard is cynical about our motivations. The beginning of the universe – the Big Bang – and the end, which he terms the Big Crumb, "are the only two interesting moments and, since we have been denied the first, we might as well put all our energies into accelerating the end, into hastening things to their definitive doom, which we could at least consume as a spectacle." (Baudrillard 1994a: 115) Our reversal of history manifests a desire to fall back into the past, an urge we recall that Julia Kristeva warns against. This is perhaps at root of the conservative, retrospective nature of apocalypticism: on an intrapsychic level, we seek to go back, and this urge etiolates into the world of personal relations and politics and ideology, where, Kristeva suggests in reference to the anti-Semitic writing of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, fascist totalitarianism is the logical conclusion to escapist fantasies: "Do not all attempts, in our own cultural sphere at least, at escaping from the Judaeo-Christian compound by means of a unilateral call to return to what it has

repressed […], converge on the same Célinian anti-Semitic fantasy?" (Kristeva 1982: 180)

This point is illustrated by the ideological assumptions on which *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s revolution is based. Jared uses a deliberate metaphor of the manifest destiny of religiously inspired colonial expansion: "Go clear the land for a new culture – bring your axes, scythes and guns." (GC 271) While he might subversively be trying to reappropriate previously oppressive metaphors, Jared's need to express his revolution in these invasive and violent terms, rather than imagining new, more inclusive ones, points to a central flaw in his vision. Why, we are left asking, should the rest of the world accept these ordinary, addicted and troubled characters' version of the truth? The idea that a small group of middle-class Canadians with no particular political motivation, led by a teenage ex-football-playing ghost, should hold the spiritual solution for the whole world is the central weakness of this vision of revolution. Ultimately any revolution based on some unitary version of truth will have to be forced violently on the rest of humanity. As Jared and his friends show, re-establishing a simulation of the past in the present involves a violent purge of anyone not considered part of the Golden-Age vision.

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Claire says that Dag "thinks about getting blown up too much". (GX 81) She would say the same about Coupland who uses his nested characters to deflect the direct glare of God, of the original, of the referent, of the sun, of the nuclear flash, the wrong sun, and

turn its literary reflection into a manageable and cathartic script. As a writer, he wishes away the untenable conditions of modern culture, sometimes betraying a misanthropist streak and wishing away the whole of humanity with it. As an artist, he renders the terrible mushroom cloud down to a picture postcard you could crumple in your fist.

After his trip to Scotty's Junction, Dag brings home a jar of Trinitite beads. He explains to Claire that the Trinitite is "from Alamogordo, where they had the first N-test. The heat was so intense it melted the sand into a new substance altogether." (GX 87) The first atomic bomb was exploded at the Trinity test site in Alamogordo in July 1945. It was, perhaps, the apex of modernity, the point at which the capacity to end history began, the root of a post-modern age, the last moment in our timeline when anything altogether new could be made. Now, nearly fifty years later, this new substance is just granules of waste, for sale at "a ladies' auxiliary clothing store". (GX 87)

When she realises that Trinitite is nuclear waste, Claire is highly upset: "'Oh my God! It's plutonium! You brought plutonium into my house. You are *such* an arsehole. This place is a waste dump now' [she says …] her pale face red with hysteria." (GX 87) Perhaps her hysteria, like Otis's fear, is comforting to her; at least she has some mortal fear to make her feel a connection to nonexistence. Coupland also ironizes the scene, once again domesticating the terror. Her childlike insult and intonation, "You are *such* an arsehole", said like a teen on the school playground, doesn't seem to match the profundity of the fear she feels. Andy tries to reassure her: "The explosion was almost fifty years ago. The stuff is harmless now –" (GX 87) but Claire does not believe him. "This stuff's *death* for the next four and a half billion years," (GX 87) she counters.

Andy is being disingenuous; when Dag called from Scotty's Junction, he told Andy that he visited the site of a John Wayne movie on his exploration of "Nuclear Road", (GX 78) and "more than half the people involved in its making died of cancer." (GX 79) The remnants of nuclear blasts are far from harmless.

Claire's hysteria recalls Coupland's definition of "Yuppie Wannabies", who "show a willingness to talk about Armageddon after three drinks." (GX 104) This "X generation subgroup" is fairly convinced by the comfortable seductions of capitalism, but after three drinks, their otherwise repressed anxiety about the end of the world emerges, their belief in the stability and viability of the capitalist order to control that anxiety wavers. Genuine yuppies, we assume, as opposed to the wannabes, will not waver when they are uninhibited by alcohol.

Coupland's telling of nuclear terror and its catharsis can be read illuminatingly through the Kristevan process of abjection. In Kristeva's terms, he abjects the things of the unspeakable semiotic realm to achieve this catharsis. Derrida has described the intimate connection between the apocalypse and the "indecent" (socially abject) revelation of the hidden parts of the body. Nuclear waste – metaphorically the psychological anxieties about the holocaust, and the literal, physical remnants of nuclear blasts – is made abject in Coupland's cathartic nuclear tales. Visions of nuclear holocaust are definitively abject; they incite "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated." (Kristeva 1982: 1) The threat, in this case which reminds us of the tenuous

basis of our identity, is the intolerable, unthinkable end. It lies there, close, in our nightmares, as close as Alamogordo, New Mexico is to Palm Springs, California.

In "Gettysburg" the abject horrors of intimacy are connected metaphorically with the horrors of war. Here a man, having left his family, writes to his daughters the story of his broken marriage. On their honeymoon, this narrator and his wife visited Gettysburg, the American Civil War battle site, and now a popular holiday town and wedding venue. When his estranged wife telephones him, he tells her

> that I thought that intimacy with another soul was the closest I could ever come to leaving my body.
>
> She says to me, but were we ever intimate? How intimate were we *really*? Sure, there were the ordinary familiarity-type things – our bodies, our bodily discharges and stains and seepages […] And yet …
>
> Imagine I am drowning and I reach within myself to save that one memory which is me – what is it? Do you know? What things would either of us reach for? Neither of us knows. (LAG 112–113)

His wife counters his vision of intimacy as transcendence by separating the idea of intimacy from the notion of physical familiarity. For her, physical familiarity is an abject symptom of relationship consisting of bodily wastes, but intimacy is a privileged knowledge of the psyche or soul of another person. For this couple such knowledge is out of their grasp and unspeakable.

At the end of his tale, the narrator tells of a Civil War soldier who returns from military duty to his home in Gettysburg. This man's work was to clean up the remains of the bodies on the battlefield days after the battle, "rolling up his sleeves and gathering the slain bodies, row upon row, digging graves in an endless line, building bonfires of broken horses and broken mules, breathing clouds of flies and the steam of blood and soil, burying and exhuming the rows of bodies and limbs, all day long for many days in succession." (LAG 124) The images of corporeal decay recall the "bodily discharges and stains and seepages" the narrator's wife uses to describe the ordinary familiarity of their marriage. What the narrator thought was intimacy is directly linked with abject, unspeakable, apocalyptic horror, with death and decay. His inability to be in a marriage is driven by an underlying terror of domesticity. The battlefield gravedigger returns home, unable to speak to his children, just like this narrator who must leave his family to escape his terror, and can only sit at a distance, silent, and write his daughters a story.

Kristeva suggests, as discussed in chapter one, that we devise rituals to deal with the abject and keep it exiled in the semiotic realm, to stop it from impinging on our daily life, and that the modern disavowal of God – and the domestication of awe – allows the abject to return. Art and literature, "which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies," will become a method of catharsis that is "destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions." (Kristeva 1982: 17) Taxonomies of abomination are part of the religious strategy designed to legislate the threat; perhaps the modern periodic table is a post-religious substitute taxonomy of abomination: all those elements which can only be forged in the fires of nuclear fission and fusion. Americium, Berkelium, Californium, Einsteinium, Fermium, Mendelevium: a litany of

New-World, nuclear-age origins; charred and postapocalyptic elements no longer related to the earth and air like their natural forebears. Pluto – plutonium – was the last elemental frontier; beyond that, we are out in some semiotic realm outside the influence of the (right) Sun, our original referent. Coupland makes these elements abject, and his writing seeks to exile them again, to reactivate the cathartic mechanisms by which identity and the world are safeguarded. The Trinitite beads are olive green, the colour of film monsters from bogs, slimy repressed nightmares.

The narrator of "The Wrong Sun" talks about films:

> The 1970s and disaster movies […] *Earthquake*; *The Omega Man*; *The Andromeda Strain*; *Soylent Green*; *Towering Inferno*; *Silent Running*, films nobody makes anymore because they are all projecting so vividly inside our heads – to be among the last people inhabiting worlds that have vanished, ignited, collapsed and been depopulated. (LAG 80)

Coupland resuscitates this sort of misanthropic fantasy in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. For Coupland the 1970s, his spiritual home, are the end-point of this style of movie. He could be accused of participating in some overzealous eschatologizing here. In the twenty-first century, the disaster movie genre has been in big-budget full swing. Perhaps this is because their producers' fears of nuclear annihilation have retreated somewhat from that paranoid peak in the 1980s, when movies were unnecessary because the pictures were projecting in our heads.

Interesting, perhaps, is that in the television series *Millennium* (1996–1999), the computer password of the main character, Frank Black, is "Soylent Green is people". In the film, *Soylent Green* (1973), set in 2022, Soylent Green is a state-manufactured high-nutrient foodstuff which, it emerges, is made of human flesh. *Millennium* is an apocalyptic series created by Chris Carter, who also created *The X-Files*, and was similarly filmed in Vancouver which stands in for Seattle. It would have been staffed by a special-effects team like *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s Linus, Pam and Hamilton.[17]

Coupland blows Seattle up on page 82 of *Life after God*: "There is a rumble [and we] look to the south, far beyond the horizon to where we know Seattle is supposed to be, 110 miles away. Instead of Seattle we see a pillar of grey dust and rubble pounding on heaven, the earth launched up into the universe, so far up that it will never return – the earth has become the sky." (LAG 82) Recalling from chapter two that Coupland sees the US, and Seattle just to the south of Vancouver, as the origin of a cultural invasion, symbolized by the aggressive and threatening Mount Baker on the border, his destruction of Seattle, sending it irrevocably out into the universe, to that semiotic space beyond the boundary of the solar system, mixing up the natural elements of earth and sky, is another literary act of catharsis. In fact, Coupland wilfully destroys numerous artefacts of the consumer culture which troubles him, and particularly aims his creative wrath at shopping malls.

[17] Examined in chapter 1.1.

3.3 "Mental Ground Zero": blowing up the shopping mall

Dag tells another end-of-the-world story; another one of his "eschatological You-Are-There accounts of what it's like to be Bombed, lovingly detailed, and told in deadpan voice." (GX 68) This description makes one suspect that Dag's spirit and intent lives on throughout Coupland's apocalyptic novels, lovingly detailed and deadpan as most of his eschatological musings are. They are usually so deadpan, in fact, that we struggle to gauge exactly what Coupland's stance is on the material he presents: just as his prevailing position on questions of ideology, religion and identity seems to be one of ambivalence, his simultaneously matter-of-fact and carefully detailed descriptions of diverse apocalypses make it difficult to assess on which side of the apocalyptic / antiapocalyptic battle line he stands. It is more instructive, rather, to identify the regular targets of Coupland's apocalypses: there we can find some clear ethos. He hates supermarkets and shopping malls.

This particular apocalypse imagined by Dag is set in a supermarket, "say, the Vons supermarket at the corner of Sunset and Tahquitz – but theoretically it can be any supermarket anywhere – and you're in just a vile mood because driving over you got into an argument with your best friend." (GX 68) The scene is both specifically localized and universal, not only because supermarkets, a symptom of globalized capital, around the world are essentially all similar, but also because the end of the world happens in a million individual, local places at once. As Derrida notes, "there is no common measure adequate to persuade me that a personal mourning is less serious

than a nuclear war." (Derrida 1984: 28) From a certain, compelling angle, every death is a holocaust. Every holocaust is made up of individual deaths.

It is significant that you have been driving over to the supermarket. Baudrillard notes that the hypermarket (by which he specifically means a peri-urban, self-contained shopping centre, but which could just as well be one of Dag's supermarkets anywhere)

> cannot be separated from the highways that surround and feed it […] the hypermarket (especially in the United States) pre-exists the metropolitan area; it is what gives rise to metro areas, whereas the traditional market was in the heart of the city, a place where the city and the country came to rub elbows. The hypermarket is the expression of a whole lifestyle in which not only the country but the town as well have disappeared to make room for 'the metro area' […] The 'form' hypermarket can thus help us understand what is meant by the end of modernity […] new cities are *sattelized* by the hypermarket or the *shopping center*, serviced by a programmed traffic network, and cease being cities to become metropolitan areas. […] The hypermarket as *nucleus* […] It is the hypermarket that establishes an orbit along which suburbaniza[tio]n moves. (Baudrillard 1994b: 76–7)

Coupland shares Baudrillard's dismay over the US-based form of the shopping centre and how postmodern cities become decentred because of it. In *Generation X*, for example, in Dag's story about Otis, he writes about "the vast, arrogant block forms of shopping mall architecture [which] make as little visual sense in the landscape as

nuclear cooling towers." (GX 80) Otis similarly "drove past a new yuppie housing development – one of those strange new developments with hundreds of blockish, equally senseless and enormous coral pink houses, all of them with an inch of space in between and located about three feet from the highway. And Otis got to thinking: 'Hey! These aren't houses after all – these are *malls in disguise*.'" (GX 80) For good measure, in *Life after God*, Coupland destroys some of these houses in the nuclear holocaust of "The Wrong Sun". The chain reaction following a nuclear blast on Vancouver's fault lines would cause "the Park Royal shopping centre [to] break into two and breathe fire [… and the] modern houses with their 'Kitchens of Tomorrow' perched on the slopes overlooking the city [to] crumble like so much litter". (GX 73–74) Coupland despises architecture that is designed to stand out of its environment; constructed lazily, cheaply, unimaginatively or without any sensitivity to the locality; or built to show off opulence or status. Hill-perching houses and the wealth they signify are condemned to crumble like litter. The "Kitchens of Tomorrow" are a post-war, late-modernist conceit which sounds twee and quaintly optimistic in the light of the future that actually did follow.

"It would be a mistake to situate the hypermarket at the end of a social and architectural chain," writes Richard Lane as he synthesizes Baudrillard's work, "[…] the hypermarket is responsible for 'the metro area'". (Lane 2000: 42) Peri-urban, satellite malls do not exist because we live suburban lives and drive great distances; we have to drive great distances and live in suburbs because peri-urban malls were established in cheap, extra-urban land in the first place. The mall and its developers are contemporary colonisers of new territory, as roughshod as past colonisers have been.

Baudrillard suggests that hypermarkets operate as "triage centers" (Baudrillard 1994b: 75) in which "people are tested and sorted according to preprogrammed categories." (Lane 2000: 41) The commodities for sale there "are no longer even signs whose meaning and message one could decipher and appropriate for oneself, they are *tests*, they are the ones that interrogate us, and we are summoned to answer them, and the answer is included in the question […] neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code." (Baudrillard 1994b: 75) This circular, self-reflexive, self-sufficient litany, complete with icons and symbolic objects, is strikingly similar to a Catholic Mass. The faithful come to Mass for regular verification of their membership and of the formulae and creeds which identify them and promise them salvation. Lane suggests that this is what Baudrillard means although he does not overtly state it: "the consumer comes to the hypermarket with his or her anxieties and questions, and hopes to find them answered in the objects […] the hypermarket [is] a replacement for the organized religion of Western society." (Lane 2000: 42)

Returning to Dag's end-of-the-world story, the argument you and your friend have been having is about environmental degradation. You irritate your friend – "you've struck a nerve and it was fun" (GX 68) – by saying things like "you don't see nearly as many *birds* these days, do you?" (GX 68) and "there aren't any shells left anywhere because the tourists took them all" (GX 68–69) and "there's just something, I don't know – *inverted* – about shopping [in an aeroplane]" (GX 69) Turning the term "invert", used in the nineteenth century as a quasi-scientific term which served to exclude and repress homosexuals, against the capitalist hegemony, you know you are being deliberately

provocative, and you are enjoying it. You associate the loss of deer and birds and shells directly to the proliferation of shopping malls: "You mean to tell me," you ask your friend when he accuses you of negativity, "that we can drive all the way here from L.A. and see maybe ten thousand square miles of shopping malls, and you don't have maybe just the *weentsiest* inkling that something, somewhere, has gone *very very* cuckoo?" (GX 69)

The result is that you are standing alone in the supermarket while your friend sits in the car. There is a "by-any-standards-obese man" (GX 69) ahead of you in the queue, his cart full of

> plastic magnums of diet colas, butterscotch-flavored microwave cake mixes complete with their own baking tins (ten minutes of convenience; ten million years in the Riverside County Municipal Sanitary Landfill), and gallons and gallons of bottled spaghetti sauce […] why his whole family must be awfully constipated with a diet like that. (GX 69–70)

This obese man with his prefabricated diet is a symbol of decadent high capitalism. This is what convenience and consumption have led to, suggests Dag: a bloated, constipated populace; a constipated economic system. Abject, too, in its constipation; the waste cannot be expelled, it lies in overflowing landfills for post-human aeons. The only resolution Dag can imagine for this swollen condition is the apocalypse which comes just then.

There's a sudden power surge and "already people are heading to aisle seven to grab the candles", (GX 70) programmed to expect disaster when disaster of this sort has never, could never have, struck before. Then

> the sirens begin, the worst sound in the world, and the sound you've dreaded all your life. It's *here*: the soundtrack to hell – wailing, flaring, warbling, and unreal […] your minds become the backlit NORAD world map of mythology – how cliché!
>
> […] *just* before the front windows become a crinkled, liquefied imploding sheet […] *just* before the fat man […] bursts into flames while the liquefied ceiling lifts and drips upward –
>
> *Just* before all this, your best friend cranes his neck, lurches over to where you lie, and kisses you on the mouth, after which he says to you, 'There. I've always wanted to do that.'
>
> And that's that. In the silent rush of hot wind […] it's all over: kind of scary, kind of sexy, and tainted by regret. A lot like life, wouldn't you say? (GX 70–71)

This is a hyperreal disaster, something often imagined but incapable of having an original. Described in (hyper)realist terms as if it is actually happening – lovingly detailed – this is (my telling of) Dag's story within Coupland's story: another layer to the simulation. It is pictured, as it only can be, in mythological terms: it is made up of countless movie reiterations of the NORAD nuclear attack map. If the nuclear holocaust had an original, nothing would any longer exist, the narrative – Derrida's juridico-

literary archive – would not exist. “The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we’ll be from the real thing,” says a character in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, (cited by Lane 2000: 121) a book, like Coupland’s novels, which stresses the hyperreal rehearsal of a disaster that can never reach opening night.

One of the terms Coupland coins in *Generation X* is “Mental Ground Zero: The location where one visualizes oneself during the dropping of the atomic bomb; frequently, a shopping mall.” (GX 70) Mental Ground Zero in Coupland’s work is very often situated in a supermarket or a shopping mall; these are the sites where he despairs most about the condition of his culture, its apparently interminable march to decadence and environmental devastation, these are the crises which will most effectively be solved by a nuclear bomb. In *City of Glass*, his non-fictional account of Vancouver, Coupland writes, “Many Vancouverites carry around mental detonators and, as they walk around the city, eliminate eyesore after eyesore. My nominee is Park Royal Mall in West Vancouver”. (*City of Glass* 98) By the time *City of Glass* was published in 2000, he had already set the end of the world at Park Royal Mall in 1998’s *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Karen’s mother, Lois, meets her soporific end “at Super-Valu in Park Royal”. (GC 180)

“The Dead Speak”, the second part of “The Wrong Sun” in *Life after God* (LAG 89–99) is a small memorial to the suburban dead at Mental Ground Zero. Five nameless people describe how they died in a nuclear explosion, one in the kitchen (perhaps a “Kitchen of Tomorrow”), one at a hair salon, one in rush-hour traffic, one at the shopping mall, and one in the office. These are all sites of the contemporary malaise; they could not have existed before the twentieth century and are profoundly distanced from nature. Each of

the victims' necrologies describes melting and burning artefacts of consumer culture, each labelled with its trade name: "A plastic *Simpsons* cup from Burger King melted sideways", (LAG 89) "the pyramid of Vidal Sassoon shampoo plastic bottles […] melt and trickle down off the counter", (LAG 91) "the convertible roof of the Mazda Miata two cars ahead of me was on fire", (LAG 93) "the decorative kites had ignited like Kleenex". (LAG 95) Together, they describe the events with expert knowledge, they refer to "the flash" which always precedes "the blast", one remembers "being relieved that we were too deep inside the mall to feel the direct heat blast effects". (LAG 95) It as if they are experts on the nuclear apocalypse, calmly describing the order of things in the correct words: they have repeatedly rehearsed disaster – like DeLillo's citizens in *White Noise* and Baudrillard's triage practitioners – but are no safer from it once it comes.

The destructive endings in the earlier novels present a problem for Coupland later. After expressing some violent, misanthropic urges in *Generation X* and *Life after God*, his neopagan, environmental sensibility gives him pause. The narrative problem with nuclear holocaust is that it destroys not only the artefacts of urban (post)modernity, but also those of the pastoral Golden Age. As a solution he devises the sleeping death in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, after which there are no more hairdressers, no more traffic jams, and no more kitchens of tomorrow being built, but animals and plants remain alive to change the cityscape back into a preindustrial countryside. A scene in *Girlfriend in a Coma* describes a supermarket a year after the sleeping apocalypse: "Inside the blackened supermarket, scores of animals, birds, and insects have made the building their home. Shit of all types splotches the floor, as do tussles of feathers, fur, bones, and

soil." (GC 218) The inside of the shop is described as a "cobwebbed, stinky, carcass", (GC 219) in which Richard, Pam and Hamilton occasionally pass Leakers, year-dead people, "beef jerky skeleton[s]", (GX 281) on their raid of the pharmaceutical counter. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Coupland thinks beyond the end, imagining a post-human, post-capitalist utopia.

A year after *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s apocalypse, all monetary value has been erased. Between watching old videos, Richard and his band of survivors "have money fights, lobbing and tossing Krugerrands, rubies and thousand-dollar bills at each other; at other times they make paper airplanes from prints by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein and shoot them into the fireplace." (GC 209) Later we see the friends huddled together, their bodies "swaddled inside down coats adorned with hundreds of Bulgari jeweled brooches." (GC 247) The symbols and currency of the excessive economic system, now destroyed, are made meaningless. Without people, there is no excess production, no production at all, no need for these survivors to be rendered into target markets. In this novel, Coupland deliberately writes a non-nuclear, less devastating apocalypse in which humans and the dominion of their economic systems die but nature can live on to take back the land.

In Derrida's view, it is quite legitimate that apocalypse need not come with a flash and a blast, and that it can be quiet:

> And it seems in effect to say *apokalupsis*, disclosure, discovery, uncovering, unveiling, the veil lifted from, the truth revealed about the thing: first of all, if

we can say this, men's or women's genitals, but also their eyes or ears. [André] Chouraqui specifies that

> Someone's ear is discovered in lifting up the hair or the veil that covers it in order to whisper a secret into it […] The arm or the glory of YHWH can also be disclosed in man's gaze or ear. So nowhere does the word *apocalypse* […] have the sense it finally takes in French and other languages, of fearsome catastrophe. Thus the Apocalypse is essentially a contemplation […] or an inspiration […] at the sight, the uncovering or disclosure of YHWH. (Derrida 1982c: 64)

As much as the revelation is obscene or abject, it might also be seen as sacred and contemplative. Although nature reasserts itself in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the massive lightning storms and spewing volcanoes in the novel are no more than a show of the underestimated power of nature; they don't directly cause any deaths. Nature does not kill humans; humans destroy themselves, after which nature simply takes its place again, its ancient, pre-human equilibrium restored. The end of the world is caused by human agency, not divine. Volcanoes and storms are neither malign or benign, and neither are they weapons of an angry God. Coupland's apocalypses are caused by nuclear bombs, materialist somnia, or by children with automatic weapons.

In *Generation X*, Dag's end-of-the-world story is ultimately brought back to a human scale, as if the kiss – the taboo-breaking, "inverted", homosexual kiss – is more important than the holocaust: "kind of scary, kind of sexy, and tainted by regret" describes your best friend's last-gasp decision to kiss you more than the nuclear end of

the world. Claire says about Dag, "I think he needs to fall in love. If he doesn't fall in love soon, he's really going to lose it." (GX 81) Claire is a voice of balanced reason in the novel and she suggests that love is the antidote to apocalyptic paranoia. Similarly, when Pam and Hamilton raid the "safety deposit boxes at the Toronto Dominion Bank in Park Royal" in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, they find that their contents are "not as treasure-ish as you might think […] There were things like locks of hair, Dear John letters, fishing trophies, blue ribbons, keys, garter belts – not pricey stuff. More like stuff you'd expect to find left over after a garage sale." (GC 238–9) Rather optimistically, perhaps like Lot's God trying in vain to find some redeeming virtue in the Cities of the Plain he has slated for destruction, Coupland imagines that things of emotional and personal worth would be the things people would find most valuable and worth keeping. In *Generation X* and *Life after God*, Coupland is not convinced enough about humanity's capacity for progressive change to stay his destructive hand; the imaginative delight he takes in describing high capitalism's demise overshadows the human scale of the holocausts. In these earlier novels the nuclear endings Coupland imagines are devastating and final. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, humanity does get its second chance, and ultimately the power to change the future is returned to their hands. This ending points towards the ethos of *Hey Nostradamus!* and its humanist, antiapocalyptic rewriting of the themes of *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

3.4 *Hey Nostradamus!*: the end of endings

While, in his view, humans bring apocalypse about, Coupland makes some effort to remember that humans are also the victims of apocalypse. As with the questions of religion and politics throughout his novels, he is caught between the comforting, simplistic allure of totalizing solutions and the more difficult complexities of individual lives. His stance charts a circle across the four novels from the playful secular humanism of *Generation X* via the depressed religiosity of *Life after God* and the unconvincing charismatic enthusiasm of *Girlfriend in a Coma* to a more muted, scarred and agnostic humanism in *Hey Nostradamus!* which is set up in opposition to the apocalyptic and paradoxically materialist evangelists who populate the novel. While in his earlier books, he goes some way in describing the lives of his victims and the individual, mundane details that identify them, it is only by the writing of *Hey Nostradamus!* that his focus lies predominantly on the effects of tragedy on individuals rather than on large-scale, less personal disasters.

Hey, Nostradamus! (2003) is in many ways a rewriting of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, published in 1998. The change in ideological tack these novels display is pivoted around two high-profile North American cultural traumas which took place between their writing: the Columbine High School massacre of 20 April 1999 and the terror attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. of 11 September 2001. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, a group of listless bourgeois characters is exhorted by a variety of mystical means – prescient visions, ghostly visitations and the end of the world – to snap out of their self-absorbed and directionless lives and effect a radical spiritual-political

revolution. The solution to the cultural ennui from which they suffer is figured primarily in evangelical Christian terms of witnessing and testifying, of shouting out the unfashionable truth to a self-absorbed, secular world which has lost all sense of the sacred, of social cohesion or political agency. In *Hey Nostradamus!*, written in the shadow of the trauma of Columbine and 9/11, Coupland withdraws his macropolitical revolutionary experiment in favour of interpersonal micropolitics, moving from what Marlene Goldman calls an apocalyptic tone to a prophetic one. (Goldman 2005: 15–16) No longer will blanket solutions work. Totalizing conceptions of the world justify school massacres and terror attacks. If there is any solution it will lie in individualized solutions and in relationships. With the world in a state of sporadic and ruleless war, with a suicide bomber or a teen shooter lurking in any suburban neighbourhood, the terrifying Real, the unincorporable abject, peeks out of its all-too-thin veil of repression. Coupland's characters now have real trauma to politicize them, real terror to motivate them, not just vague grumblings about their too-comfortable lives, and they express this new impetus in micropolitical terms. Highlighting this shift of tone, Coupland opens *Hey Nostradamus!* with an epigraph from 1 Corinthians: "Behold, I tell you a mystery; / we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, […] / the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, / and we shall be changed." (HN epigraph) This passage, which he found on the gravestone of one of the victims of the Columbine massacre (McCampbell 2009: 140) is a direct contrast to the sleeping death and its correlative somnolent ideology described in *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

The similarities between *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!* are striking, even at first glance; it is clear that the reader is invited to compare the two novels and

reassess the action of the first in the light of the second. The teen ghosts, Jared Hansen and Cheryl Anway, are central narrative presences through the novels, husbanding their stories from their positions in limbo. Jared was a gregarious football-playing jock while Cheryl was an evangelical Christian. She joined the *Youth Alive!* movement initially to get closer to Jason, but she surprised herself by converting to the evangelical faith. They introduce themselves first in each book and they continue to haunt the surviving characters throughout the rest of the narrative. Jared tells how he is talking from the "end of the world […] the place my old friends came to inhabit as well – my friends who grew old while I got to remain forever young." (GC 5) For her own part Cheryl says "As I'm never going to be old, I'm glad that I never lost my sense of wonder about the world, although I have a hunch it would have happened pretty soon." (HN 10) Jared notes, "my bout with cancer was my Great Experience" (GC 3) while Cheryl similarly remarks "My death was the only remarkable aspect of my life." (HN 32)[18] Like Richard and Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Cheryl and Jason both lose their virginity to each other. Early in her narrative, Cheryl lists the Grouse Mountain ski slope as one of the things she loved of the world, and we are reminded of the fact that Richard and Karen had that first sexual experience on those slopes. One of the most significant and portentous scenes of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in which Karen foresees the impending apocalypse, is located on the mountain's ski lift.

In another concordance, Cheryl tells that "The papers are blanketing the world with my most recent yearbook photo, and if you've seen it you'll know that I was the cliché girl

[18] Jared mentions his sex binge with a Cheryl Anderson as another possibly Great Experience, and although Cheryl Anderson features no further in the novel, the choice of her first name is another pointer to these novels' intertextual connectedness.

next door", (HN 26) while Richard considers the homogenous nature of yearbook photos: "I have always noticed in high school yearbooks […] how, after only a few pages, the identities of all the unsullied young faces blur, how one person melts into another and another". (GC 32) Richard sees that at this age identity is still mutable and unformed, a crucial psychological point throughout Coupland's work. Both Cheryl and Jared die at seventeen, at the edge of adulthood, at life's fringe between innocence and experience, and, as Cheryl suspects, at the edge of losing their wonder. In all of these novels, growing up and growing older are processes fraught with moral and physical compromise. These teen ghosts, and the living-dead presence of Karen, like angels and saints, haunt the survivors in the novels, teasing them with their immortal youth. They will never grow older or have to compromise or lose their wonder. It is the survivors who must live on and negotiate the future and its everyday corruptions, and many of them – like Richard in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and Jason and Heather in *Hey Nostradamus!* – struggle to compete and live up to the impossible, ethereal moral standards these time-frozen ghosts apply to the survivors' adult lives.

Cheryl reflects further on her yearbook entry: "The description accompanying my photo is along the lines of 'Cheryl was a good student, friendly and popular' – and that's about it. What a waste of seventeen years." (HN 26) In response to the fraught responsibilities of adulthood, the impulse might be to regress to a fabricated state of innocence like some of the characters in *Generation X* and *Life after God* do, but as discussed in chapter one, in his later novels Coupland no longer sees this regressive strategy as viable. His protagonists are older and more pragmatic, even if they are more pessimistic, lonely and fearful.

Coupland's shift from revolutionary macropolitics to the micropolitics of love, loneliness and interpersonal connection serves as a literary example of Lee Quinby's and – through her work on apocalypse – Foucault's genealogical criticism. This is a way of apprehending our relationship to power and dominant and subordinate norms which fosters "local histories", dislodges "claims of prophetic truth", "puts on display the making of moral or ethical values", and which is geared to an "ontology of the present". (Quinby 1994: 53–54) In *Hey Nostradamus!* we plainly see how Coupland's view shifts dramatically from large-scale events to the import of everyday, intimate struggles. Personal struggle, a sort of local history, to redeploy Quinby's argument, is a symptom of a discomfort with received truths and structures. Heather and Jason and Reg are all outsiders to the dominant sphere of value-production, and try to apprehend their world in terms that more accurately concord with their experience.

Coupland's ideological trend towards micropolitics is also structurally – if not substantially – similar to that of Julia Kristeva who helps illuminate Coupland's texts. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kristeva aligned herself with theoretical Maoists, but after a visit to China in 1974 during which she noted the poor conditions of the people – particularly women – under Mao's rule, (Kristeva 1986c) she lost faith with politics and turned to psychoanalysis, refocusing her interest in human agency from the macropolitical to the personal. She did not lose sight of the political implications of identity-formation or of intellectual activity. (see Kristeva 1986e) Hence, Toril Moi suggests, Kristeva's articulation of a "politics of marginality", (Kristeva 1986a: 8) something with which Coupland continues to engage throughout his novels.

Coupland's attitude towards Kristeva's *chora*, or womb-state, changes over the course of the novels. Jason, narrating the high-school events from the age of 29, says that at school they were all "baby chicks […] Seventeen is nothing. You're still in the womb." (HN 50) Unlike the utopian womb-space depicted in *Life after God*, the metaphorical womb in *Hey Nostradamus!* is pictured as a site of uncontrollable terror, as the space where the potential for great violence lies in wait. During the shooting spree, one of the killers repents and is shot by his colleagues, Jason kills another by throwing a rock at him, and the last is attacked by a number of the surviving children and crushed under a table. Cheryl tells:

> I saw the rifle fall to the ground, and then I saw the boys from the camera club laying the table flat on the ground on top of Duncan and begin jumping up and down on it like a grape press. They were making hooting noises, and people from the other tables came and joined in and the table became a killing game as all of these children, boys and girls, who fifteen minutes earlier had been peacefully eating peanut butter sandwiches and oranges, became savages, killing without pause. (HN 41)

This scene represents the furthest dark side of regression to the semiotic *chora*. These children – even more susceptible to the slip from symbolic order to the rhythmic, pre-verbal pulsions of the semiotic because they are young and not fully constituted – become savages in an instant, switched by the violence of the disaffected teen shooters. Cheryl says "we all possessed the capacity for slipping at any moment into great sin and

eternal darkness […] maybe I just didn't trust anyone fully, knowing how close we all were to the edge." (HN 33) Cheryl's Christian perception reframes the potential of the liminal condition; here is confirmation that return to a womb-state is an abject danger rather than an innocent yearning for a bucolic state.

In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Richard describes his friends' work in film special effects:

> Pooling their skills, they helped created aliens, zombies, vampires, Mafia-shot corpses, humans in all states of decay, mummification, terror, and explosion […]
>
> A strong memory of that early period of TV production was of bodies: bodies on gurneys, bodies in boxes, bits of bodies, bodies bleeding, dummy bodies, alien bodies, bodies embedded with artificial components, bodies slated to vanish, bodies popping out of bodies, bodies just returned from the beyond and bodies set to explode [… I'd] see a 'galore of bodies' while visiting Monster Machine, where they were experts in […] making their subjects explode, cough up blood, shimmy, or radiate green light on cue. (GC 88–89)

The green light radiating from these abject monsters recalls the green hue of the unnatural Trinitite beads Dag brings home in *Generation X*. These unnatural products are parallel fabrications.

In contrast to Richard's evident narrative – and Coupland's authorial – delight and playfulness in describing this scene, Cheryl and Jason each describe the massacre at the

high school in muted, underplayed realist detail. Cheryl remembers how "Lauren pretended to be dead, eyes open, body limp, and I wanted to smack her" (HN 18) and "I clearly remember blood from the huddle mixing with streams of sprinkler water" (HN 36). Jason in turn recalls how

> Lori Kemper ran past. She was in the drama club and her arm was purple and was somehow no longer connected properly. On the linoleum was Layla Warner, not so lucky, in a disjointed heap by the trophy case. Two other students, equally bloody, ran by, and there was this guy – Derek Something – lying in a red swirl of blood and sprinkler water, using his arms to drag himself away from the cafeteria doors. (HN 57)

When the corpses are real, there is far less pleasure in describing and reimagining the scene. Demonstrating the shift in Coupland's tone from elitist apocalyptic to humanist prophetic, Cheryl and Jason, unlike Richard's friends, do their utmost to humanize the victims of the violence, trying to remember their names and affiliations. Monster Machine's simulating endeavours might be seen as a symptom of the apotheosis of secularism. If people at the end of the world are no longer afraid of horror, in Kristevan terms they deny the sacred and they strip art of its cathartic substance. It might be their disavowal of taboo which has made the sacrifices at Delbrook High necessary; it could be this secularizing impulse which has resulted in the sacrifices at the World Trade Center and Columbine High.[19]

[19] Of course the very act of telling a story about the dangers of forgetting the powers of horror is itself a cathartic act, even if the story appears to break the taboo of speaking the unspeakable. This is how apocalyptic fiction, horror films and other manifestations of horror and death in fiction, popular culture,

There is an enormous amount of online material available about the Columbine High School massacre. The reasons why people would be so interested in feeding into an industry of gossip and endless retellings of this event which became so iconic that the original event is almost apocryphal, seen only through the blurry pictures lifted from security camera stills and purloined from police files, are only peripherally related to this thesis. It is clear, however, that salacious interest always accompanies a real-world irruption of wish-fulfilling horror that usually stays locked away in the semiotic realm of fantasy. In *Hey Nostradamus!*, Coupland deliberately reacts against the abominable rumour mill that started up after the massacre. His Delbrook massacre is a direct rewriting of the Columbine shootings, handled in the way Coupland would prefer it handled: with a respectful consideration of the individual victims involved; an attempt to remember the reality of the situation and the children involved rather than turning them into icons and statistics, a taxonomy of a local abomination. Coupland was clearly aware of the details of the Columbine mythology, and a comparison of some of its key details with the Delbrook narrative shows this rewriting in operation.

The Wikipedia account, (Various Authors 2008) compiled by various users of the online public encyclopaedia, is an exhaustive, 10 000-word litany of the massacre, comprising a minute-by-minute account of the shootings including rumoured interchanges between the shooters and the victims, a detailed list of the dead and injured (in the order they were shot), a technical list of the weapons used by the killers, eyewitness accounts and photographs gathered from the press and police, links to sources and related

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religious and quasi-religious mythology, on the news and in the media, continue to serve as an effective social catharsis.

information, and an overview of the aftermath of the massacre which affected US and Colorado school policies on security and bullying, police reaction tactics and gun-control laws.

The Wikipedia description of the weapons used in the Columbine massacre is libidinally detailed:

> During the shootings, Harris carried a 12 gauge Savage-Springfield 67H pump-action shotgun (serial no. A232432) and a Hi-Point 995 Carbine 9 mm semi-automatic rifle with thirteen 10-round magazines, fired 96 times. Harris's other weapon, the shotgun, was fired a total of 25 times. Harris committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with his shotgun.
>
> Klebold carried a 9 mm Intratec TEC-9 semi-automatic handgun manufactured by Navegar, Inc. with one 52-, one 32-, and one 28-round magazine. He also carried a 12 gauge Stevens 311D double barreled sawed-off shotgun (serial no. A077513). Klebold's primary weapon was the Tec-9 handgun, which was fired a total of 55 times. Klebold would later commit suicide via a shot to the left temple with the Tec-9. (Various Authors 2008)

When, in *Hey Nostradamus!*, Cheryl tells that "the gunmen – gun*boys* really – turned and showered [students] with buckshot or bullets, whatever it is that guns and rifles use", (HN 15) and later, "I know nothing about guns. Whatever they were, they were

powerful", (HN 17) Coupland deliberately invokes and rejects the technical, depersonalized and over-zealous list the Columbine-obsessives have built.

In *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), writer and director Michael Moore uses the Columbine High School massacre as a foundation for his criticism of the US's gun laws. He contrasts the US's high murder rate with Canada's low rate, suggesting that Canada's stricter gun-control laws are the simple reason for their lower murder rate and generally more peaceful atmosphere. He also contrasts the cities of Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, just across the lake from each other, but vastly different in their levels of gun violence. When Coupland locates the Delbrook massacre in Vancouver, he seems to say, unlike Moore, that this sort of horrific crime is just as feasible a possibility in Canada as across the border. Heather is a court stenographer and in corroboration she says, "my chosen vocation prepares a person for the worst of what can happen to a human body, coroner's photos included, even in happy little Vancouver: bride burnings, and women tossed into wood chippers, then sent to the rendering plant." (HN 200) Gruesome violence exists in Canada; even if there are not so many guns, there are other ways Canadians – dwellers of "the land God gave to Cain" (Goldman 2005: 3) – have devised to kill.

Heather's job inures her to violent images, and takes away their fascination. After she meets Jason, she asks a friend in the court archives to show her some photos from the Delbrook massacre,

> I suppose there are Web sites where you can go look at this kind of stuff, but …

> Okay, the fourth photo down was of Cheryl. I stopped breathing when I saw her. *Her*.
>
> So *young*. Oh, dear God, so young. (HN 200–201)

From the Wikipedia page on Columbine, one can navigate to vivid pictures that weren't published in the newspapers of the boys lying dead in the school library. On the other hand, the widely published, iconic pictures from the cafeteria are grainy monochrome stills from security camera images. One imagines that there are clearer police photographs of the aftermath, of the corpses and blood and water. Heather is interested in these pictures, not for idle titillation, but so that she can understand what Jason saw all those years before she knew him. Jason is missing at this point, and in some ways Heather searches for him metaphorically in the pictures. If he were there, he would discourage her. Earlier, he says about the same explicit crime-scene photographs, "I've seen all the photos a million times like everyone else, but they just don't capture the way it felt to be there – the sunlight and the redness of the blood: that's always cropped out of magazines, and this bugs me because when you crop the photo, you tell a lie." (HN 67) Jason will not be found in these fictitious rehearsals of this particular holocaust. But because Jason cannot express this to her, when Heather sees Cheryl dead, she imagines this is the way Jason saw her when she died in his arms. She is physically shocked, despite her experience with crime-scene photographs. This picture is a link to Jason and she can relate it to the world of life and love; Cheryl is not a number on a dossier, she is not an item on a list on a website.

By rewriting the Columbine shooting, Coupland attempts to salvage a narrative that has slipped away from reality into a symbolic realm. In so doing, however, he must describe the events of the Delbrook shooting in detail, and he seems sensitive to the fact that he, just like the Wikipedia-obsessives, might be guilty of dealing in too much sensational detail. Cheryl provides an excuse for the blow-by-blow account he narrates in her voice: "If nothing else, relating the step-by-step course of events in the cafeteria allows me to comprehend how distanced from the world I'm feeling now – how quickly the world is pulling away. And for this reason I'll continue." (HN 23) Coupland seems to stop and ask why, if he is critical of the pornography of violence which has developed around the Columbine shootings, he is generating his own. Cheryl supplies him with a narrative excuse to continue.

Through Jason, Coupland objects to the equally obsessive post-mortems of the Columbine massacre, the urge to find rational reasons for such an event. The possible causes mooted for the Columbine massacre range from music to antidepressants to bullying, homophobia and the Goth subculture. Jason, on the other hand, angrily dismisses the Delbrook killers' motivations as "the generic sort of alienation we've become all too familiar with during the 1990s." (HN 102) His impetus is not to waste thousands of words on these murderous boys, not to afford them the attention they so urgently seek; he pans his perspective away from them like a television camera panning away from a streaker at a sports match. Remembering that the Delbrook massacre is set in 1988 but written in the early 2000s, the Columbine massacre could be one of the ways in which we've become "all too familiar" with generic alienation. But, more immediately, Coupland could be referring to his own novels – his own apocalyptic

episodes dreamed up by shiftless youth – and their aftermath. *Generation X*'s description of social alienation was something new in 1991, but it was part of a beginning of a trend for a generation of disaffected, grungy, slacker, burger-flipping youngsters which by the end of the decade had become an outdated cliché only used by marketers. Some new definition had to be designed, and in his disavowal of the methods and motivations of his earlier work, Coupland looks forward to what's next.

Pointedly, Coupland opens *Generation A*, his novel published in 2009, with an epigraph from a commencement address by Kurt Vonnegut:

> Now you young twerps want a new name for your generation? Probably not, you just want jobs, right? Well, the media do us all such tremendous favors when they call you Generation X, right? Two click from the very end of the alphabet. I hereby declare you Generation A, as much at the beginning of a series of astonishing triumphs and failures as Adam and Eve were so long ago.
> (*Generation A*, epigraph)

As early as 1994, when this speech was made, the tag of Generation X had become a cliché, appropriated by the oppressive regime. Just as he has rewritten earlier novels – *Girlfriend in a Coma* in *Hey Nostradamus!*, *Microserfs* in *JPod* – in *Generation A* Coupland goes right back to the start to restate the condition of young people. This novel is set in the near future, when bees are thought extinct and natural crops have failed worldwide, a result of genetic modification of crops. Coupland's young characters – notably a globally diverse group rather than a set of North Americans –

seem far more politicized and savvy, more self-centralized than the marginal figures from *Generation X*. Despite having to deal with the environmental catastrophe that high capitalism has left them, they have more agency and power to live a "series of astonishing triumphs and failures" than the disempowered characters in *Generation X*.

In *Hey Nostradamus!* Coupland also revisits the religiosity of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, toning down its evangelical bravado in favour of an agnostic, humanist tone. Kristeva suggests that, as a measure of catharsis, art "is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions." (Kristeva 1982: 17) But in the Vancouver suburbs of *Hey Nostradamus!*, as in the rest of middle-class North America, traditional religion is far from collapse. Mary McCampbell suggests that "the depiction of grace and redemption in [*Hey Nostradamus!*] are life-affirming, but also, in a contemporary post-religious culture, subversive" (McCampbell 2009: 137) but McCampbell's assertion of the demise of religion is premature. Across the twelve-year span between *Generation X* and *Hey Nostradamus!*, Coupland reflects a dramatic reconservatization of social values. The optimistic, secular playfulness of *Generation X* and the post-religious questing of *Life after God* are gone, replaced first by *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s secular revolution couched in apocalyptic Christian terms, then by a critique of suburban fundamentalism in *Hey Nostradamus!* Christianity is not mentioned in *Generation X*, but twelve years later, it has become the dominant ideological framework of Coupland's milieu. This trajectory accurately records changes in the North American cultural climate; there is nothing subversive in his reflection of an increasingly doctrinaire society. It also reflects Coupland's increasing interest in mainstream middle-class life and its challenges after he has celebrated marginal cultures and characters – and criticized corporatized ones –

in his earlier novels. In the Vancouver suburbs of *Hey Nostradamus!*, Christianity remains socially central and, after flirting with the quasi-revolutionary ideologies of its evangelical forms, he points his critique directly at the suburban mainstream.

In *Hey Nostradamus!*, Jason describes one of his drug-addled episodes: "I get cranked in a downtown parking lot. I fly high and develop elaborate schemes to elevate human consciousness. I come down. I get cranked again, but I suspect the new amphetamine is cut with milk sugar, so I enjoy it less the second time." (HN 118) This apparently incidental description of a depressed and dissolute life fundamentally describes the difference between the two novels. The pages of exhortations and quasi-religious chest-puffing by Jared and Richard in *Girlfriend in a Coma* are here dismissively reduced to "elaborate schemes to elevate human consciousness" in which only drug addicts indulge. Nothing more is said in the novel about revolution or grand political schemes.

Cheryl describes Jason's older brother, Kent, a senior member of the *Youth Alive!* church group at the school, who "was like Jason minus the glow. When I was around Kent, I never felt that life was full of wonder and adventure; Kent made it sound as if our postschool lives were going to be about as exciting as temping in a motor vehicles office. He was always into planning and preparing for the *next step*." (HN 12) This "*next step*" recalls Jared's "what's Next"; Jared's revolution is now associated with this dull Christian evangelist and his priggish clique, who spy on Cheryl and Jason to report any "fornicating" (GC 11) to the rest of the cell. In Jason's later narrative, he describes the *Youth Alive!* members as "crabby morality spooks" (HN 50) and says that they would "never miss an opportunity for joylessness". (HN 61)

Lloyd Anway, Cheryl's father, is furious when, at her funeral, a large group of *Youth Alive!* members hand out marker pens and start writing messages over her white coffin: "They were treating my daughter's casket like a yearbook." (HN 110) Kent and his co-worshippers practise the most materialist version of western Christianity, self-consciously shorn of ancient trappings, rendered mundane in their patronizing efforts to make it appeal to youth. Recalling Baudrillard's critique of hypermarkets, the *Youth Alive!* faithful triage others into basic categories of saved and unsaved; like emergency personnel at a disaster scene, they believe they have the power to decide who will live and who will die. Lloyd writes to Jason that "Cheryl's *Alive!* friends look forward to the grave the same way Chris and Cheryl used to look forward to Disney World." (HN 111) Disney World / Disneyland: another Baudrillardian anthropological case study, (Baudrillard 1994b) another capitalist triage centre. In a Kristevan sense, by removing the ancient ceremonial trappings of religion – its semiotic, rhythmic and sacred otherness – the modern charismatic sects strip religion of its cathartic power, and it subsequently malfunctions as a ritual forestaller of sacrifice. The abject is no longer contained, sacrifice becomes necessary again; as Jason knows, seeking rational reasons for the irruption of abject abomination into everyday life is a pointless exercise.

In *Hey, Nostradamus!* evangelical Christians are portrayed as rigid and misguided, desperately holding onto outdated and inflexible versions of the truth. In the language of America after the 11 September 2001 attacks, these evangelists become fundamentalists. The cover art of the UK hardcover edition of the novel, designed by Coupland, shows a repeated image of a stylized kneeling figure ranked in a grid across

the cover sixty times. The image he uses is an ideogram used in airports to denote a Muslim prayer room, but here Coupland deftly subverts North American polarization in the recent wake of 9/11 by associating the image with the Christian evangelists who populate the book and who all pray the same way. Amid this single-minded mass of supplicants embossed in silver, one in the middle of the cover is highlighted in white and is facing the other direction. This individualized figure could refer to any of the narrating characters in the novel; characters who have some relation to formal religion, but who are seeking spiritual meaning against the tide of convention.

Coupland's characterization in *Hey Nostradamus!* suggests that it is flawed and uncertain characters who are more interesting and more redeemable than those – like Jared in post-millennial retrospect – who are too sure of themselves. As discussed in chapter one, Reg Klaasen, the staunchest and most vicious of the Christian fundamentalist characters, loses his faith and becomes a more sympathetic character for it. Even Cheryl, who dies a converted Christian and too young to lose her faith to the moral compromises of life, admits that "It always seemed to me that people who'd discovered religion had both lost and gained something. Outwardly, they'd gained calmness, confidence and a look of purpose, but what they'd lost was a certain willingness to connect with unconverted souls. Looking a convert in the eyes was like trying to make eye contact with a horse." (HN 27) Cheryl also finds that from her position in afterlife limbo, things are not as certain as they once seemed. Her imagination of God and Heaven have changed. "To acknowledge God," she says, "is to fully accept the sorrow of the human condition. […] Soon I'm headed off to the Next Place [… Jason] knows I'll at least be trying to watch him from the beyond, whatever

beyond may be." (HN 41–42) In this novel, dead Cheryl's is an authoritative vision of the afterlife, but in its muted, unknowing humility, it varies radically from Jared's confrontational suite of certainties.

"*Hey Nostradamus! Did you predict that once we found the Promised Land we'd all start offing each other? And did you predict that once we found the Promised Land, it would be the final Promised Land, and there'd never be another one again?*" (HN 91–92) Jason's plaint summarizes Europeans' apocalyptic journey from the Old World to the New, from the east to the west, lost on the edge with nowhere left to go. Utopian visions of a Golden Age are gone, and now, unlike after previous historical apocalypses, there is no fresh Canaan to move to. Coupland's output, from *Generation X* through to *Hey Nostradamus!* parallels this course. He experiments with various imaginative apocalypses, writing endings for the world which troubles him, only to find that once the apocalypse has come, the imagination fails; there is no new New World. His characters are left, in *Hey Nostradamus!*, realizing that they are marooned on the edge, unsure of how to manage life in the fallen world, unsure of what lies beyond, unsure of what comes next.

Chapter Four:

What's Next: Reimagining religion after God

> *"RE / CON / STRUCT"*
>
> (*Generation X*, 53)

> *"Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere […] Life was charmed but without politics or religion […] – life after God – a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven […]*
> *we are living creatures – we have religious impulses – we* must *– and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion?"*
>
> (*Life after God*, 220–221)

> *"Are you ready […] to change – to join – to become part of what's Next?"*
>
> (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 272)

> *"GOD IS NOWHERE / GOD IS NOW HERE / GOD IS NOWHERE / GOD IS NOW HERE"*
>
> (*Hey Nostradamus!*, 9)

The four novels examined in this thesis were selected because of the ways in which they foreground religious themes in a post-religious milieu. Coupland's continual concern with communicating the possibilities for transcendent identity, with the spiritual

symbolism of landscape, and with the nuclear abject and the limits of science are ways in which he attempts to grapple with religion after God. His tone shifts from a playful neopagan agnosticism in *Generation X*, via eschatological depression in *Life after God* and zealous, though unconvincing, evangelism in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, back to resigned humanist agnosticism in *Hey Nostradamus!* His ever-shifting and ambivalent attitude towards both dominant and alternative religious forms demonstrates the difficulty of expressing religious belief in the secular culture about which he writes.

Andrew Tate notes that many of Coupland's narratives throughout his oeuvre

> feature explicit or covert images of conversion, baptism and parable, and the theme of apocalypse. […] Yet as a writer from an avowedly secular background, Coupland's relationship with the Christian tradition is neither one of disillusion nor of reclamation. Rather, his work seeks a new sacred vocabulary constructed from the detritus of an obsessively materialist culture and represents a serious attempt to read an apparently godless world in spiritual terms. […] religion-oriented readings of ostensibly secular texts are, I would argue, entirely appropriate for Coupland's narratives of quest and redemption. (Tate 2007: 133–134)

Tate, like Mary McCampbell (McCampbell 2009) after him, seek in Coupland's work the capacity to reconstruct the expired, specifically Christian, God of modernity. They hope that Coupland will help them sift through the detritus of the culture and piece this fragmented God together again and breathe life back into it. Given that Coupland has

never categorically specified whether he believes in God and which God that might be, theirs is a defensible reading, but it is a conservative one. I suggest that Coupland's work can be read in a more revolutionary way than this. In his very ambivalence and hesitance about religion, he comes close to expressing an entirely new religious framework, one not based on fallen idols and flattened hierarchies; a "religion without religion" (Derrida's phrase, cited by Hart 2004: 57); a religious framework which is completely appropriate for the post-religious and postmodern culture he describes. In his novels he scratches fairly superficially at the profound sources of new, democratic, godless possibilities for transcendence.

Tyler, Andy's younger brother, aphorizes in *Shampoo Planet*, "LET'S JUST HOPE WE ACCIDENTALLY BUILD GOD." (*Shampoo Planet*, 219) By telling ever-shifting stories about the power in the spaces between people and atoms, Coupland, I believe, has started to express new possibilities for transcendent belief: not "a belief" which implies monolithic singularity; not a "system" of belief which implies mediated systemization; not a new "faith" which implies dogmatism; and certainly not a new God, which implies hierarchy, dominance and political disempowerment. This is a thorough reimagination of religion rather than a reconstruction from previously sundered parts, and it may be called a religion only if we bear in mind that it is a religion after God, a lateral, relational scheme of transcendence. As hesitant as it sounds, as frustrating as it may be for those who yearn for the return of modernist certainties, this blurred and continuously reblurred definition is deliberate and essential to expressing a cogent postmodern state of belief: postmodern religion is not hewn of marble; it is a particle wave of infinite potentiality which only freezes – momentarily –

when it is observed. This constant flux could account for Coupland's hesitance or unwillingness to state his belief for once and all. Narrative, specifically fictional narrative, Coupland's form, is also like a potential wave, which freezes at the instant of its reading. On each reading and each reconsideration, it freezes repeatedly in countless, interconnected formations. Its denial of static certainty is the ideal mode through which to express the metaphorical nuances of postmodern religion.

How, though, would this new religion differ from the "strange little handcarved religions" (GX 147) the Tibetan monk criticizes in *Generation X*? For it to be a liberating advance, and cogent with the most optimistic possibilities of postmodernity, I suggest, it must be empowering, engaged, democratic, non-hierarchical and transcendent. In this chapter, I examine in some depth the narratological, philosophical, spiritual and scientific underpinnings of this new potential for belief to discover whether it could differ substantially from the old, whether it could be politically empowering and engaged and whether it is coherent with recent insights in philosophy, politics and science.

i. Power in religion and the power of narrative

"You children from Europe ... from America ..." the monk says, "[...] You and your strange little handcarved religions you make for yourselves." (GX 147) A central conflict in Coupland's religious imagination is whether religion is private or a basis for communal power and action. Drawn as he is to quasi-pagan rites and individual

meditation, he criticizes new-age religion, which serves as a retrospective replacement for bold monotheisms after modernism, but fragments its followers into groups of one. Religion thereby loses its political weight and becomes one more symptom of his characters' impotence against the forces of capital. If religion is to have any emancipating function, it must unify its adherents and give them more power and agency than they would have alone. At his most sociable, Coupland envisions a communal creed that will unite people; at his most depressed, his characters fade away on solipsistic searches that leave nothing in their wake.

An appropriate spiritual solution to Coupland's postmodern characters lies somewhere in between these two poles: not in isolation nor in grand, global schemes, but in localized resistance based on storytelling. Jean-François Lyotard believes that in postmodernity "'resistance lies in the little narrative, in locality and particularity' which have an intimate relationship with globalisation and standardisation." (Currie 1998: 111–112) In *The Differend*, he suggests that "narrative and narratology share the political responsibility to highlight the co-existence and the incommensurability of different stories […,] to base political action on a view of humanity as a matrix of unresolvable narrative disputes." (Currie 1998: 111) The fact that these narrative disputes will remain unresolvable further justifies Coupland's agnostic methods. It can be seen as a quasi-Zen unknowingness, a postmodern unwillingness to resolve a conflict into spurious binary parts.

For her part, Julia Kristeva expresses a "politics of marginality" which, Toril Moi explains, "demonstrates at once her loss of belief in collective political action (she

describes the politically active intellectual as someone hopelessly caught in the very logic of power he or she is seeking to undermine) and her continued commitment to a politicized analysis of intellectual activity." (Kristeva 1986e: 8) Whether one believes in God or transcendent consciousness or not, it is an uncontroversial claim that organizations – churches, unions, corporations, parties alike – are transcendent: they transcend the ability and political capacity of their individual members. But the politics of any new – rather than recycled – religion will be postmodern: local, lateral and liminal; never categorical. The stories which serve as the liturgical practice of this religion must somehow be born of a lateral collation of power. Is non-hierarchical power feasible?

Michel Foucault writes that "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere." (Foucault 1978: 93) He suggests that it is impossible to escape power; even when one creates what appears to be a democratic organization, power hierarchies will establish themselves. Once invoked, particles of power always leap from that potential plane – their "condition of possibility" – to a mundane, disenchanted reality with no further potential. As in Irwin Schrödinger's famous experiment, they have been observed, made static, vertically stacked. In Foucault's view, democracy never lasts.

This pessimistic prognosis can be assuaged, however, if the subject's empowerment is borne through narrative, whose metaphoric nature keeps it always in the plane of possibility and immune to disenchantment and hierarchical ossification. In *Hey Nostradamus!*, Heather says "Sometimes I think God is like weather – you may not like

the weather, but it has nothing to do with you. You just happen to be there." (HN 156) We might re-read Foucault to mean power is like weather. It is subject to its own laws which seem mysterious to us, and crucially, is always in flux, always denying definition that would be deployed by dogmatists. Rather than a system of one-way, pre-determined entropy – inevitable decline to the most brute, vertical formulation – what if there were always potential for positive change as much as negative? Is democratic liturgy possible?

Derrida finds great hope in literature, and in this light it seems that Coupland's instincts are good when he sees storytelling as a route to communal liberation. Nicholas Royle explains Derrida's interest in literature:

> 'Literature is a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which [… secure] in principle its *right to say everything*. Literature thus ties its destiny to a sort of non-censure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy without literature, no literature without democracy.' ['Passions: "An Oblique Offering"' 23] […] The literary works to which he is most drawn are works that participate in a more general transformation, in that trembling and upheaval of western thinking that we might, provisionally, call deconstruction. […T]hese literary texts are also shown to be concerned with notions of the present that are strange and ghostly, with kinds of thinking and experience that fracture and disturb linear, calendrical conceptions of time and history. (Royle 2003: 86–7)

If it is based on literature – on Coupland's particular brand of storytelling about the ghostly and strange: liminal conditions and apocalypse; ghosts and monsters; wilderness and battles of the soul – and if its agnostic mysteries are founded in quantum discoveries which fracture and disturb our linear conceptions of time and history, a new religion has the potential to be democratic.

Kevin Hart explains how Derrida's mid-career interest in negative theology – defining God in terms of what it is not, as opposed to the positive theologies which present God as an anthropomorphized presence – mutated once he suspected that "even the most negative of negative theologies [...] construes God as full presence, and therefore gets entangled in the metaphysics of presence." (Hart 2004: 56) But, writes Hart, "he is more sanguine about the chances of a deconstructive theology. The aim of such a movement would be 'to liberate theology from what has been grafted onto it, to free it from its metaphysico-philosophical super ego' ['Deconstruction in America']". (Hart 2004: 56) Feasible postmodern expressions of religious belief need to be freed from the millennia of ideological baggage they bear. Hart goes onto delineate Derrida's later notion of "messianicity", which does not rely "on a historical messianism – whether it be Christian, Jewish or Islamic – which proffers a Messiah of known characteristics who is expected to arrive at a particular time and place [but rather] refers to a structure of our existence that involves openness towards a future that can never be anticipated". (Hart 2004: 59) This messianic formulation calls to mind that key phrase in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, "what's Next". (GC 271, 272) One might criticize this vague phrase as a symptom of, in Jameson's terms, "a weakness of the imagination", (Jameson 1998c: 50) but with Derrida's messianicity in mind, it is endemic to the concept that it can neither

be anticipated nor expressed. Faith, now as always, consists in leaping into the unknown.

Kristeva is also convinced of the fundamental importance of literature in expressing mutable and uncontrollable transcendence. Besides its cathartic purposes, she suggests that literature "is destined to survive the collapse of the historical religions." (Kristeva 1982: 17) Kelly Oliver describes the intricate links in Kristeva's work between poetry and ethics – and by extension, spiritual-political belief. "Kristeva suggests that 'the ethics of a linguistic discourse may be gauged in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes.' ['The Ethics of Linguistics'] In addition, the ethics of a social discourse may be gauged by how much poetry it allows. [...] Poetry signals tolerance in a society. The openness to poetry is the openness to difference." (Oliver 1993: 2) Openness to difference, in turn, will prevent the orthodox systemization – exclusion of alternative views, contrary and compatible readings – of any future religious belief. Belief based on stories and the rhythmic, fluctuating pulsions of poetic language will remain flexible and avoid hierarchical organization; it will remain open to change like weather.

J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive reading of parables in "Parable and Performative in the Gospels and in Modern Literature" (Miller 2001) is an illuminating analysis of the potential for action in parabolic narrative and is ultimately pessimistic. Miller defines parable in literature or scripture as "a mode of figurative language which is the indirect indication, at a distance, of something that cannot be described directly." (Miller 2001: 130) In many ways the entire text of the quartet of Coupland's novels which I study in this thesis – with their various attempts at expressing the inexpressible – are parables,

and they are more overtly divided up into smaller parables. One of the aims of Miller's essay is to deconstruct the opposition between sacred and secular parables. If this opposition is logically collapsed, one no longer needs to treat the analysis of scripture any differently from the analysis of non-religious texts.

Miller starts his deconstruction of the categories of sacred and secular parable by assuming that "it ought to be possible to identify specific differences, in the language, between the parables of Jesus and any secular parables whatsoever. Much is at stake here. The distinction between sacred scripture and secular literature would seem to depend on being able to identify the differences." (Miller 2001: 129) To this end he goes on to suggest that

> the two kinds of parable may be distinguished by recognizing that both are performative rather than constative utterances but that two radically different kinds of performative would appear to be involved. A parable does not so much passively name something as make something happen. A parable is a way to do things with words. It is a speech act. In the case of the parables of Jesus, however, the performative word makes something happen in the minds and hearts of the hearers, but this happening is a knowledge of a state of affairs already existing, the kingdom of heaven and the way to get there. In that sense, a biblical parable is constative, not performative at all. […] Secular parable is a genuine performative. It creates something, a 'meaning', that has no basis except in the words. (Miller 2001: 132)

Secular parable would seem an ideal form for Coupland's characters: they "make something happen", they are powerful and give their beneficiaries genuine agency to forge new, previously unexpressed meaning. In secular parable which does not rely on already-iterated and worn out truths, meaning – the "something" that is made – stems from the words.

Miller, however, highlights the built-in paradoxical failings of the performative parable as a would-be emancipatory form: "Human performatives are always from beginning to end baseless positings, […] the making of a realm created by language, existing and sustained only in language. In this it is no different from the complex social world made by promising, contracting, naming, […] and which we would do anything to cross over out of. No speech act, no poetic or parabolic performance can help us one bit to do that." (Miller 2001: 139) He then goes on to collapse the opposition between secular and sacred parable by reminding us that Jesus had to spell out the moral of his parables so that his disciples could understand them, and in turn his disciples transmitted the tales until the Gospel-writers wrote them down. They have become secularized, no longer the direct word of God. In effect, the parables we are left with are "parables about parable": (Miller 2001: 133) "As long as they are seen as figures of speech, as merely parabolic […] one has failed to enter into the realm of parable. […] They produce neither action nor knowledge. [… As Franz Kafka writes in *Parables and Paradoxes*,] 'All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible […], and we know that already.'" (Miller 2001: 138) Parables, seen in this light, are mystical trickery: their tellers set out to tell their audience something

they know they will not understand so that they will seem connected to some unspeakable transcendent power.

This goes to explain our dissatisfaction with the mystical utterances of Jared in particular. His parables of apocalypse and rebirth only serve to show how he is connected to the God he proclaims and that none of his friends are. They will never understand. Miller says that "no purely human parable-maker […] can avoid the temerity of at least tentatively, implicitly, or hypothetically putting himself in Christ's place and claiming to serve as an intermediary between this everyday world and the kingdom of heaven. Secular parable may be, strictly speaking, a true performative [… but] is always contaminated by an implicit claim to be based on knowledge and to bring knowledge." (Miller 2001: 140) Jared's pronouncements and translations from God are steeped in claims of truth and knowledge. They are undemocratic: they come from above.

Where does this leave us? Are we able to make any claims or utter any statements or tell any stories that might be liberating? If the motivating basis of action is "reduced" to language, does it mean there is no possibility to act? Terry Eagleton takes issue with Miller's pessimism in his essay "J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah" when he writes "To view action as problematical and ambiguous is not necessarily a recipe for quietism […] If action is a *text*, it is not necessarily an illegible one." (Eagleton 2001:181) In his Marxist reading of the biblical book of Jonah, he continues:

> The over-rigorous distinction made by Jonah [and by extension, Miller] between what he himself knows or does, and what God knows and does, returns in our own time as a liberal humanist dichotomy between the agent and his or her enabling conditions. To trouble this tenacious opposition is to fall as first into what seems like nihilism, a despair as to the potential effectivity of action […] Any profound process of political transformation calls, paradoxically, for human agents who are on the one hand a good deal more centred, resolute and affirmative than the subjects of quotidian life, and on the other hand will shake such affirmative identity to its roots. […I]f oppressed groups were able to have [some positive sense of who they are] they would not need to act in the first place. Political action consists not primarily in expressing an already well-founded identity, but in creating the social conditions in which it might just become possible to say who one was, or to discover what one would like to be. (Eagleton 2001: 181)

Doubtless Eagleton would disagree, but perhaps Coupland's disenchanted, disempowered youngsters are the ideal vanguard for contemporary revolution. They are in a uniquely paradoxical position: culturally central enough to have a centred, affirmative sense of identity; oppressed enough by their employers and vendors and the baby boomers to feel marginalized and disgruntled. The obstacles to their political efficacy have always been their individualism, their consumerism, their economic impotence, and their irony. They "live forever on the brink of knowing a great truth". (GC 268) Jonah, too:

> the Book of Jonah leaves its protagonist caught in a transitional stage between false consciousness and some new, currently unnameable style of identity; and to this extent we have made little advance upon it. Nobody to my knowledge has yet produced a satisfactory paradigm of a form of subjectivity which would at once be affirmative and self-interrogative, centred enough to act decisively yet constituted to its core by the sense of some ineradicable otherness. (Eagleton 2001: 181)

Coupland offers his disenchanted searchers a unifying, lateral narrative and creed to rally around, one that rejects consumption and rather empathizes with the needs of the planet and its people – a new, communal religion. It is something unprecedented, not recycled:

> Richard thinks about being alive at this particular juncture in history and he can only marvel – to be alive at this wondrous point – this jumping-off point toward farther reaches […I]t's all such a tiny bit of what comes next.
> His mind races: Think about all those crazy people you can see on the streets. Maybe they aren't crazy at all. Maybe they've seen what we've seen – maybe those people are us. (GC 281)

Their agnosticism tempers their arrogance; their fervour invigorates their quietism. They shout out the truth in stories with no authoritative moral. For Coupland, this position on the edge of and empowering new faith is often expressed in quasi-Buddhist terms.

ii. Coupland's quasi-Buddhist sensibilities

While Linda, the meditating woman in Claire's story, (GX 141–148)[20] meditates in silence for seven years, seven months, seven days and seven hours, the garden around her "return[s] to the wild". (GX 144) Linda's meditation is a protest against the material rewards of rapacious modernity. Linda was "an heiress to a vast family fortune, the seeds of which sprouted in slave trading in Georgia, that propagated into the Yankee textile mills of Massachusetts and Connecticut, dispersed westward into the steel mills of the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania, and ultimately bore sturdy offspring of newspapers, film, and aerospace in California." (GX 141) The growth in the wealth of Linda's family is a concise economic history of the United States economy, rooted in the labour of slaves, moving to secondary, processing industries and thence to the tertiary production of entertainment and war. With the pioneers, and with all of Coupland's seekers, the money flows westward over time, and exploits the land and its resources as it goes.

Despite , or because of, her wealth, "in her late teens and early twenties, Linda became a beautiful but desperately unhappy woman, constantly searching for one person, one idea, or one place that could rescue her from her, well, her *life*." (GX 142) In this story, Linda typifies so many of Coupland's characters, whose *lives* are made up of consumption and passive reaction to their parents' values, of fear and political disempowerment, of depression and antidepressants, of drugs and alcohol to plug the

[20] Discussed in detail in chapter 1.2

gaping void. While Linda's story is the most overt suggestion of a Buddhist sensibility in these novels, there are fragments of quasi-Buddhist contemplative meditation and unknowingness scattered throughout the books. As I have discussed in depth in chapter one, Coupland's characters repeatedly find themselves in a existential malaise, most cogently expressed in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in Coupland's / Jared's / Richard's long treatise on the ills of the culture, and the religious void – apparently impossible to fill in an age after God – that sits at the heart of it: "Richard, tell me this:" says Jared,

> back in the old world, didn't you often feel as if the only way you could fully *truly* change yourself in the powerful way you yearned for was to die and then start again from scratch? Didn't you feel as if all the symbols and ideas fed to you since birth had become worn out like old shoes? Didn't you ache for change but you didn't know how to achieve it? […]
> This feeling is specific to the times we live in. (GC 268)

Or less hyperbolically, as Hamilton sums up the cultural malaise, "There's nothing at the center of what we do." (GC 94) As noted in chapter three, the option to die and then start again – purge by apocalypse – becomes a less palatable option for Coupland by the time he writes *Hey Nostradamus!* The next solution then, is to forge and disseminate new symbols and ideas, to build a new coherent religion that might serve as a spiritual centre.

Hey Nostradamus! valorizes an ethos of pacifist, agnostic humanism; the unknowingness of Heather and of Cheryl serves as a model for this new religious

practice. When Cheryl writes "GOD IS NOWHERE / GOD IS NOW HERE / GOD IS NOWHERE / GOD IS NOW HERE" on her school binder, the mantra is misread by evangelical Christians as a sign of a vision of the presence of (the Christian) God. But, says Cheryl, "all I was doing was trying to clear out my head and think of nothing, to generate enough silence to make time stand still." (HN 9) The mantra was intended to allow Cheryl to access a clear-headed meditative state, a traditional Buddhist meditative technique. After death, we recall, she is even less certain about heaven and God than she was while she was alive. She thinks that Jason knows that she'll "at least be trying to watch him from beyond, whatever beyond may be." (HN 42)

For her part, Heather says, "I don't know how the world works, only that it seems to do so, and I leave it at that." (HN 176) Her voice of calm, empathetic agnosticism is the most sympathetic in the novel. Reg describes her as having "a soul as clear as ice cubes." (HN 238) In many places in Coupland's work, clarity and silence are sought and are hard to attain. After he dies in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Jared explains that he now has

> the gift of clarity and directness.
>
> What's clarity like?
>
> Try to remember that funny feeling inside your head when you had math problems too difficult to solve: the faint buzzing noise in your ears, a heaviness on both sides of your skull […] This is the opposite sensation of clarity. Yet for many people of my era, as they aged, this sensation became the dominant sensation of their lives. It was as though day-to-day twentieth-century living had

> become an almost unsolvable algebraic equation. This is why Richard drank. This is why my old friends used to spend their lives blitzed on everything from cough syrup to crystal meth. Anything to make that sloggy buzz make a retreat. (GC 247)

On the day of the massacre, Jason is given a sedative injection and, he describes, "I felt clear-minded and calm." (HN 75) But the chemically-aided clarity Jason feels is an addiction – like Scout's antidepressants, stabbings for Donny in "My Hotel Year", and drugs and alcohol for the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* – which superficially and unsatisfactorily stands in for the lack of depth and centre in their lives. The sedative's clarity catalyzes Jason's subsequent drug and alcohol abuse. Jason also states, "I don't speak much. Until they put a chip in my brain to force me to speak, I plan to remain quiet." (HN 61) Unwittingly, Jason follows the methods of a contemplative's life – the silence and hermetic isolation – but we are not told whether it leads to transcendence. Paradoxically, it might have been his violently Christian father, Reg, who initiated this path of Buddhist-style contemplation and self-abnegation when he shouted at his small son, "*You're nothing, you hear me? Nothing. You're not even visible to God. You're not even visible to the devil. You are zero.*" (HN 70) It is a Buddhist ideal to escape the ego and become nothing; the meditative space of self-realization lies in between the binary opposites of God and the devil.

Jason's disappearance in the wilderness, his divestment of ego, his disattachment from the world, is prefigured in the pilgrimages of other characters in Coupland's novels. The nameless narrator of "In the Desert" in *Life after God* is one such pilgrim. When his car

breaks down on the contemplative drive from Las Vegas to Palm Springs (also the destination of *Generation X*'s Andy, Claire and Dag when they seek hermitage from city life) he wanders out into the desert: "I was ravenous with hunger and quickly went from anger to confusion and mild dizziness. […A]fter a while I just shut up and tried to walk with a blank head – trying to make time disappear by pretending time no longer existed. And this fake Zen continued until I realized […] that I had taken a wrong fork". (LAG 158)

In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Linus's pilgrimage into the wilderness is similarly a failure. Linus returns to his home town and his friends after drifting for four years in the desert around Las Vegas. Wendy sees him for dinner and reports to Richard that on his journey he had "gone inside himself, and hasn't quite emerged yet. He talked about sand dunes, ice, chocolate bars, and hitchhiking – the sorts of things that would be a big deal if you were a hobo." (GC 76) We recall from chapter two that desert sands and northern ice symbolize the edge of culture and the end of the world. Self-marginalization to the very edges of society is a common strategy for Coupland's characters who seek clarity. Hearing about Linus, Richard is disappointed. He expected a missive of meaning from the edge, as if Linus were John the Baptist or Moses communing with God in the wilderness. "I was envious of Linus's venture into nothingdom, but also ticked off that he hadn't had a revelation in all of his wanderings. I still lived […] with the belief that meaning could pop into my life at any moment. I was getting […] no younger, yet for some reason not particularly wiser." (GC 76)

Perhaps "nothingdom" and returning with no answer – speaking in "a voice from nowhere" (LAG 140) – is a truer message from the edge than the certainty Richard expected. This is something Coupland can only suggest in *Hey Nostradamus!* through the sympathetic agnosticism of Cheryl and Heather. In *Girlfriend in a Coma* Coupland is still trying to "develop elaborate schemes to elevate human consciousness" (HN 118) in the words Jason uses to disavow, in effect, Jared and Richard's evangelical certainty. Linus describes his contemplative failure thus: "I thought I was going to see God or reach an epiphany or to levitate or *some*thing. But I never did. I prayed so long for that to happen." (GC 235) Linus's failure seems to lie in the fact that he was praying to an old, deceased God. Praying to a higher being has no effect. "I think maybe I didn't surrender myself enough – I think that's the term: *surrender*. I still wanted to keep a foot in both worlds", Linus continues. It is only Karen, Linda, Scout, and possibly Jason, the characters who entirely reject the material world, who can transcend it.

Simply acting in a Zennish way, Coupland suggests, does not result in clarity of consciousness. To attain clarity, *Life after God* proposes, takes a deeper investment, a deeper divestment. Scout sets the culminating example of self-erasing meditative practice with his self-abnegation in the woods at the end of the book. "As I've gotten older [… T]he glamour of corruption disappears; […] instead you learn tolerance, and compassion and love – and distance – and these are hard words for me to say." (LAG 228–9) This "tolerance, compassion and love" are hallmarks of the engaged spirituality I discuss in more detail below; an egoless, disattached life, for Scout, is not a selfish life. Scout finds it hard to say this, because religion is supposed to be dead and outdated, uncool. But, he accepts, "[b]eyond a certain age, sincerity ceases to feel pornographic

[…] the coolness that marked our youth […] can only leave you feeling empty. Full of holes." (LAG 226) It is because he has grown up that he can now speak of holes, and something transcendent that might fill them.

It is also hard to say because there is no commonly accepted language to express this new godless religion; the terms need to be redefined; religion needs to be redesigned from scratch. After the events of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Richard concurs with Hamilton's earlier suggestion that "There's nothing at the center of what we do" (GC 94) in similar terms to Scout's: "I said we gave no evidence of an interior life. Acts of kindness, evidence of contemplation, devotion, sacrifice. All these things that indicate an world inside us." Richard's vision of a life that draws on something beyond the external and superficial is a mixture of contemplative meditation and Christian sacrifice. They may seem incompatible, but I show below how closely these monastic traditions might match.

The picture we derive from these fragments of meditation, disattachment and not-knowing in Coupland's novels is of a diluted, poorly articulated quasi-Buddhist sensibility; mostly they only describe the superficial trappings of contemplative meditation and not much of the philosophical content behind it. They are, however, pervasive enough to show that contemplation and ego-denial would be crucial to a properly articulated new religion in Coupland's imaginative universe.

Buddhism is a religion without God, and so may seem like a simple solution for Coupland's characters. Why would they not simply be Buddhists and find their peace

and centre in traditional Buddhist practice? The answer lies partially in Coupland's discomfort with New Age beliefs. The versions of Buddhism which have become popular in North America – metonymized perhaps by yoga and veganism – have become simply another expression of the cult of the individual in that society. Buddhism makes you feel good and look good; it is a fitness regime rather than a religion. It also allows you to feel morally superior to the unenlightened masses who eat meat and get fat on junk food. When Richard complains, "I mean, look at us: instead of serving higher purpose we've always been more concerned with developing our 'person*alities*'", (GC 256) he might well be criticizing American yoganistas. This solipsistic and stripped Buddhism individualizes and fragments rather than unites around a commonly held kernel of meaning. "The love of meat prevents any real change" pronounces one of the marginal aphoristic posters in *Generation X*. (GX 12) Unanchored as this statement is, it is difficult to tell whether it should be taken ironically. Is it self-evidently ridiculous, or does it unironically communicate a basic tenet of faith? In Buddhist Tibet, it may simply be a statement of truth; in North America, however, few would believe it and those who do have accepted a culturally incompatible idea, one that is ultimately divisive.

Coupland's translocated and Occidentalized Buddhism is modified to fit the postmodern conditions and location of his characters. Similarly, pointing to its cultural coherence, it has a postmodern mystery at its core. Claire says, "I'll add some more about Linda here, too: she was bright. She could discuss particle physics, say – quarks and leptons, bosons and mesons" (GX 142). This is no mere throwaway example of Linda's intelligence. Her knowledge of quantum physics is the modern equivalent of access to mystical

secrets. She is a priestess, and quantum realities are the wisdom she divines and translates for her followers. Dag's journey to the Trinity nuclear test site reminds us that the quarks and leptons, bosons and mesons were first transubstantiated in the new world, his Trinitite beads are the sacred manna which results from that postmodern sacrament. As I discuss below, this combination of quantum physics and religious practice is not an arbitrary juxtaposition: there are numerous affinities between quantum physics, Christian monasticism and Buddhism which also coincide elegantly with the revelations of deconstructive philosophy and postmodern theory, making its intersection an ideal, culturally coherent framework for Coupland's new religion.

iii. Buddhist and Christian monastic contemplation

Coupland's religious leanings are founded in a tradition of North American literary mysticism. In chapter three, I argued that Marlene Goldman's study of Canadian apocalyptic literature could well encompass Coupland's work, concerned as it is with ex-centric characters who feel that they have no political weight and are "barred from paradise". (Goldman 2005: 5) Goldman's reason for excluding Coupland's work seems to be that his work is more generically North American than specifically Canadian in content and tone, but I would suggest that even where his action is set in the USA, the hallmarks of his characterization and plotlines show a distinct similarity to those specifically Canadian apocalyptic works she studies.

I would make a similar case about Coupland's strong ties to the Canadian visionary-mystical literary tradition discussed by Russell Morton Brown. (Brown 2001) Brown introduces a special edition of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* dedicated to the Canadian visionary tradition and asks readers to "notice the importance of visionary moments and the presence of the numinous in the work of some of Canada's most important fiction writers, poets, and critical thinkers." (Brown 2001: 802) Listed among these writers are Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and several others. Given that the Guelph conference on which the special edition was based was held in 1999, not long after *Girlfriend in a Coma* was published, it is understandable that Coupland would not be included in this list, but one imagines that he would comfortably fit in the discussion now, especially after the publication of *Hey Nostradamus!*

National stereotypes of Canadians, that they are "a phlegmatic people: reticent, cautious, self-deprecatory, self-protective in their politeness […] don't sound productive of visionary ways of seeing", comments Brown. (Brown 2001: 804) But as I have discussed earlier in different terms, the Canadian spiritual experience is closely linked with its specific landscape. Northrop Frye, cited by Brown, goes further in linking the Canadian experience of land with morality and the soul:

> I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature […] It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something these things manifest. The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to

> preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values. (Brown 2001: 804)

Brown notes that the stereotype of Canadians derives from characterizations of Canada's Scottish Presbyterian settlers, who protected themselves against the land and moral excess, rather than from the putatively more vigorous Dutch and English colonisers of the original United States. Nonetheless, "[r]ather than producing a literature of cowed responses," concludes Brown, "it suggests writers finding their way into the tradition of the sublime." We recall the wilderness themes discussed in chapter two, particularly *Life after God*'s awe-stricken attitude to the apparently pristine wilderness; we remember Claire's ceremonies in *Generation X* which so endear her to Andy, the fact that Cheryl's Christian rebirth was sparked by her consideration of nature, and the significance of the wildness of Grouse Mountain, so close to Vancouver's suburbia. Coupland often thematizes the sublime, both in the US-American deserts and the Canadian forests, and I suggest that rather than diluting the Canadian sublime aesthetic, he expands and enhances it by spreading it southwards.

A particularly interesting section of Brown's essay introduces essays by Kristina Kyser and Goldman on Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Kyser quotes Frye's pithy aphorism, "The apocalypse is the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared." (Brown 2001: 808) If applied to *Girlfriend in a Coma*, with all its apocalyptic posturing, one realises that there is too much ego in that novel. *Hey Nostradamus!* is Coupland's post-apocalyptic novel, its ego stripped away and the revelation far clearer. Kyser goes on to read *The English Patient* from a Buddhist angle, the introduction of which, Brown

says, "provides a widening out of the sources and conflux of vision in Canada today." (Brown 2001: 808) Derrida's reminder, discussed in chapter 3.3, that apocalypse can be a contemplative secret, rather than a loud bang, serves to deepen this connection between Coupland's eschatology and a mystical literary tradition.

How, though, can we reconcile a Christian mystical tradition with an imported quasi-Buddhist sensibility without it becoming diluted, commodified and superficial? It may also be asked whether a Canadian writer can appropriate fragments of Buddhism – and whether this white, English-speaking South African scholar can write of the postmodern efficacy of these fragments in a North American culture – without being guilty of orientalizing and exoticizing Buddhism and the large populations who live with the religion as part of their dominant culture, and who necessarily have a far more nuanced understanding of it. Edward Said argues that orientalism is a "corporate institution for dealing with the orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Said 1995: 3) I would suggest that Coupland (and I, without wishing uncritically to feed into the orientalist discourse Said criticizes) may be guilty of simplifying a complex and ancient religion to suit our rhetorical ends. In our defence, though, the goal of our appropriation of this aspect of the Orient is an emancipatory one, rather than an oppressive one. Said notes that Orientalism started as a European strategy, and as colonial subjects, Coupland and I are distant from the colonial power; in fact, we are rendered the colonial Other as much as the Orient is. Furthermore, one could ask who owns Buddhism, and who arbitrates the use of its fragments. Are Coupland and I any

less qualified to speak of our conception of Buddhism, or any oriental topic, than an Asian? Is an Asian American, a Buddhist Mauritian, a Christian Thai, a Muslim Arab, or a Chinese atheist more qualified, more in moral possession of the East?

That said, the question remains whether it is possible to express a new-world, Christian-originated and deep sympathy for Buddhist philosophy and methods. Certain ideas of Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk and prolific writer, suggest that it is. Merton (see Thurston 2007a and King 2002) was born in 1915 in France. He and his family moved to the United States in the midst of the First World War. He completed his BA in English at Columbia University where he also became a Catholic, and soon set out to become a priest. In 1941 he joined the Trappist order at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, and was ordained in 1949. He remained based at Gethsemani until his apparently accidental electrocution in Bangkok in 1968, 27 years to the day after he joined the abbey. They were a turbulent 27 years: his brother, John Paul, died during the Second World War, and the Cold War, Vietnam War and US race politics in the period concerned him deeply. The conflict between hermetic contemplation and social action and the French and American wars in Asia stoked his interest in Buddhism. He died during an extended trip to Asia to meet Buddhist colleagues. Merton's writings are widely respected, and in 1996 his memory was honoured by Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, on the occasion of the first Gethsemani Encounter at the abbey. In his address, acknowledging Merton's key role in reconciling Christian and Buddhist practice, the Dalai Lama said

> Thomas Merton really is someone that we can look up to. From one point of view he had the complete qualities of hearing – which means study, contemplating, thinking on the teachings, and of meditation – hearing, thinking and meditation. He also had the qualities of being learned, disciplined and having a good heart. He not only was able to practice himself, but his perspective was very, very broad. Thus, it seems to me that in this memorial or recollection of him we should seek to be following his example that he gave us. (Gyatso 1996)

Evoking Said's notion of orientalism, Bonnie Bowman Thurston explains that Merton's initial understanding

> of Buddhism and of Asian culture was undoubtedly romanticized. There is a sense in which Buddhism was a metaphor for the antithesis of aspects of Western culture he distrusted: its acquisitiveness, its technological obsessions, its almost universal secularity […] Western religion had lost its interiority. In a September, 1968 letter he wrote, 'Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening , and of an even greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. […]' Buddhism provided models whereby Christians […] could learn the interiority of Christ Who, throughout the gospels, withdraws […] to pray, to 'commune with his own heart and be still.'
> More pointedly, Buddhism provided a corrective to the intellectual dualism engendered by Cartesian thought. (Thurston 2007: 23)

This passage is interesting in many respects. Firstly, Merton's view of Buddhism as the antithesis of Western culture's "acquisitiveness, technological obsessions [and] secularity" and the fact that it is a romanticized view almost directly parallels Coupland's engagement with Buddhism. It stems from mistrust and disillusionment with the capitalist mores of the North American culture and from a yearning for a meditative and profound interiority of religious experience, rather than a superficially demonstrative one. Coupland's quasi-Buddhist characters practice romanticized forms of the religion. Merton writes that surrender to the creative action of love and grace is demanded by a deep experience of religion – this surrender recalling the reasons for Linus's failed pilgrimage – and that this surrender is brought about by stillness and interiority. Christ, Merton suggests, was a seasoned practitioner of this sort of contemplative meditation, and the Buddhist practice is not foreign to a Christian tradition. Furthermore, Merton's suggestion that our real journey in life is interior also calls to mind Coupland's ideological trajectory from macropolitics – grand revolutionary gestures – to the micropolitics of psyche and personal relationships. As I show below, quantum relationships bring these micropolitics down to their smallest – and most culturally, religiously and psychologically pertinent – scale. Finally, the fact that Merton saw Buddhism as providing "a corrective to the intellectual dualism engendered by Cartesian thought" fundamentally connects Buddhism with postmodern philosophy's aims. As Connie Zweig puts it, "Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha may have been the first deconstructionist." (Zweig 1995: 145) And when Merton collates the aims and practices of Buddhist and Christian mysticism, we can argue that aspects of Christian mysticism may well be compatible with postmodern, post-essentialist philosophical insights: that, as the narrator of "In the Desert" is reminded by his

encounter with the desert drifter, “there is still something left to believe in after there is nothing left to believe in.” (LAG 173)

In his novels, Coupland does not engage more deeply with this romanticized notion of Buddhism, but Merton’s trip to Asia was an attempt to do just that. What he found was a profound correspondence between Buddhist and Christian traditions. In his *Asian Journal* Merton wrote, “the most significant thing of all [about my meeting with Tibetan Buddhists was] the way we were able to communicate with one another an essentially spiritual experience of ‘Buddhism’ which is also somehow in harmony with Christianity” (cited in Thurston 2007: 18). Elsewhere he reiterated: “I have no hesitation in saying that the ‘Buddhist’ view of reality and life is one which I find extremely practical and acceptable, and, indeed, I think it is one of the very great contributions to the universal spiritual heritage […]. It is by no means foreign or hostile to the spirit of Christianity, provided that the Christian outlook does not become bogged down in a slough of pseudo-objective formalities, as I am afraid it sometimes tends to do.” (cited in Thurston 2007: 22)

Thurston suggests that it was Merton’s positions as Master of Scholastics from 1951 to 1955 and as Master of Novices from 1955 to 1965 which particularly primed him to appreciate the Zen Buddhist approach. Training monks was a specific skill in which Merton was gifted. “Because Zen encourages direct, unmediated experience,” writes Thurston,

> its language and teaching were particularly valuable to this endeavor. Its preference for the concrete and tangible, its location of meaning in the ordinary tasks and problems of daily life, and its often high spirited, good humoured and irreverent approach appealed to Merton. Additionally, the Buddhist tradition is extremely acute psychologically and has developed very precise language to describe interior experience. It provides not only techniques to foster that development but a language to describe the radical re-ordering of perspective engendered. (Thurston 2007: 22–23)

The "direct, unmediated experience" of God or sacredness or a transcendent presence is something that particularly appeals to Coupland's most spiritual characters: Linda, Scout and Karen, Jason, Cathy and the narrator of "My Hotel Year" all to some extent strip themselves of their material trappings, even their bodies, to approach this presence directly.

The effects of the psychological acuity of Buddhist philosophy might be seen in the general sense of psychological centredness and coherence – silence and clarity rather than fragmentation and noisy striving – its tenets bring to these characters disillusioned with materialist evangelism. Crucially, too, it provides the language to describe this "radical re-ordering of perspective". If reality and perception are founded on language, it is only by having the language to describe their inner experience that Coupland's subjects can actually have the inner experience. Equipped with this language, Merton was able to describe this experience to his students; he was able to spread the word and unite others around it.

Merton, like many mystics before him, was constantly challenged with the paradox of being in a Trappist order, contemplating in silence, often in hermetic retreat, while still wishing to teach and to react to social conditions. It seems a conflict Coupland would identify with: his characters constantly vacillate between railing against the world with political intent and wishing to disappear from it. Ruben Habito (2007) explores Merton's meditative practice in relation to Zen practice and explains how his meditative practice led him to hear – and to respond to – in the words of his essay title, "the cries of the world".

Habito describes "the fruits of Zen life, […] those features that come to fruition in the life of one who engages in Zen practice" (Habito 2007: 92) as a journey through three stages. (Habito 2007: 92–98) To set off on a searcher's path to enlightenment, one must first experience *dhukha*, a sense of dis-ease and malalignment of the self and its position which leads one initially to search for inner peace. To address the *dhukha*, one takes the seated meditation – zazen. Second, an event of enlightenment, an awakening, comes after a certain amount of zazen: "there may occur an event that can stand out and become pivotal in a person's entire life journey. This may come in an unexpected moment". (Habito 2007: 94) Resonant with deconstructive philosophy, Habito describes this experience is really beyond description; he suggests that it is people's attempts to put the experience into words which often results in romanticization or idealization of the experience.

The third fruit of Zen life

> can be called ‘the embodiment of awakening in one’s daily life.’ […] An individual person who has been drawn to Zen by the experience of *dhukha*, or dissatisfaction, and existential awareness of one’s dis-eased condition, of a state of separation, alienation, disparateness of one’s being, experiences this third fruit as an overcoming of the sense of alienation and separation, and thereby as a ‘coming home.’ […] Such a person lives in the ordinariness of daily life, eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, going to work, getting tired, enjoying (or getting bored at) parties, washing the dishes, taking out the garbage, and so on. And in this ordinariness, one is fully at peace. At peace, indeed, but not smugly content.
>
> In this place of peace, one is not thereby rendered passive and indifferent to the rest of the world. Rather, as the second fruit is an experience of emptying of one’s self-centred delusions, an over-coming of the barrier that separates one’s ‘self’ from the ‘world,’ and an awakening to one’s interconnectedness with all, one comes to realize that what the world is, is precisely what one is.” (Habito 2007: 95–96)

It is clear that many of Coupland’s characters are affected by *dhukha*, worldly suffering, but only one, Linda, formally undertakes zazen practice to address it. It is important to recognize that once this peace has been attained, it can be applied to the world: it is not “indifferent to the rest of the world”; the seeker’s self is intertwined with the world.

One might compare this trajectory from *dhukha* through meditative isolation to re-engaged inner peace with the trajectory across Coupland's four novels. *Generation X* describes some of the sources of dis-ease but also celebrates its characters' ability to change their lives. They do not despair and they manage to change their life stories on their own. *Life after God*, in contrast, details a variety of characters affected by worldly suffering: faithless, lost, drifting, empty, self-mutilating, depressed. This time they seem unable to improve their lives through their own agency. Scout says, "My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and I can no longer make it alone." (LAG 289) *Life after God* describes characters who have grown older and are no longer in the natural, child-like state of grace that they once were. Scout describes himself, years before, swimming with his friends: "We would float and be naked – pretending to be embryos, pretending to be fetuses […] Our minds would be blank". (LAG 219) These children, still living in the semiotic womb-space, are able to achieve blank, meditative minds without effort. They, like the youngsters in *Generation X*, are able to make it on their own, without a god. *Life after God* culminates in Scout's dramatic act of meditative and self-effacing isolation; this moment can be read in effect as Scout – and Coupland's disillusioned characters en masse – sitting down to zazen, their first step to enlightenment.

Girlfriend in a Coma is centred around Karen's coma, which is her zazen, and Jared's meditation in his post-death limbo. The spiritual insights in the last third of the book might be seen as their samadhi, the awakening they have achieved through zazen, symbolized by Karen's physical awakening from her coma. Karen's and Jared's political re-engagement, however, lacks peace. As long as they narrate their stories to the world, they remain attached to it, unable entirely to separate their egos from their

material environment. Jared's exhortations are frantic. Karen is more removed and displays more inner calm than he, and ultimately it is her disappearance from the world – her ascension to nirvana, to mix Christian and Buddhist metaphors aptly – that grants the planet its second chance and reverses the novel's apocalypse.

In *Hey Nostradamus!* – which entails, as discussed in chapter 3.4, a reinterpretation of the themes and characters of *Girlfriend in a Coma* – Coupland paints a different picture of inner calm. Cheryl's deathly zazen is more resigned and disattached than Jared's and she appears to be moving to her "beyond". Heather, for her part, sets a very sympathetic example of an awakened searcher when she, unlike Karen, continues living in the everyday world, at peace in her unknowingness, "but not smugly content. […] not thereby rendered passive and indifferent to the rest of the world."

Merton followed a similar path from dis-ease to enlightenment and re-engagement with the world. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes his pilgrimage "from a state of inner chaos, toward a life of contemplative silence." (cited by Habito 2007: 98) His description of his experience of *dhukha* resonates with Scout's "feeling of [... c]haos with an undercurrent of disturbing randomness". (LAG 244) Merton describes his life before his decision to join the abbey as fraught with "inner vacuity, […] distress and anguish and fear". (Habito 2007: 99)

After his induction into the monastery, he advised followers how to practice in seclusion:

> The first thing that you have to do […] is try to recover your basic natural unity, to reintegrate your compartmentalized being into a coordinated and simple whole and learn to live as a unified person. This means that you have to bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence so that when you say 'I,' there is really someone present to support the pronoun you have uttered. (cited in Habito 2007: 102)

This account of Catholic monastic contemplation is remarkably similar to the function of Buddhist meditative practice. The seeker focuses inward and disassociates himself from the distracting fragments of the world. This stage of meditation towards a moment of awakening took Merton seventeen years from the time he entered Gethsemani. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he describes his moment of awakening. Standing on a busy street corner in Louisville, Kentucky, in March 1958,

> I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of 'separation from the world' that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudo-angels, 'spiritual men,' men of interior life, what have you.

> Certainly those traditional values are very real, but their reality is not of an order outside everyday existence in a contingent world, nor does it entitle one to despise the secular, though 'out of the world.' We are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution […]
> This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud […]. To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking. (cited by Habito 103–104)

This was Merton's moment of profound awakening, and from that day, he re-engaged with the world's issues. His description calls to mind Richard's own awakening at the end of *Girlfriend in a Coma*: "Think about all those crazy people you can see on the streets. Maybe they aren't crazy at all. Maybe they've seen what we've seen – maybe those people are us." (GC 281).

Merton's meetings with Buddhist leaders were part of this re-engagement, and as Habito suggests, although he remained at the abbey after this moment of enlightenment, he now used his solitude to aid the world rather than avoid it: Merton's solitude was "a decisive act of plunging oneself right in the midst of the wounded world, to partake [of] the tasks of its healing, in the particular way he was called." (Habito 2007: 109) "My solitude is not my own," wrote Merton, "for I see how much it belongs to them [the people of the world he noticed teeming in Louisville] – and I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to

them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not 'they' but my own self." (cited by Habito 2007: 109) Merton succeeded through his *dhukha*, his zazen and his samadhi in separating himself from the world and ascertaining a profound connection between himself and the other citizens of the world.

iv. The potential for quantum consciousness

Compassion and tolerance and engagement with social ills fostered by the process of contemplative and empathetic meditation might be seen as the light of Coupland's new religion. It has darkness too. Not a dark side, because "side" infers an opposition and a separation. In a postmodern religion, dark and light are inextricably imbricated. Taoism shows an ancient appreciation of this imbrication with its figure of yin and yang, the intercurling darkness and light which make up one unified, circular whole. Hidden in the very fabric of this circle is the potential for darkness and destruction: the destructive potential of subatomic particles. The nuclear bomb, that chain reaction of fissured atoms – in its abject alterity, its omnipotence, in the near-immortality of its waste[21] – is the touchstone of sublime awe for Coupland. If Merton's contemplation is the light, Einstein's and Oppenheimer's theories made real are the darkness. We recall Dag's pilgrimage to Scotty's Junction, Nevada, "where the atom bomb scientists, mad with grief over their spawn, would come and get sloshed in the Ford saloon cars in which they'd then crash and burn into the ravines; afterward the little desert animals came and ate them. So tasty. So *bib*lical." (GX 76) These scientists delved into the frontiers of

[21] See chapter 3.2

nature and inescapably, irreversibly, released a new transcendent darkness from the atom.

Adding to the mesh of links between contemplative religion and quantum physics, Phillip M. Thompson in his essay "Thomas Merton and Leo Szilard: The Parallel Paths of a Monk and a Nuclear Physicist" (Thompson 2004) provides a biographical bridge between Merton's life and the apparently incomparable life of Leo Szilard, a Hungarian-born physicist. Szilard was the first physicist to conceive of a nuclear chain reaction and in 1939 drafted the letter Albert Einstein sent to Franklin D. Roosevelt alerting him to the possibility of a Nazi-developed nuclear bomb, which led to the establishment of the Manhattan Project. Merton was a cloistered Christian contemplative, while Szilard travelled widely and was a secular Jew: "He exhibited no interest in formal religion and was certainly not interested in contemplative traditions. To the extent that he had a religion, in was an Enlightenment one, favoring an impersonal entity sustaining the rational patterns of nature." (Thompson 2004: 980) Nonetheless, Thompson identifies a number of striking resemblances in the intellectual style and evolution of these two thinkers.

Szilard, for instance, had a street-corner moment of his own, two decades before Merton's. In 1933, walking the streets of London in a scientist's version of meditation, pondering a scientific problem, Szilard tells, "as the light changed to green and I crossed the street, it suddenly occurred to me that if we could find an element which is split by neutrons and which would emit two neutrons when it absorbed one neutron, such an element, if assembled in sufficiently large mass, could sustain a nuclear chain reaction."

(cited by Thompson 2004: 980) Thompson argues that this was no mere coincidental moment of inspiration. He charts how "their evolutions reveal some striking parallels, including the tendency at different times in their lives to break radically from and toward the world […] and a tendency towards angelism." (Thompson 2004: 981) Though Thompson does not mention Merton's interest in Buddhism, he shows like Thurston how, in solitude, Merton operated on a rarefied plane disassociated from general society, and then re-engaged with the everyday world and its problems. Szilard seems to share this quasi-Buddhist evolution, starting from an attitude of angelism, described by novelist Walker Percy as

> the tendency of intellectuals to zealously seek a specialized and esoteric knowledge that transcends ordinary human experience. […] The inherent distortion in such a quest often eliminates or minimizes the value of other types of truth or reality. The seeker is propelled into an 'orbit' of refined reflection that makes the re-entry of the seeker into the normal flow of normal human life very difficult. […] A proper balance […] is lost to the demands of a pure and almost monomaniacal pursuit of the intellect or spirit. (*Lost in the Cosmos*, 1983, cited by Thompson 2004: 982)

Thompson elides the "almost monomaniacal" quests of Merton and Szilard, although, he notes, Merton's "objective was not the smallest of objects, an atom, but the largest, God." (Thompson 2004: 983) Thompson, however, need not polarize the concepts of God and the atom: in postmodernity, the quest for the quark is a religious quest. "The scientist is the prince and sovereign of his age," Percy continues. "[H]e stands in a

posture of objectivity over against the world. […] The problematical self, like the young Einstein who couldn't stand the dreariness of everyday life, discovers science and transcends the world. In orbit, he enters an elect community of scientists, however small, to whom he can address sentences about the world". (*Lost in the Cosmos*, cited by Thompson 2004: 982)

Although Coupland's reflections are far more populist than Merton's or Szilard's, this "'orbit' of refined reflection" could describe Jared's attitude in the last third of *Girlfriend in a Coma*. In these passages, Jared – amusingly a teenaged, jock ghost, but no less one of Percy's problematical selves – could be as guilty of a tendency towards angelism as Merton and Szilard; his elect community numbers six: the survivors of the *Girlfriend in a Coma* apocalypse. The challenge for all three is to speak and act in democratic terms that relate to a broader section of the populace.

In his essay, Thompson also discusses how Merton and Szilard were connected, both in their angelism and in their later politics. As a young man, Szilard felt that a rational government ruled by a scholarly elite was the solution to the world's political problems. After the Second World War – just as Merton would be brought back to the everyday world by the moral imperatives of the results of war – Szilard's "youthful search for utopian solutions was now modified by experience and replaced by the more realistic objective of trying to limit the chances for damage from the weapon." (Thompson 2004: 984) He helped form nuclear-control publications and bodies like The Council for Abolishing War and The Council for a Livable World. (Thompson 2004: 984)

For his part, in the late 1950s, Merton's interest in the effects of war led him to an interest in scientific matters, biographies of scientists and reading journals like *Scientific American*. In his diary, he listed "Niels Bohr and Co." as his "no. 1 cultural heroes". (Thompson 2004: 985) Finally, in April 1962, Merton wrote to Szilard to propose a common front of peace and anti-proliferation movements, including Szilard's councils. Szilard wrote back, promising to keep him informed on the state of his anti-bomb petitions. The two had no further contact. Szilard died in 1964. These two men from apparently opposite backgrounds were intimately linked, both in their priestly tendency to consider higher things, and in their eventual re-engagement with the world's issues.

The perplexing and mysterious pictures of reality discovered through quantum physics bring metaphor, contemplation and rationalist description ever closer. What scientists find when they analyse the results of quantum experiments increasingly needs metaphoric language to explain. (see Klein 2006: 571) Newtonian principles are no longer adequate to the task, and the reassimilation of the metaphoric Word seems to allow ideas of God back into science. There is a current debate in certain quantum physics circles about whether consciousness can be found in the subatomic realm, effectively about whether the existence of a transcendent presence can be proven scientifically. The fact that scientists are debating the presence of God in the physical universe is keen pointer to the post-Enlightenment intellectual trends which characterize the contemporary milieu with which Coupland grapples. The mysteries of quantum relationships uncovered in this interchange bear some remarkable similarities to deconstructive visions of what Philippa Berry calls "a post-religious, post-skeptical, and, crucially, post-dualistic consciousness." (Berry 2004: 171) What is the relationship

between post-dualist philosophy, particularly Derridean deconstruction, and post-religious religion?

"Suffice it to say that the vital contribution of deconstruction or poststructuralism to postmodern theory has not yet revolutionized the much less reflective field of international relations," Berry notes. "Yet through their repeated interrogation of the centrality to western thought of polarized categories such as light/dark, good/evil, atheism/belief, these discourses remind us of the need to reflect upon our ontological and epistemological deserts, as we reopen the shadowy and liminal terrain *between* opposing concepts." (Berry 2004: 177) Derrida – along with Kristeva – is a key analyst of this terrain between opposing concepts. According to Stephen D. Moore, he seeks "the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept,' a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime." (Derrida 2004: 39 described by Moore 1994: 57) This is Coupland's "what comes Next", a democratic, non-hierarchical belief after God. This new model might almost serve as an abject irruption into the complacent certainties of established religious structures. By counterpointing the following discussion of the potential for quantum consciousness with examples of the affinities between a putative quantum-Buddhist-based belief and Derrida's notions and ideals, I can demonstrate that Coupland's new religion is coherent also with deconstructive philosophy.

It is important to note that Derrida is at pains to distance himself from the tenets of traditional religion. "I think about nothing but death," Derrida dramatically states. "[…I]t's really the only thing that interests me, but precisely insofar as I do not believe

that one lives on post mortem." (Derrida 2001a: 88) As Nicholas Royle puts it, "Derrida is concerned with a radical thinking of faith, stressing that 'faith has not always been and will not always be identifiable with religion [or] with theology'. In particular he is interested in the nature and effects of what he calls 'faith in language'. […] As he puts it: 'I cannot lie without believing and making believe in language'. […] There is a faith, a strange structure of promise, which haunts everything we say." (Royle 2003: 35–36) Elsewhere he says that *différance*, that central organizer of his philosophy, "cannot be elevated into a master-word or master-concept, […] it blocks every relationship to theology". (Derrida 2004: 38)

There is, in addition, an illuminating body of work which tests the affinities between Derrida's philosophy and Buddhism, and it is particularly in Derrida's logocentricity and deconstruction where the two elide. "What is interesting about Buddhism, from a deconstructive point of view, is that it is both onto-theological (therefore what-needs-to-be-deconstructed) and deconstructive (providing a different example of how-to-deconstruct). What is interesting about Derrida's type of deconstruction, from a Buddhist point of view, is that it is logocentric", writes David Loy summing up certain central links between the two philosophies. (Loy 1992) Robert Magliola's book, *Derrida on the Mend*, (2000) first published in 1984, served to introduce this interesting comparison to an American audience. Loy wrote a number of important essays (for example Loy 1987 and Loy 1992) synthesizing and building on Magliola's work. Loy begins his key essay, "The Clôture of Deconstruction: A Mahāyāna Critique of Derrida" (Loy 1987) by citing Magliola's statement in *Derrida on the Mend* that "Derrida is indeed *on the verge* […] of *someway* else, if not a something else, but surely he has not

yet broken out of the turn. Derrida is in the turn of language, but he has logically demonstrated language to be not a turn but a labyrinth." (Magliola 2000: 48, Loy 1987: 59)

Loy concurs with Magliola, stating that "Derrida's radical critique of Western philosophy is defective only because it is not radical enough. His deconstruction is incomplete because it does not deconstruct itself and attain *clôture*: that much-sought *clôture* of metaphysical thinking which would also be the opening to something else." (Loy 1987: 59) Remembering when these pieces were written, and the evolution of Derrida's ideas in subsequent years, these criticisms may no longer be so valid, and recent years have unearthed further subtlety and great practical applicability in his work. What is interesting about the statements by Magliola and Loy, however, are their evocation of that space "on the *verge*" of something, which is Coupland's terrain. We could read Derrida's position on the verge of the ideal, always "to-come" as a sensitive reaction to the philosophical state of the world, rather than as hesitance. Coupland and Derrida refuse static certainty: it is incompatible with their subjects' lives.

Buddhisms and Deconstructions, (Park 2006) edited by Jin Y. Park is a fine primer to recent scholarship in the field. "Until recently," introduces Park,

> East-West comparative philosophy has been at best sporadic gestures marked by an imbalance in the way the Eastern and Western ideas were presented. […A]long with the emergence of nonsubstantialist philosophy in the West, a new direction in comparative philosophy is definitely on the horizon. *Buddhisms*

> *and Deconstructions*, with its acknowledgement of the plurality of both Buddhist traditions and deconstructive philosophies, is an attempt to mark such a change. (Park 2006: xi)

This complex and varied approach, including essays on Indian, Tibetan and Chan Buddhism, might help move this field of enquiry beyond exoticized readings of Buddhism, the "East" and the "West", and their various cultural concerns. The collection serves as an excellent foundation to a deeper study of the Buddhist-deconstructive nexus, which is beyond the scope of my current thesis.

Derrida's key criticism of religious structures is materialist. The uses and abuses of power perpetrated by organized and traditional religion and the ideology and philosophy perpetrated by it over time – indeed "the entire history of Western thought" – bespeak the "'powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire' for [a transcendental] signified, an order of being that would be fundamental and immutable, and 'place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign.'" (Moore 1994: 18) Simply put, this is an outdated but still extremely motivating quest for God, the ultimate Truth, the originating referent; the quest to defer death by affirming the binary primacy of life. But because this signified does not exist, "in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse […], a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences." (Derrida 1993: 225)

Coupland contributes to the liturgy of hierarchical power in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, when he has Jared proclaiming apocalyptic salvation in a traditional God-as-transcendental-

signified. The post-religious religion which Coupland begins to express in *Hey Nostradamus!*, on the other hand, is based on an incorporation of death rather than its deferral, on reconciling the yin and the yang, the constant everywhereness and nowhereness of the darkness and the light, the creative universe and its particles that could fission the entire creation into nothing at any moment. Religion in *Hey Nostradamus!* is re-imagined as a non-centric transcendent power that does not rely on vertical authority for its definition and its worth. "Metaphysical concepts are pure effects of *différance*, for Derrida;" writes Moore. "[T]hey have no meaning, no essence, in and of themselves, and as such are neither primary nor fundamental. [… Derrida] is determined to maintain the utter flatness of the differential plane that preoccupies him. This surface must have no privileged vantage points, no metaphysical peaks". (Moore 1994: 90–91) It is the non-God of Buddhism, of Heather's agnostic clarity and open soul, which the new religion invokes (rather than worships), the non-God of lateral relationships. The everywhere-at-once, nowhere-at-once existence of quantum wave particles seem a good place to look for this relational, differential energy.

***

Lothar Schäfer, a physical chemist, kicks off the quantum consciousness debate in the September 2006 edition of *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* with his essay comprehensively entitled "Quantum Reality and the Consciousness of the Universe: Quantum Reality, the Emergence of Complex Order from Virtual States, and the Importance of Consciousness in the Universe", (Schäfer 2006) in which he posits a "generally new quantum perspective of biological evolution" by which he argues that

complex order – including consciousness – develops from the "actualization of virtual quantum states […] which make it possible to suggest that a transcendent reality underlies the visible order of the world and is immanent to it". (Schäfer 2006: 505)

"At the foundation of ordinary things we find entities – atoms, molecules, elementary particles – existing in a kind of reality that is different than the reality of the objects they form," explains Schäfer.

> In a way these quantum entities, of which we and everything around us are made, are not quite real but are 'standing in the middle between the idea of an event and the actual event, a strange kind of physical reality just in the middle between possibility and reality,' as Werner Heisenberg wrote [in 1958]. Specifically, elementary particles can exist in states in which they have no definite position in space. That is, they are practically nowhere; they display aspects of consciousness in a rudimentary way; and they are able to act on each other without any delay over long distances. […] These discoveries must affect our views of human nature and, particularly, of our spiritual nature. (Schäfer 2006: 506–7)

The "nowhere" location of quantum entities is a powerful metaphor for the liminal locations I have discussed in this thesis, from the threshold condition of psychological abjection, to geographical edges and the middle of nowhere, to ghost-characters' limbo states. Nowhere, we remember, is where God is, according to Cheryl's mantra, and it is

in the negative spaces between binary assertions where deeper linguistic meaning resides.

"Is not the centre, the absence of play and difference, another name for death?' Derrida's constant concern has been with what he calls […] an '*affirmation [that] determines the noncentre otherwise than as loss of the centre*'" (Royle 2003: 16) The linguistic, semiotic, ideological, cultural centre, like God, is dead; now we must seek our meaning in the borders, in the spaces in-between. This is a fraught quest because, as Derrida says, "the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself". (Derrida 1993: 224) Can we construct a non-structured religious structure? We can try it by structuring it laterally rather than hierarchically. We can try it by basing it on a perpetually divisible idea that has no indestructible, incontrovertible centre. "'Différance' designates the fact that 'there is no atom'." (Derrida 1995: 137) There is nothing indivisible, nothing that can boil down to an essential whole. This concept is reiterated clearly by quantum mechanics: until scientists broke the atom, they thought the atom was the smallest, most indivisible unit of matter. Now they delve deeper and deeper and see that, at base, matter is made up of nothing at all: just waves and numerical concepts.

For Schäfer, this nowhere location is a result of the non-material basis of reality. Erwin Schrödinger and Max Born elucidated the idea that subatomic particles are made up of probabilities and waves, not of matter. Matter comes about at the moment of observation or actuation, when a potential position becomes an actual position. Schäfer theorizes that these actual states jump at the moment of their actualization from some

virtual and Platonic state, a state which is both transcendent of reality and immanent to it in the subatomic realm. "Virtual states can also be viewed as Platonic ideas," he explains. "Because they are not real in the material sense, the order that they define is a transcendent cosmic order that exists before it is real. *Virtual state actualization* (VSA) can be thought to be the mechanism by which the material world is secreted and separated from the wholeness of the transcendent order of the universe." (Schäfer 2006: 512)

A remarkable thing about quantum pairs – a pair of electrons in the same valency, for example – is their scientifically observed ability to communicate instantly over vast distances. Their signals are faster even than light, something thought to be a physical impossibility. This leads to Schäfer to conclude that "the nature of reality is that of an indivisible wholeness" (Schäfer 2006: 508) The two partners in the subatomic pair remain connected and "act as though they were one thing regardless of the distance between them", (Schäfer 2006: 508) and Schäfer draws the following conclusion: "If reality is nonlocal, the nature of the universe is that of an undivided wholeness. Because our consciousness has emerged from this wholeness and is part of it, it is possible to conclude that an element of consciousness is active in the universe." (Schäfer 2006: 508)

Another important feature of quantum entities in Schäfer's argument is that they

> possess aspects of consciousness in a rudimentary way […] Under certain conditions [quantum] systems change their behavior when what we know about

> them changes. […Q]uantum systems are sensitive to gradients of information. In the ordinary world of our conscious experience, the only thing we know which can react to the flow of information is mind. In this sense we can say that at the foundation of ordinary things we find entities with mindlike properties. (Schäfer 2006: 508–9)

This apparent proof of the existence of "mind" in the physical universe is a profound concept for those who would bridge the gap between science and religion and break down that rationalist duality – a project, too, of Derrida's. Schäfer excitedly announces that "that the materialism and naive realism of classical science are finished". (Schäfer 2006: 522)

It is not the new and perplexing mysteries being unearthed by quantum physics that Schäfer's opponents in the *Zygon* debate object to, but rather the unscientific conclusions he draws from his evidence. Schäfer's assertion that this all points to a "divine reality" and his appeal to "hope" are a metaphor too far for the scientists who react to his paper. Erwin Laszlo, for his part, criticizes Schäfer's unnecessary division of the universe into real and virtual states. "The simplest possible scheme of thought," Laszlo writes, "is that which obeys Occam's razor: it does not multiply entities (in this case a priori assumptions) beyond the bounds of necessity." (Laszlo 2006: 534) He goes on to change the name of Schäfer's "virtual" states into "potential" states, and his "real" states into "actualized" states. This way both states can occupy the same, real, paradigm and not have to make some transcendent leap from an imaginary condition to work.

Laszlo is careful, however, not to deny the mystery of quantum states, but suggests that they are better explained without forcing them into a framework involving divine consciousness: "[B]y negating the premise, we do not reach the converse conclusion (that mind events do not exist in nature); we do not reach *any* conclusion. We leave open the possibility that virtual states are no more an indication of mind in nature than actual states." Laszlo's non-conclusion seems appropriate to a new, non-dogmatic religion, one based not on metanarrated structures but on a Zen-like openness of mind, a denial of categorical Truth. It reminds us of Heather's calm, pacifist agnosticism. Laszlo's preferred lack of conclusion is an example of the panpsychic scientific approach: "The dual aspect form of panpsychism," Laszlo suggests,

> is the more appropriate paradigm for natural sciences, for it leaves it free to deal with a coherent set of observed facts without burdening the theory with transcendent nonphysical elements. At the same time it does not fail to acknowledge the presence of mind in the universe by recognizing that the evidence for it – which is one's own consciousness – is not an exceptional or supernatural phenomenon but an intrinsic inner aspect of all things in space and time. (Laszlo 2006: 541)

This is an interesting adaptation of the rationalist scientific ethos, a uniquely postmodern reaction to contemporary discoveries.

"As a consequence," continues Schäfer from the passage above, "from a tradition in our culture that is characterized by conflict between science and religion, we are now able

to enter an era of congruence and wholeness when it is meaningful to assume that physical reality is part of a divine reality and when what we know about the world is not in conflict with what we hope for." It is this non-scientific conclusion, not the evidence he presents, to which Shafer's detractors most object. Towards the end of his essay, Schäfer does admit, "We must be clear about the fact that quantum theory cannot be taken as a license for proposing paranormal effects, new age theories, and esoteric forms of magic. Nevertheless, we also must note that the materialism and naive realism of classical science are finished, and, at the level of elementary particles, aspects of consciousness appears." (Schäfer 2006: 522)

Stanley Klein, however, is forthright in his criticism of Schäfer's conclusions: "Unfortunately, the caveat about taking quantum theory as a license for magic is immediately followed by a magic statement that elementary particles have aspects of consciousness. It is as if Schäfer wants to bury the caveat." (Klein 2006: 569) His criticism, he summarizes, "is that Schäfer's discussion is misleading, because, although quantum mechanics says that almost anything can happen, it places strict quantitative constraints on the likelihood of anything happening." (Klein 2006: 568) Just because anything *can* happen in the quantum realm – including the emergence of minds and transcendent order – doesn't mean anything *does* happen – in fact, it is very unlikely to happen. This is clear from the remarkable stability of our physical world and its adherence to timeless physical laws.

Klein prefers to see the new discoveries from quantum physics as a bridge between science and religion, rather than a scientific proof of religious tenets, and he goes on to

list a number of ways in which our picture of quantum reality can serve as this bridge. Some of the spars of this bridge include the facts that quantum mechanics "provides an ontological status for free will", "is anti-Copernican in giving the observer a central role in creating reality", "has uncertainty", "has multiple interpretations", and "has unlimited possibilities" (Klein 2006: 570–71) Furthermore, quantum mechanics "is mysterious. Mystery is central to many theologies. It is neat to have a mysterious, commonsense violating ontology that reminds scientists to tone down their arrogance. Humility is good not only for oneself but also for one's dealings with others." (Klein 2006: 571) It is also neat, I would add, to have a religion based on uncertainty, which reminds priests and acolytes to tone down their arrogance. Quantum mechanics, Klein continues, as Schäfer also describes in his essay, "has nonlocality. We are tightly connected to and entangled with each other and nature."

If quantum mechanics proves that Coupland's characters are – physically, on the level of subatomic substance, as well as socially – "connected to and entangled with each other and nature", how should this knowledge affect their behaviour and their action? Does it imply a more fundamental duty to the world and each other, or at the very least does it confirm their social and environmental morality? How do they observe – how do they *practise* – their new religion? Jared and Richard desperately seek to inspire social action that is based on their new, profound insights, but as we have seen, their vision is flawed because it is partially based on the wrong God, a dead God. In reimagining religion, we should not give up on these "elaborate schemes" like Coupland has, but rather adapt them and make them more compatible to a new era.

v. Quantum contemplation and contemporary cultural conditions

Fragmentation is a popular trope for understanding the postmodern world. Many scholars complain of the isolation postmodern conditions bring about, but when considered in a different light, we see that fragmentation and separation are actually a result of Enlightenment rationality, while democratic strands in postmodernity are hierarchy-flattening, relational, and unifying, and show how postmodern citizens are connected. A new religion based on these strands could help to treat the isolated and fragmented condition of Coupland's characters. Armed with scientific legitimization of social ethics, and tempered by the humility of unknowingness, it can serve as a compelling basis for communal action and engagement.

Spirituality has often been put forward as a solution to the psycho-social ills of contemporary life, but clearly a conservative reassertion of outdated spiritual modes does not apply to contemporary subjects. Sudhir H. Kale (2004) usefully sums up some major characteristics of religion in the globalized era, indicating how religious practice has fundamentally changed in recent years. Interestingly, Kale's survey is published in the *Journal of Macromarketing* and its intent is to alert marketers to the commercial potential of tapping into these new religious tendencies. This does not detract from the value of his overview, and using his essay to expand on Coupland's counter-consumerist vision is perhaps an appropriately postmodern gesture.

According to Kale, globalized spirituality is used as a means of reterritorialization. Globalization upsets previously stable identities, leading to a sense of unease and lack of belonging, deterritorialization, and in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's terms, cultural schizophrenia brought about by the time-space compression of the globalized world. (Currie 1998: 103–105) Religious identity can stand in simply for national and local identity in these conditions but, as Kale suggests, the globalized world "also opens up new avenues for people to reterritorialize themselves. The vortex of time-space compression created by technological advances allows people to forge links with kindred spirits across continents. […] Internet newsgroups, mailing lists, virtual communities of every description, and the current trend in mass media away from broadcasting and toward narrowcasting can all be explained at least partially as attempts at reterritorialization." (Kale 2004: 98) Time-space compression is a concept borrowed by Deleuze and Guattari from physics which describes the effects of relativity and the gravity of massive objects on the time-space matrix. The relationality of quantum-level physics similarly destabilizes rationalist notions of time and space.

Next, Kale cites Enrique Dussel's notion of transmodernity as a characteristic of globalized spirituality. "Transmodernism," Kale explains, "seeks to bring together the best of modernity and the inherited wisdom of religious traditions. […] Transmodernity is a negation of the fragmented life dictated by modernity […]; it challenges the arbitrary division of people's lives between public and private, secular and sacred." (Kale 2004: 99) This definition, deliberately or not, is couched in the language of deconstruction. If its aim is to challenge arbitrary divisions and encourage a spiritual bricolage, it seems a mode that suits contemporary cultural currents well.

Kale goes on to discuss Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson's formulation of the "cultural creatives", who "share values grounded in spiritual transformation, ecological sustainability, and a sense of community." (Kale 2004: 99) According to Ray and Anderson, there are about fifty million cultural creatives, mostly in Western countries, who are challenging the excessive consumption and "more-is-merrier" (Kale 2004: 99) ethos of their dominating cultures. Their altruistic concerns mirror those of Coupland's sympathetic characters who are concerned with the environment and authenticity and search for deeper meaning against the selfish flow of the commercial mainstream.

Finally, Kale observes the syncretization of spirituality, "the mixing of elements from hitherto different and independent religious or spiritual traditions in the creation of a new belief system." (Kale 2004: 101–102) He notes that Eastern religions have been syncretic for millennia – Hinduism and Chinese Confucianism have been mixed with elements of Buddhism for a long while, and more recently Christianity and Confucianism have even mixed. "The process of spiritual syncretism – in vogue for hundreds, even thousands, of years in some regions and for only a few decades in others," suggests Kale, "will only intensify with escalating migration and ever-increasing access to information technology among all peoples in the world." (Kale 2004: 102) One could also mention Caribbean voodoo melanges and African animist religions among many other syncretic religious formulations. Ancient Greek religion, similarly, evolved under Romanizing pressure from a pagan, matriarchal form to a patriarchal one. It is more valid, perhaps, to acknowledge that religion is in constant flux, and only those who wish to assert the ultimate superiority and truthfulness of their

religion would deny this. There is nothing new about the evolution of religious forms; it is the forms themselves that may sometimes be new.

Robert H. King (2003) examines syncretic east-west religion in depth, comparing the spiritual philosophies of Thomas Merton and the Buddhists with whom he corresponded and finally visited in 1968. At this point, we recall in Habito's scheme, Merton's seclusion and contemplation had been followed by a moment of awakening and then the third fruit of Zen life: re-engagement with the world and in its politics. King contrasts Merton with other mid-century politically engaged spiritual leaders, Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King, and suggests that whereas their spiritual focus was on national political issues, Merton's were global. As such, Merton serves as an ideal example of engaged spirituality in a globalized age. His key political concern was war, "specifically nuclear war, which he saw affecting all humanity." (King 2003: 162)

When Merton met the Tibetan Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, on his 1968 trip, Nhat Hanh made him realize that "'Zen is not an esoteric and world-denying cult of inner illumination,' but has a 'rare and unique sense of responsibility in the modern world.'" (King 2003: 168) For his own part, "Nhat Hanh was impressed with Merton's openness, especially his nondogmatic, non-dualistic outlook" (King 2003: 168) which he associated with western spiritual outlooks. Dualist schemes are characteristic of the Enlightenment rationality that poststructuralist philosophers seek to break down.

Merton also corresponded for years with D.T. Suzuki, a Japanese writer and scholar of Zen Buddhism. Despite his appreciation of Zen Buddhism, Merton found there was one

aspect of the religion with which he could not agree: "He had a serious problem with the 'impersonal' language that Zen Buddhists use to speak of the Transcendent – whether or not they call this reality 'God.' [… Suzuki] could not conceive of God as a personal being. Godhead, for him, meant 'ultimate emptiness' – not the emptiness of nothingness, to be sure, but emptiness nonetheless – and one does not enter into a personal relationship with Emptiness." (King 2003: 168)

But people do enter into personal relationships with emptiness. Peering into the perverse abyss is nothing new in literature or philosophy. Coupland's particular preoccupation with nuclear demise – expressing death in frozen prose, bumping it from looming potentiality to quantifiable, locatable position to control and defer it – is another example of a relationship with emptiness. Scout's self-abnegation becomes a totemic fetish. The negating nothingness in Coupland's work replaces a dead God with whom people, perhaps, had personal relationships. Nothing is the modern God. God is nowhere.

Merton's conception of God is a positive one. It would have been interesting if Merton had lived longer and had been able to engage with deconstruction and negative theology, which at first glance might seem entirely incompatible with his faith. Robert King, however, suggests that Merton, steeped though he was in Catholic practice, was open to an evolving idea of the Godhead and incorporation of the sacred void. He tells:

> At a retreat he led for a group of contemplative sisters at Gethsemani in May 1968, just a few months before he left for Asia, he was asked 'Does it make any

> difference if you're a Catholic or not if there's so much good spirituality in all these other traditions?' In his reply, he makes it clear that he still considered the lack of a personal relationship to God a deficiency in Buddhism, yet he held out hope that with greater understanding the deficiency could be overcome. 'Something that has to be explored in the relations between Catholicism and Buddhism,' he said, 'is the fact that there's room for a personal understanding of what they call the "void."' The true ultimate for Buddhists, he explained, is the void or emptiness. 'But it's not a negative emptiness, it's a positive emptiness which is fullness.' (King 2003: 168)

It is in this apparently empty space – the aporetic space between – in which meaning resides. Merton believed that with greater understanding the space between the personal God and the void could be collapsed, and by poetic extension, that the polar stasis of competing religions could become a standing wave pattern, always interconnected, unified, and with infinite potential.

Like Merton, the French philosopher, palaeontologist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) discovered the unifying potential of a globalized world in war, presaging the Merton's political re-engagement over the nuclear bomb. Teilhard fought in the front lines in World War I and described how the Great War was "the first time the globe as a whole was engaged in a common action. […] The World War was a totalizing action by which humanity was coming together; and together they might build a New Jerusalem. […] In the global conflict 'a window was opened onto the deep strata

of what man is becoming. A region was created in which it was possible for men to breathe a heaven-laden atmosphere'". (King 2002: 29)

In his essay, "Globalization and the Soul – According to Teilhard, Friedman, and Others", Thomas M. King (2002) takes issue with Thomas L. Friedman's dualistic view of the globalized world which he made popular in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, first published in 1999. In this book, Friedman suggests that the spiritual alternative to the globalized world, symbolized by robots constructing Lexus cars from components made and sourced throughout the world, is the realm of the olive tree: home, where soul and spiritual value reside. This is a retrospective approach, with an old-fashioned vision of the soulful which exists separate from the evolving world. The olive tree does not seem strong enough to withstand the pressures and changes outside, and needs to stay cloistered and protected instead of engaging and meshing with those changes.

A conservative response to change is common and understandable, and Coupland sometimes falls into retrospective yearning for the past, especially, as discussed, the mid-1970s, the era of his – and most of his characters' – adolescence, their last flush of irresponsible innocence. On the other hand, Coupland also presents visions of a compatible relationship with the present and the future, most effectively summed up in Andy's secret parable about Edward in *Generation X*. Edward's story shows the exciting and vital delight to be gained by going out into the world, becoming part of the crazed, postmodern city, instead of hiding alone in his hermetic cocoon. Edward, after his period of seclusion, appears to have reached a state of Zen enlightenment which, like Merton's, is followed by re-engagement with the world. Spirit, argues Andy in his

parable and King in his essay, is to be found in the new world, not cosseted in a detached remnant of the old world, and this globalized space indeed offers much for the soul.

"The task of globalization is soul-sized," writes Thomas King, "and that for Teilhard meant that contemplation can continue into action, and the deep religious urge of the soul can find fulfilment in human work. Yes, there is still need for time apart; we still need our 'olive trees,' our times of silent recollection. But the work of globalization itself resonates with the soul." (King 2002: 32) Teilhard's spiritual evolution – from suffering to insight to engagement with the world – in many ways mirrors that of Merton although the details of his life are quite different. Coupland, too, sends his characters through the fires of war – Gettysburg, Vietnam and the Cold War specifically – before allowing them to discover the soul in the present, something only Heather does finally in *Hey Nostradamus!* In her calm disattachment, she is one of very few of Coupland's characters who is not trapped in nostalgia for the past or in terror of the future.

When Andy sees the smoke column from his car at the end of *Generation X*, he panics: "it was a thermonuclear cloud […] I waited for the sirens". (GX 204) But when he drives to it – drawn to the site by the gravity of the abyss – he realises that it is only a chaff fire on a farm. Many people have gathered to watch the fire: they become "charmed and unified" and a white egret swoops over them, and makes them feel "chosen". (GX 206) Fears of war have been transmuted into a divine blessing, into unity

and a “crush of love”, (GX 207) just as, for Teilhard, war would lead to a “New Jerusalem” and that “heaven-laden atmosphere”.

A new unified society, “charmed” out of the ashes of the old, calls to mind Zygmunt Bauman’s reading of postmodernity, that it “can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity presumptuously had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*.” (Bauman 1992: x) In many ways this sort of re-enchantment is the programme of so many of the thinkers behind the new religion I express on behalf of Coupland, whether they are secular philosophers, quantum physicists, physical chemists or religious contemplatives: all seek deeper meaning in the complex mysteries which have recently been uncovered and which have unsettled Enlightenment complacency. The old truisms are consigned to the fire. “[S]o many new and wonderful tropisms had been activated by the fire,” (GX 206) says Andy. The holy egret has been attracted by the insects escaping the fire; the scientists’ fire of fission has released a new God from the atom.

Teilhard’s philosophy was based on St Paul’s concept of the world as an evolving Body of Christ. Our mystical task, he thought, was to encourage this evolution. Eventually Christ would come to inhabit this Body fully, so that he was no longer separated from the world, but present in every part of it. “Teilhard argued that Body of Christ involves education, the environment, industry, international cooperation, and above all scientific research;” writes King, “on the new and unifying earth God would bestow his Soul. This was the spiritual meaning Teilhard found in globalization.” (King 2002: 30) If we were to take Schäfer’s line that the quantum realm is activated from a transcendent,

Platonic ideality, we can see how this transcendent Godhead – the Body of Christ in mystical Catholic terms – would inhabit every molecule of the universe. The fact that the quantum world is a modern discovery allows Teilhard's Christ to inhabit the world more intimately than ever before. Teilhard believed the world was evolving, and that science was part of its evolution.

vi. "Fusion entities": Narrative as quantum contemplative method

Stanley Klein's final science-religion bridge is probably the most important for a study of a novelist and his work. Quantum mechanics, he says, "is metaphoric. The particles of Feynman or the complementary waves of Schrödinger are metaphors. [Werner Heisenberg suggests that] quantum mechanics can be thought of as the dreams that things are made of. […] Knowing that science has revealed that the fundamental building blocks of our universe have a metaphoric, idealike ontology makes metaphor more acceptable." (Klein 2006: 571) When scientists begin to assimilate metaphor into their schemes, we are clearly in a changing world, and in deconstructive philosophy, meaning resides between the lines of language. Metaphor – words, narrative, story-telling, modifying our world through our words – is a fundamental method of cogent postmodern belief.

In *Hey Nostradamus!*, Jason first meets Heather in the check-out queue at a toy shop, and they start bantering about the imagined life of a toy giraffe at the counter – his

name, the car he drives, his apartment with unchanged 1975 decor, his friends – then go for coffee together. Heather recounts,

> I thought Jason was the most talkative man I'd ever met, but I later found out he'd said more to me in those two hours than he's spoken to all the people in his life in the past decade. He was obviously a born talker but he needed a ventriloquist's dummy to speak through. Somehow that dorky giraffe on the counter had pressed his ON button, and we had just invented the first of a set of what I would call fusion entities – characters, that could only exist when the two of us were together. […]
>
> In the end, I think the relationships that survive in this world are the ones where the two people can finish each other's sentences. Forget drama and torrid sex and the clash of opposites. Give me banter any day of the week. And our characters were the best banterers going. (HN 151)

The fictional characters of Heather and Jason are ventriloquist's dummies through which to talk. In many ways, these pure, unsullied creations are the most sacred, cathartic, healing presence in the book, and it is notable that they are a result of a process of fusion, a forging-together which Heather prefers to the fission of conflict and separation. These fusion entities allow Jason to talk for the first time in a decade, and this talk is therapeutic: it eventually leads to him exorcizing the trauma of Cheryl's death, the school massacre and its aftermath, and allows him to connect with Heather. Heather comments: "After his life of silence, I think that our characters were Jason's liberation." (HN 158)

Heather also tells how "when Jason and I fought, the characters went away. […] Our characters were immune to the badness in the world, a trait that made them slightly holy." (HN 222) Later, when Heather discovers that Allison, a fake psychic, has used the fusion entity characters to pretend that she is receiving psychic signals from Jason and to extort money from Heather, Heather admonishes her: "How could you use extortion when you were doing something so … *sacred*?" (HN 228) Allison's job of expanding and enhancing the fusion entities' stories in the way she imagines Jason would have done is expressed – as often, hesitantly, but expressed nonetheless – as a scared task. Allison, despite her intentions, was using the power of these stories to comfort and heal Heather, to make her transcend the earthly grief of losing Jason.

It is interesting to compare Heather and Jason's liberating stories about Gerard the Giraffe, Froggles, Walter and Benihana with the stories of the narrator of "Little Creatures" in *Life after God*. On his road trip with his daughter, they forget her Dr Suess book in a Chicken Shack. The narrator's daughter is attuned, like any young child, to the comforting repetitive liturgy of storytelling: "You refused to settle down until I told you a story and so I was forced to improvize in spite of my tiredness, something I am not good at doing." (LAG 18) He tells her a still-born story about Doggles, who was "supposed to have a starring role in *The Cat in the Hat* […] Except he had a drinking problem". (LAG 19) Unlike Heather and Jason, this narrator is a poor improviser and is unable to conjure up enchantment (recalling Bauman's view of the spiritual possibilities in postmodernity) and immediately disenchants the story with mundane disappointments imported from his own life. Squirrelly the Squirrel's art

exhibition never happens because "Mrs. Squirrelly had baby squirrels and so Squirrelly had to get a job at the peanut butter factory and was never able to finish his work." (LAG 20) Squirrelly's short tale, of course, can be taken as a condensed history of the narrator's creative failure, something for which he blames his daughter.

Clappy the Kitten, for her part, "rang up too many bills on her MasterCard and had to get a job as a teller at the Hongkong Bank of Canada to pay them off. Before long she was simply too old to try becoming a star – or her ambition disappeared – or both." (LAG 21) This vignette seethes with xenophobic anger at the fact that rich foreigners must employ overspent Canadians: clearly Clappy the Kitten perceives no value in globalization. These characters are neutralized by the "badness in the world" which Jason and Heather's fusion entities avoid. These stories serve no cathartic or liturgical purpose for the girl, and cannot help her, or the narrator, to transcend their depressed condition. The narrator tells his daughter that he felt "suddenly more dreadful than you can imagine having told you about these animals – filling your head with these stories – stories of these beautiful little creatures who were all supposed to have been part of a fairy tale but who got lost along the way." (LAG 22)

The narrator feels dreadful about having subverted the function of fairy tales which, like that of any ritualized repetitive myth like origin myths, religious scripture and gospels, is to create an ideal, transcendent realm of consensus and catharsis. We recall Julia Kristeva's statement that "The various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion." (Kristeva 1982: 17)

Barbara Creed succinctly summarizes how this cathartic process of ritualized stories works: "Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process." (Creed 1993: 8) The stories in "Little Creatures" get lost along the way to becoming true fairy tales – ritualized cathartic narratives.

Storytelling is often pictured as therapeutic Coupland's novels. At the beginning of *Generation X*, Andy discusses Alcoholics Anonymous meetings:

> fellow drinksters will get angry with you if you don't puke for the audience. By that, I mean spill your guts. […]
> 'Never be afraid to cough up a bit of diseased lung for the spectators,' said a man who sat next to me at a meeting once, […] 'How are people ever going to help themselves if they can't grab onto a fragment of your own horror? People want that little fragment, they *need* it. That little piece of lung makes their own fragments less scary.' I'm still looking for a description of storytelling as vital as this." (GX 15–16)

Inspired by AA meetings, Andy establishes the ritual of bedtime stories in which Claire and Dag share: these are the stories the characters tell to each other throughout the novel, from Dag's vision of the end of the world to Claire's story about meditative Linda. "The only rule," Andy says, "is that we're not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA, and at the end we're not allowed to criticize. The noncritical atmosphere works for

us because the three of us are so tight assed about revealing our emotions. A clause like this was the only way we could feel secure with each other." (GX 16) Despite his ironic, critical tone when describing the AA methods, Andy and his friends do derive genuine comfort from sharing their stories. They are in a therapeutic, confessional relationship, which allows them to vomit out their abject obsessions and their concerns and move on, like Jason, liberated. Andy is not entirely convinced by the security of this bedtime story relationship, and it is notable that his key vision, the story of Edward, is his "secret story, a story I won't even tell Dag and Claire". (GX 53–54) He tells it to us, though.

We remember that the subtitle of *Generation X* is *tales for an accelerated culture*. It is an album of stories, a set of gospels, epiphanies, parables, case studies and bedtime stories for Coupland's target culture. As if it is a course of therapy, a talking cure, the presenting problem is voiced by Dag when he complains at the beginning of the book that "the world has gotten too big – way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we're stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers". (GX 6) As well as too big, the world has become too fast, the culture too accelerated.[22] Claire reiterates this fundamental concern when she says that "it's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. 'Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them.' I agree. Dag agrees. We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind and came to the desert – to tell stories and make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process." (GX 10) This becomes the motivating statement for the entire novel and for much of Coupland's later work.

[22] Paul Virilio's conception of the politics of speed is discussed in chapter 2.1

Later, Dag explains his move to Palm Springs in similar terms: "My life had become a series of scary incidents that simply weren't stringing together to make for an interesting book, and *God*, you get old so quickly! Time was (and is) running out […] And now I'm here." (GX 36) In *Life after God*, Scout reiterates this when he considers that perhaps the "few little moments that have just a bit more resonance than other moments […] are the true story-making events of our lives". (LAG 205–206) The narrator of "Patty Hearst" says "when we can't figure out what our particular story is we feel lost somehow." (LAG 182)

Throughout these novels, there is an urge to "storytelling as a means to asserting identity", as Andrew Tate puts it. (Tate 2007: 40) Jason imagines how useful it would be to have a clone – "If Reg is against them, that means they're probably a good idea." (HN 87) – particularly because it would come with a user's manual, a ready-made, predetermined narrative for his life, so that he would not have to spend his energy devising his own as he goes along. "Imagine all the crap this would save you,' he says, "the wasted time, the hopeless dreams. I'm really going to think about this: an owner's manual for *me*." Narrative often serves this purpose in the novels: a means to sense and order, direction and instruction in one's life. For the Christian forebears of Coupland's characters, the Bible used to serve as a manual, but now it is inapplicable. Our personal narratives become our personal Bibles. Coupland's new religion is a literary cult founded on the power of narrative.

Heather is a court stenographer, copying down plaintiffs' and defendants' confessions, turning their oral testimony into written narrative. When stenography is flowing

properly, she tells, “it’s as if the things people are telling each other in court are emerging from my own brain in real time. It’s like I’m inventing the world!” (HN 165) Later, Heather says that stenographers “never get to be a part of the plot twist.” (HN 198) Coupland might be saying the same of writers, that they simply stand at a remove and record life, turn it into formal, written narrative: into scripture. It is a scared task, a God-like one. Writers, storytellers and stenographers invent the world.

Coupland has invented a world at the edge of the future, outfitted with all the raw materials for expressing a profoundly new potential for belief. His preoccupation with nuclear darkness and contemplative lightness, and his stories’ affinity with the liminal, abject, and aporetic spaces of contemporary psychology and philosophy allows us to imagine a future belief in the world he describes. This belief is not little nor is it handcarved, it is coherent with recent insights in philosophy, politics and science. Its power lies in the fact that it transcends the limits of the fragmented individual to bear both revolutionary and cathartic potential; it serves as a basis for action, and a fundamental, subatomic-level proof of Coupland’s subjects’ inter-connectedness. It might ultimately salve the isolation and lack of agency which afflicts them.

Conclusion

At the outset of this thesis, I stated that its central questions are psychoanalytical and political rather than religious. A new form of connective and ego-transcending belief is crucial to psychological coherence and political empowerment. The attendant public structures and functions of religion, rather than the specific dogma itself, have always been the socially important ingredients of any religion. Now that in Coupland's specific, apparently secular culture, old versions of God and Church are discredited, new forms are needed to fulfil those political and psychological functions.

The mistake postmodern subjects often make is to think that because the dualism and power structures of dominant, hierarchical religion have been exposed as fundamentally repressive and the tenets of their faith as mythological, the roles and functions they once played are no longer important and not worth preserving. This assumption is a major cause of the depressed and isolated conditions of the postmodern subjects about whom Coupland writes. As Walter Anderson and Maureen O'Hara write, "People are aware of having let go of something but not really confident of having found something with which to replace it. Neither they nor the culture nor the mental health establishment has a language for naming such small discoveries as explorations and triumphs." (Anderson and O'Hara 1995: 176)

In this thesis, I have used the linguistic and post-dualistic work of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida to distinguish between the base functions and the superficial trappings of religion. The psychologically cathartic and cohering and politically empowering

functions of religion remain important to addressing our deepest needs. Fictional narrative, as Coupland uses it, has the capacity to be constantly revised with every reading and reconsideration and needs never be categorical; it need not be concerned with the generation of truth but rather of multiple, subjective reflections on truth; it is a wave-pattern of potentiality rather than a vehicle for single, static, definitive meaning. The denial of categorical meaning in Coupland's fiction is thoroughly congruent with linguistic philosophy and the metaphorical mysteries of quantum mechanics, and is also a fundament of long-standing mystical strands at the fringes of monolithic religion. Intentionally or not, Coupland's very indecisiveness and refusal to settle on a definitive stance is radical; his deployment of narrative is uniquely suited to the task of expressing a new belief for people who have let their old beliefs go.

The functions of religion need no belief in a higher or supernatural power to keep operating, they need only liturgy and community. Fiction becomes the new, democratic liturgy and the realization drawn from quantum physics that humans and the universe as a whole are connected in intricate ways on a subatomic level can serve as a foundation for a profound sense of community. This realization is fundamentally politicizing; it breathes new life into lamented ideals of revolution. Compelling interpersonal responsibilities stem from our realization that we are connected. Just as we should not seek to reconstruct an old version of God out of sundered fragments, so we should not look to rebuild old, dead political systems. Equipped with the newly uncovered insights from science which validate time-honoured understandings metaphorically and instinctively apprehended by generations of mystics, we are in a position to reimagine religion and politics in a way that goes beyond deconstruction and reconstructive

attempts to rehabilitate old certainties. The distillation of Coupland's ideas which I have performed in this thesis, the merging of religion after God with philosophy after duality and science after certainty becomes radically significant. Individual subjects, once lost to solipsistic despair, are rescued from their isolation. Religion and politics, once thought dead and empty, have the potential for new life.

This thesis is positioned in a large gap in scholarship. Compared to the vast amount of popular coverage of Coupland's oeuvre, there is relatively little academic work on Coupland's books. To date there is only one book-length study of his work, (Tate 2007) which is an introductory sociological survey of his books and their cultural environment rather than an in-depth theoretical analysis of any particular aspect of them. The essays by Russell Morton Brown (2001), Jefferson Faye (2001), Veronica Hollinger (2002), Mary McCampbell (2009), Robert McGill (2000) and Andrew Tate (2002) on which I have commented in this thesis are the most interesting of the few essays published on Coupland. Each has an illuminating angle on Coupland's work, but they are all limited in scope and none of the angles, apart from Tate's, is subsequently expanded upon.

I have suggested that it may be Coupland's indecisiveness and his constant fluctuation that deters scholars. I would also suggest that the novels' superficial humanism, which seems to resist worthwhile theorization, belies their intellectual novelty and importance. Many of his novels remain entirely untouched by academic enquiry. I hope that this thesis might serve to rehabilitate Coupland, validate his work as a critical scholarly subject, and serve as a springboard for further examinations of his oeuvre. The approaches I have taken in this thesis are just some of many angles from which his work

can be read, and there is much more to read and much more to be uncovered. Coupland is difficult to read, precisely because of his apparent simplicity, but if read carefully, his novels reveal a profound and still avant garde commentary on contemporary conditions in his culture that goes beyond his public, mainstream pronouncements which are simplified for the sake of easily digestible publicity.

This thesis necessarily had a tight scope and there are many avenues of enquiry I could not follow. Scholars could fruitfully make more of the interpersonal responsibilities with which reconnected postmodern subjects are now faced. If we have expressed a new state of political connection, how should this change our behaviour, and how should this behaviour translate to more intimate relationships? Derrida's later thoughts on hospitality and donation have been discussed at length, but these ideas could well be applied to Coupland's novels which centre around families and interpersonal connections, especially *Eleanor Rigby*, *All Families are Psychotic* and *The Gum Thief*.

Much has been made of Don DeLillo's rehearsal of disaster in *White Noise*, but very little has been written about similar themes in other, more recent novels like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Raban's *Surveillance* and Chris Cleave's *Incendiary*. The eschatological theory I have outlined in chapter three could serve as a useful springboard for the presentation of apocalypse in a number of contemporary novels. I also noted the obsessive collection of data about the Columbine High School massacre. A great deal could be said about the psychological functions of the narrativization of real-life disasters specifically in a post-religious milieu. Likewise, the depressive complexes in Coupland's novels could be analyzed in terms of Kristeva's

later work on depression, *Black Sun*, in which she delineates a cause-addressing counter-depressive therapy which is more effective than symptom-treating antidepressants.

As I have discussed, a solid body of work has begun to grown around the nexus of deconstruction and Buddhism, and this reflects changes in eastern and western attitudes to religion. Jin Y. Park's collection of essays (Park 2006) goes some way in complexifying the elements of this relationship. Most of this work is in comparative philosophy, however, and it would be highly illuminating if applied to a broad range of contemporary fiction. Other contemporary religious themes include the role and application of liberation theology in third world communities. Ernesto Cardenal, (in Jobling et al. 2001) for example, shows how rereading the inherently repressive Bible becomes a gesture of real empowerment. Paul Hallam, (in Jobling et al. 2001) like Robert Allen Warrior, argues against the benefits of liberation theology and denies any revolutionary potential in scripture. This thesis has focussed on Coupland's heteronormative, white, suburban, North American milieu, and much could be made of reading his work from the perspective of gay, third-world, or other marginalized readers. I have hinted at post-colonial and anti-colonial readings of Coupland's work, and far more could be explored in this area.

Hallam also draws a parallel between Sodom and London. His ideas could be expanded to investigate Coupland's cities more deeply. I have suggested that Las Vegas is presented as a City of the Plain, but instead of being razed from the earth, it is colonized by corporations. Paradoxically, the remnants of sleaze become the city's last pointers to

quasi-sacred authenticity. Coupland's presentation of postmodern space can be examined further in reference to Charles Jencks's elaboration of postmodern architecture, and to the work of Henri Lefebvre and Mike Davis. Michel de Certeau's elaboration of postmodern flâneurism could illuminatingly be applied to Coupland's imagination of the city.

These are just a few of the avenues I did not venture down while writing, and I hope that reading this thesis will suggest countless others. Most of all, though, Coupland's unexplored novels cry out to be read closely in any way at all. We should not rely on mediated public pronouncements and second-hand reiterations of Coupland's incisive vision of his culture, not even his own; we should go to the source: not his PR statements, interviews and tweets, but his novels – those mysterious vehicles of metaphorical, shifting and ever-potential truth. To turn Coupland's colonial conceit back on him, a number of his novels remain virgin territory, open to analysis and objectification. Scholars who delve into them have the extremely rare opportunity to stake fresh claims and to say something new.

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