

## A Cosmopolitan New World: Douglas Coupland's Canadianation of AmLit<sup>1</sup>

by Karen E. H. Skinazi

In his *New York Times* blog in August, 2006, Douglas Coupland lamented the state of *CanLit* as, essentially, a literature in which old biddies talk about their small lives in small towns.<sup>2</sup> *CanLit* is a category, he makes clear, in which he does not fit. “In Canada, I was perceived as just not a Canadian writer,” he says, in the documentary, *Souvenir of Canada*, which is based on the book of the same name. “I thought ‘Oh God,’” he continues, “So next I started setting books here in Canada . . . and even then, like, four books later”—Coupland crosses his arms, shakes his head, and reports, in a satirical voice, “‘He’s still not Canadian.’ And it’s kind of weird, ’cause now I’m doing books *on* Canada and—” He shakes his head and changes tone again—“‘Nope, still not Canadian.’”<sup>3</sup>

Yet if Coupland and his compatriots do not recognize his place in *CanLit*, Coupland does recognize himself as a Canadian writer who is intent on investigating, as well as helping to create, the culture of his country through his art. Dedicating his book *Souvenir of Canada* to his father, “a more Canadian man is harder to imagine,” Coupland adds, “and to follow in his footsteps is the deepest of honours.”<sup>4</sup> Coupland has created numerous pieces that explicitly give language to the “Canadian experience.” In the category of non-fiction, *Souvenir of Canada* and *Souvenir of Canada 2* are coffee table books that use images of daily Canadian life to speak about and to Canadians. *City of Glass* performs this role for Vancouverites specifically. *Terry: Terry Fox and his Marathon of Hope* tells a story that is close to the hearts of most Canadians. And finally, *Souvenir of Canada*, the documentary, draws viewers into the world of Canadiana and that of the author/filmmaker, therefore defining Coupland himself as the quintessential Canadian. In fiction, Coupland takes a slightly different approach.

Instead of *CanLit*, Coupland perhaps considers his place among the writers of *AmLit*—a more adventurous bunch, presumably. Certainly, American critics have accepted him in their fold. In *Hybrid Fictions*, one of the few in-depth analyses of Coupland’s work, for example, Daniel Grassian positions Coupland as an American writer of “serious” American fiction, to be classed among the American writers David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Neal Stephenson, William Vollmann, Sherman Alexie, Michele Serros, and Dave Eggers, all of whom, like the American Modernists before them, are not being sufficiently studied in their own time, according to Grassian. Grassian does admit that Coupland is Canadian (“Canadian by birth,” he adds in parentheses in the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article and beyond, I use the terms “Canadianate” and “Canadianation” not merely as a pun on Canadian and nation, but to distinguish them from the terms “Canadianize” and “Canadianization,” which generally refer to making persons or products internal to Canada nationally-bound (immigrants to Canada are Canadianized, which is to say, they are made or become Canadian in law or in custom; a second definition refers to programs and institutions that are making themselves more nationalistic or patriotic by adopting Canadian content, and dropping foreign—usually American—content as a result). To Canadianate, I will show, is to insert Canadian elements (people, values, practices, vernacular, and so on) into a foreign context and thereby make that context richer, since the Canadian elements cannot be subsumed into a mononational discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Coupland, “What is CanLit?” *New York Times* (22 August 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Souvenir of Canada*, Dir. Robin Neinstein, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Coupland, *Souvenir of Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002).

first of three such confessions), but he insists that despite this geographical aberration, Coupland's writing, "even when it is based in Canada, appears almost indistinguishable from American fiction."<sup>5</sup>

This inclusion of Coupland's writing in the American canon is not to say that Coupland tries to "pass for American," which he jokes, in *Souvenir of Canada*, is easy to do, "as long as we don't accidentally use metric measurements or apologize when hit by a car."<sup>6</sup> Instead, I will demonstrate, he uses his unique vantage point as a Canadian who is writing "American fiction" to rewrite Canada back into American history. He highlights the Canadian presence in and influence on the United States and its culture. While many of Coupland's fictional stories take place primarily in American states, Coupland's hometown city of Vancouver does make regular appearances in his work.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he is always careful to balance his "American" locales with Canadian content. In fact, Coupland's "American" stories unfold in much the way that his sketch of Brentwood, California does, in the non-fiction collection, *Polaroids from the Dead*: Brentwood is first described as an American place with no history; then it becomes clear that it is a place with some history; suddenly, it is a place with Canadian history; and finally, it is a place rich with possibility. In much of Coupland's fiction, Canadian references, characters, and relationships, as well as visits across the border proliferate. Coupland more than litters his "American" novels with Canadian artefacts; he *Canadianates* the American landscape, extending the notion of "America," or the New World (a term he favours) to include both Canada and the United States, separate but overlapping entities that suggest a cosmopolitan ideal of "(re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance."<sup>8</sup>

### **An Interrogation of Time and Place: Moving beyond history and geography?**

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2003), 17, 183n. Also see Ryan Moore, "'... And Tomorrow is Just Another Crazy Scam': Postmodernity, Youth and the Downward Mobility of the Middle Class," in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, Ed. Joe Austin and Michael Niven Willard (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 253-271. Moore discusses issues such as nihilism, ironic distance, and longing for depth in "post-war America" as exemplified by such books as Coupland's *Generation X*, *Life After God*, *Polaroids from the Dead*, *Microserfs* and *Shampoo Planet*. Seeing the lack of hope in Coupland's novels, which cannot "produce their sense of torment without the coexistence of desire for the transcendent and the inclination that all accessible strategies are, in the end, exhausted and ineffectual," Moore turns to a space in which he believes the process of active collaboration can occur: post-punk rock 'n' roll (256, 264). Moore at no point states his recognition that the author he uses to illustrate the "underachievement, disaffection, and apathy of . . . America's white middle class," is not American, and is not limiting his palette to the depiction of an American phenomenon (253). Were Moore to understand the larger arc of Coupland's project, he might see that despite the "underachievement, disaffection and apathy" of his characters, these characters are also a projection of hope. Coupland's mixed national communities, like post-punk rock 'n' roll, are busily engaged in the process of active collaboration.

<sup>6</sup> Coupland, *Souvenir*, 63.

<sup>7</sup> *Generation X* and *Miss Wyoming* are set in California, *Shampoo Planet* and *Microserfs* in Washington, and *All Families are Psychotic* in Florida (in part). Vancouver is the backdrop of *All Families are Psychotic*, the setting for several stories in *Life After God*, and for the novels, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, *Hey Nostradamus*, *Eleanor Rigby*, and *JPod*. For a discussion of Coupland's employment of Vancouver as an "elusive, malleable" and postmodern city, see Robert McGill's "The Sublime simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's geography of apocalypse," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 70 (Spring 2000), 252-276.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Robbins, "Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 3.

In the preface to *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, Donald E. Pease writes of the “‘emergence of global democracy’—whose impact on global politics was registered in the collective recognition of a postnational world.”<sup>9</sup> Coupland tests out this idea that the world is postnational—that history and geography no longer count. Andy, the narrator of *Generation X*, is from Portland, Oregon, and his roommates Dag and Claire are from Toronto and Los Angeles respectively, but the three identify as the “poverty jet set, an enormous global group.”<sup>10</sup> “Where you’re from feels sort of irrelevant these days,” Andy tells us.<sup>11</sup>

In general, markers that might identify characters—last names, physical features, religions, or genealogies—are either absent or generic in the land of Coupland. And in the Palm Springs setting of his first work of fiction, *Generation X*, there is not even “weather . . . —just like TV,” Coupland writes.<sup>12</sup> Entering this land is entering a world with very little sense of human particularity. Even history is a billboard to be plastered over with each new era. As the world has grown “way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it,” Coupland and his characters must find new ways of telling stories, and new ways of thinking about the places in which they anchor their stories.<sup>13</sup>

“[H]istory and geography are what’s being thrown away,” says Canadian-American Tyler Johnson (born in British Columbia, living in Washington state), the narrator of Coupland’s second novel, *Shampoo Planet*.<sup>14</sup> With all the new information emerging at the end of the twentieth century, Tyler comes to understand that old information has to make room for the new. This disposal has its justification:

[W]hat is geography to Harmony or Pony or Davidson, who speak to people all over the planet every day all at once on their computer nets and modems? Or what is history to Mei-Lin or Gaïa, who receive seventy-five channels on their families’ dish-TV systems? . . . my friends are better prepared mentally for the future that is actually going to arrive. Nature always prepares her babies for what they’ll need. Me and my friends are throwing-out consultants. Wish us luck.<sup>15</sup>

Characters of the “enormous global group” accept, with a degree of uncertainty, a new world order in which the old rules no longer apply.

As it turns out, however, history is not quite obsolete, as one chapter in *Generation X*, entitled “Quit Recycling the Past,” indicates. Coupland *does* recycle the past, playing out the interdependence of the North American countries through a number of experimental techniques, including his revision of American mythology. In *Generation X*, Coupland evokes the legendary Puritans’ errand into the wilderness with his story of Andy, Dag, and Claire seeking refuge in the desert. Andrew Tate, in his investigation of

<sup>9</sup> Donald E. Pease, ed. *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), vii.

<sup>10</sup> Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. This image brings to mind the cyberspace of William Gibson, whose *Neuromancer* begins with the line, “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.” William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 2000), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Coupland, *X*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Coupland, *Shampoo Planet* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992), 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

religious epiphany in Coupland's writing, notes that Coupland "recreates the oldest European-American story: the journey west by a group hoping to find sanctuary and sanctity or a new Canaan that might accommodate a persecuted people."<sup>16</sup> Tate recognizes, of course, that Coupland's Palm Springs is not identical to the original errand into the wilderness, since in *this* desert is a city. But more significantly, perhaps, is the framing of this place of transcendence.

Unlike the Puritan-pilgrims seeking freedom and the chance to create a shining city upon a hill in America, Coupland's postmodern-pilgrims seek multiple refuges in phenomena in multiple countries in *North America*. *Generation X* opens and closes with the narrator participating in scenes of the natural sublime beyond the borders of the New Canaan, whether that New Canaan is the desert or "America"—unless "America" means something larger than the United States. At the beginning, the narrator flies to Canada to witness the total eclipse of the sun in the Manitoba prairies, and in the end, he is grazed by the talons of a near-mystical egret that draws blood and the love of a crowd of strangers in Mexico. These moments—along with the "shopping malls and bad architecture"—complicate the possibility that the desert could have ever been a natural refuge; in fact, as the sector between the bookend "epiphanies," to use Tate's language, the American desert seems the least likely candidate as a place of redemption, refuge, or renewal.<sup>17</sup> Tate's reading of *Generation X* as the "oldest Euro-American story," the story of the descendents of Europe, the New Adams, creating a new world in the New World of America, then, does not quite account for the continual movement in the text—both to and *from* the United States.

Grassian also has an Americanist's reading of this story. Rather than focus on the movement *to* the American desert at the beginning, Grassian concentrates on the movement to Mexico at the end. Grassian reads this ending as an escape from postmodern American culture, and he compares it to the expatriatism of Hemingway, Stein, and the other American Modernists (94). I think, however, that the opening scene in Canada undercuts the possibility that Coupland is simply invoking this (expatriate) American tradition without fundamentally changing its core Americanness. In modernizing and transnationalizing the image repertoire of the American national narrative, in making Dag, one of the protagonists, Canadian as well as American, and Andy, the central consciousness of the book, seek solace in Canada and Mexico, as well as the United States, Coupland might be invoking the Modernists, but he is not simply recycling their stories. In Coupland's book, the American story is only part of a larger story—or continent. In this version, the map of North America is completed, and it now includes Canada, the United States, and Mexico. His characters do not cross the ocean to Paris (in *Shampoo Planet*, they do, with dire results), but instead remain on land, and change national American myth into international North American myth.

Geography, then, like history, is not quite obsolete in a world that "has gotten too big."<sup>18</sup> This geography, however, is not the demarcation of political borders, or the focus on specific locations. Instead, many Gen-Xers have "Terminal Wanderlust: A condition common to people of transient middle-class upbringings. Unable to feel rooted in any one

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Tate, "'Now—here is my secret': Ritual and Epiphany in Douglas Coupland's Fiction," *Literature and Theology* 16.3 (Sept. 2002), 330.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>18</sup> Coupland, *X*, 5.

environment, they move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location.”<sup>19</sup> In Coupland’s North America, in fact, one can rediscover Jack Kerouac’s open road, a space for movement, the symbol of freedom. But this road is also the path to and symbol of connection—to the countries that share the continent.

*On the Road*, however, would offer a limited scope for Coupland’s characters. Whereas Kerouac’s main characters, Sal and Dean, do manage to make it to Mexico (after ping-ponging back and forth across the United States repeatedly), they do not conceive of a Northern border, it would seem—which is odd, considering that Kerouac was a self-proclaimed “Canuck” who wrote of his French-Canadian roots in almost every work but this one. There is something of Kerouac, perhaps, in his “Ghost of Susquehanna”—the figure who is unable to get to Canada (despite eternally trying); this Ghost from *On the Road* reappears in *Pic*, also heading to “CANADY.”<sup>20</sup> Pic says that the ghost has been “lookin for Canady in Virginia, West Virginia, West Pennsylvania, North New York, New York City, East Arthuritits and South Pottzawattomy for the last eighty years . . . He’ll never find the Canady and he’ll never get to Canady because he’s goin the wrong way all the time.”<sup>21</sup> Coupland’s characters, on the other hand, use the open road to its full extent: from Canada, through the United States, all the way to Mexico. Coupland’s global teens and twenty-somethings, in other words, use the road to traverse the border freely and join the countries together on and through the road that unites them. Dag’s Ontario license plates, “covered in a mustard crust of Oklahoma mud and Nebraska insects,” wind up in San Felipe.<sup>22</sup>

This freedom from traditional notions of both history and geography comes with a strange price: irony. Departure from familial expectations and escape into mobility, in Kerouac’s novels, do not necessarily mean finding easy answers to questions of identity; at the very least, however, they do mean breaking free from a settled, conformist life. Yet the seemingly-rootless mobility in Coupland’s books, coming at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, might impress readers as being tired and overdone. Coupland addresses this criticism himself. In Coupland’s *Miss Wyoming*, John Johnson is told in response to his ideals of the romance of the road: “The road is *over*, John-O. It never even was. You’re thinking like a kid behind a Starbucks counter sneaking peeks at his Kerouac paperback and writing, ‘*That’s so true!*’ in the margins.”<sup>23</sup> Why does Coupland mock his own literary devices? Is he suggesting that for the superironic ’90s and ’00s characters that populate his novels, not much can be done in earnest?

Ultimately, in Coupland’s novels, much *is* done in earnest, including John Johnson’s search for his soul on the road. Inevitably, characters in a given Coupland novel hit a brick wall in their efforts to be globalized and post- and Mc- everything, and look for something greater. Here is where the power of Coupland lies—in his ability to inscribe communitarian values in his fiction. Characters, as “God-hungry” as Gibson’s *Neuromancer* characters, who Rob Wilson says are “searching for the ultimate Matrix or

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*. 1955 (New York: Signet, 1957), 87.

<sup>21</sup> Kerouac, *Satori in Paris* and *Pic* (New York: Grove, 1985), 229.

<sup>22</sup> Coupland, *X*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Coupland, *Miss Wyoming* (New York: Random House, 1999), 52.

Code—to appropriate the transnational sublime of this new technoscape,” might find themselves unable to use their “ultramodern” technologically advanced New World Order machines to “accidentally build God.”<sup>24</sup> They are able, however, to build bridges between themselves, to connect in a way that seems unlikely for characters that are described as ironically detached hipsters who live in “modernariums” and favor hotel rooms over homes for their generic anonymity.

North America is the bedrock for Coupland’s books, the only place for human bridges to be built, for the “idealized sense of community” to be found, and it is a place both dangerous and compelling. In *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederic Jameson argues that “a model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organising concern.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, in the eschatological vision dreamed up in *Generation X*, the twisted way the era has stamped Canadian and American “geography” (as symbols of potential destruction) onto the brains of Gen-Xers is revealed:

your minds become the backlit NORAD world map of mythology . . . and on it are the traced paths of fireballs, stealthily, inexorably passing over Baffin Island, the Aleutians, Labrador, the Azores, Lake Superior, the Queen Charlotte Islands, Puget Sound, Maine . . .<sup>26</sup>

Post-Cold War “citizens of the world” need to rethink their goals and motivations in life, and Coupland’s characters are shown to hold on to the NORAD maps of their minds while they simultaneously realize that they must reconfigure these morbid constructions. NORAD maps slowly transform from symbols of potential mass destruction to those of mass construction of their “enormous global group.”

The Cold War and its aftermath clearly shape Coupland’s thinking as a citizen of the world, more specifically of North America, and most specifically of Canada. Americans growing up during the Cold War might have believed that they were engaged in a battle between good and evil but Canadians, according to Coupland, believed they acted as the proverbial monkey in the middle:

In the 1970s, one of the first things we learned when studying geography is that Canada lies between the U.S.S.R. and the United States. World War III was slated to begin above the Canadian north—that never seemed to be negotiable when decoding the strategies of both superpowers—and thus Canadians were stuck with this grim geographical position.<sup>27</sup>

Carrying the Cold War legacy, Coupland believes that the fates of Americans and Canadians are intimately bound up, each important to the other; the U.S. would have been the active player in World War III had it happened as was imagined in the 1970s, and Canada the immediate recipient. Coupland’s books are sometimes read as “American,” but in Coupland’s rendering of the North American landscape, Canada’s

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<sup>24</sup> Rob Wilson, “Techno-euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime.” *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, Ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 210; Coupland, *Shampoo*, 219.

<sup>25</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (NY: Verso, 1991), 51.

<sup>26</sup> Coupland, *X*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Coupland, *Souvenir*, 22.

role is always significant, be it as player, receiver, or middle ground. Coupland always seems to be offering a friendly reminder that while “America” looms large, “North” is important, too—to itself and to its neighbor.

### **Canadian Invasion: Bewitched Borders and Bi-Nationals**

In Coupland’s fiction, scenes of Canadian-American border-crossing reinforce national distinctions while at the same time they are so seamless as to be forgettable—or *magic*. In *Generation X*, “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 *remember* driving home or crossing the border.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in *Hey Nostradamus*, Jason forgets all that occurs between ingesting a lethal combination of scotch and “magic” pills in Vancouver one night and simply being in Seattle two nights later, riding shotgun in an Audi sedan on Interstate 5. It occurs to this character that it might prove to be a problem that in his vest pocket is a “palm-thick wad of fifties, but no ID” considering he is “a Canadian in the U.S. most likely on shady business.”<sup>29</sup> Yet if it were a problem, he and we never know of it; after taking another magic pill, Jason finds himself on the north side of the border once more. And *All Families Are Psychotic*’s Wade has no problem crossing back and forth either, perhaps because his wallet is stuffed with four IDs—from British Columbia, Quebec, Missouri and Nevada. He does not hail from all these places—two provinces, one east and one west, and two states, one central and one southwest—but he somehow manages to be a part of all of them, a creature who not only lives on both sides of the border, but encompasses the whole of North America in his identification and his identity.

For Wade then, as for Jason, and for Edward, border-crossing into the United States *does not happen*, even as it does. The act is deliberately unnarrated, or, in Couplandian terms, *denarrated*. What is at stake in denarrating the border, in creating invisible, magical border-crossings that in no way resemble either classic literary images or even contemporary satirical ones of arrival to the United States? Missing is the dramatic moment of arrival in the “Promised Land” where Mary Antin writes of a rebirth: “I have been made over.”<sup>30</sup> Lacking is the overture in Henry Roth’s heavily symbolic *Call it Sleep* (1934), where David Schearl discovers, upon arrival in America: “rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swamy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty.”<sup>31</sup> Absent even is the humorous, postmodern revision found in Gish Jen’s novel *Typical American* (1991), where Ralph-formerly-Yifeng Chang arrives in America and discovers that his first “image of freedom, and hope, and relief for the seasick” consists of “the pylons of the Golden Gate Bridge . . . [which] he couldn’t make out . . . until he was almost under it, what with the fog.”<sup>32</sup> Although the moment of arrival on American soil is simply eclipsed, leaving readers no clue as the emotional states of Coupland’s characters, the lack of narration suggests that Coupland’s characters do not despair at the loss of ties with their home countries, or swell with hopefulness at the potential of their new one. This missing emotional content speaks to Elliot Robert Barkan’s argument that

<sup>28</sup> Coupland, *X*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Coupland, *Hey Nostradamus* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 124.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, 1912 (New York: Penguin, 1997), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep*, 1934 (New York: Avon, 1971), 14.

<sup>32</sup> Gish Jen, *Typical American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991), 7.

cultures of “commuting immigrants,” or immigrant communities from nearby homelands, develop differently from those with distant origins because bi-directional flow of individuals between their new country and their original homelands is more likely.<sup>33</sup>

Giving Canadians coming to the United States almost-magic border-crossings or bi-national identification, then, Coupland reconfigures the idea of a border in his Canadian-American fiction. The arrival in the United States is neither the cutting off of old national ties nor the adoption of new ones; it is a fastening of two ties, a binding of international, intra-North-American ones. Coupland, however, is careful not to erase the border altogether, even as his characters “forget” it or cross it with multiple pieces of cross-identifying identification. In fact, the four pieces of identification, and the magic pills, both a little dreamlike, unrealistic, ultimately draw attention to the border.

Canadians might *seem* like Americans, but in the end, Coupland exposes the artifice, flips over his magician’s hat to show his readers the secret rabbit within; his border-crossing Canadian characters are always marked, named, and recorded as Canadians in the United States. Identifying them is important to Coupland, probably because appearance and language do not always make national distinction obvious—although with his typical sense of ironic wit, Coupland has two Canadians muse that an American’s charm lies in his “big American teeth” in *All Families are Psychotic*.<sup>34</sup> If his Canadian characters *were* to indeed “pass for American,” difference would be collapsed. Because the Canadians in the United States do not “pass” as simply American—because Coupland paints a surreal, *Alice in Wonderland* quality to the forgotten border-crossing, and highlights the citizenship of his Canadian characters in the United States, he reminds his readers that the sum of the United States is greater than its American inhabitants.

In addition to Canadians visiting the United States, Canadian-Americans, or Americans of Canadian birth or descent, visibly populate the United States of his novels. As he is sure to point out to his readers, Dag in *Generation X* was born in Canada but lives in the United States with dual-citizenship.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Tyler in *Shampoo Planet* was born in Canada but lives in the United States. Sarah in *All Families are Psychotic* was born in Canada but works in the United States. Although he also includes Americans living in Canada (Ted in *All Families are Psychotic* is one), Coupland concentrates less on an Americanized Canada and more on the infiltration south, creating the picture of a United States that has been *Canadianated* by its large quantity of Canadians that inhabit it and are integral to its culture (even if that culture is a fictional one). Canadian Sarah in *All Families are Psychotic*, for example, is the first handicapped NASA astronaut going into space; Canadian-American Tyler in *Shampoo Planet* is poised to revolutionize the theme park and garbage industries with the creation of *HistoryWorld*<sup>TM</sup>, where visitors pay to dig through abandoned landfill sites.

Canadian-Americans are always “outed.” The dual-citizenship, with difference

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<sup>33</sup> Elliott Robert Barkan, “Proximity and Commuting Immigration: An Hypothesis Explored via the Bi-Polar Ethnic Communities of French Canadians and Mexican Americans,” *American Ethnic Revival: Group Pluralism Entering America’s Third Century*, Ed. Jack Kinton (Illinois: Social Science and Sociological Resources, 1977), 165.

<sup>34</sup> Coupland, *All Families are Psychotic* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 48.

<sup>35</sup> Officially, the United States government does not recognize dual-citizenship, but unofficially, dual-citizenship is tolerated. A touchy subject in the post-9/11 environment, much has been written about it. See, for example, Jack Kelly, “Number of dual citizens in U.S. soaring,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (15 May 2002). According to the Canadian *Citizenship Act* (1977), Canada officially recognizes dual citizenship.



between the two citizenships not being “essential,” but primarily legal, categories, could theoretically go unnoticed. But Coupland does not allow his characters to “pass,” as Nella Larsen does not allow her half-black, half-white character, Clare Kendry, to “pass” for white—even though, in the world of *Passing*, she *can*.<sup>36</sup> Larsen does not allow Clare to successfully live the life of something she is (for she *is* white, as surely as she is black), and Coupland does not allow his characters, even the dual citizens, to move through the course of his novels as something they are (for the dual citizens *are* American, as surely as they are Canadian), either—not without exposing the something else that they are, too. Yet therein lies the difference between the authors; Coupland, unlike Larsen, does not confine his characters to a single category, but insists on multiply-identifying them.

The result of these machinations is that Coupland’s characters form a picture of a cosmopolitan America that does not perpetuate the insularity of “America”—the “historical malaprop” that marks the United States of America, as Djelal Kadir argues in the introduction to the 2003 *PMLA* special issue, “America and Its Studies.”<sup>37</sup> Whereas Coupland is incorporative of Canada in his America, he attempts, I would suggest, avoiding what Kadir accuses the New Americanist project of being: “appropriative, assimilationist, and acculturating.”<sup>38</sup> Rather than “homogenizing diversity into identity and interpolating alterity into ulterior sameness,” Coupland constructs a fictional cosmopolitan landscape which is “oriented to the individual” as David Hollinger describes it in *Postethnic America*, so that each character can be viewed “as a member of a number of different communities simultaneously.”<sup>39</sup> Although *All Families are Psychotic* is set, for example, in the United States, we read the story of each individual writ beyond nation, and within their multiple communities. In one community that Janet and her husband share, there is a collection of friends they have gathered as a couple over the years. In another, wholly separate community of which Janet is a part, she, a twenty-year-old Persian, a seventy-one-year-old Legionnaire, and a middle-aged lesbian, come together to deal with having AIDS. Beyond her physical communities, Janet also has her familial community—a scattered one. Every morning she wakes up and thinks, “*My children—where are they?*”<sup>40</sup> Her children live on both sides of the Canadian-American border. Janet’s affiliations extend even further; she communicates regularly with the members of her medical chat groups, an extended internet community that makes her “feel connected in a manner TV never did.”<sup>41</sup> Through Janet’s life, Coupland depicts the multiple, contingent and overlapping circles of friends, family, and networks—national, continental, and global—in which the typical North American is at different times and places engaged.

Kadir contends that “we have to pursue, consciously and assiduously, a comparative and relational refocusing of America in the larger world context.”<sup>42</sup> Coupland cogently achieves this end. In *All Families are Psychotic*, he devises a scene in which three characters with three different nationalities—none of them American—come together in the United States: Florian, the Swiss entrepreneur who resides in the Bahamas

<sup>36</sup> Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> Djelal Kadir, “Introduction: America and Its Studies,” *PMLA* 118.1 (2003): 21.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 86.

<sup>40</sup> Coupland, *Families*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Kadir, 22.

because of the tax breaks there; Janet, the Canadian housewife from Toronto, by way of Vancouver, who is staying in Florida to watch her NASA daughter's launch into space; and Cissy, the Ugandan prostitute with British foster parents who has been living at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. Florian, Janet, and Cissy luxuriate in the openness of the United States which, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, lacks a centering common culture, but provides, instead, a political culture that "values individuals and celebrates, with cosmopolitanism, the great variety of what individuals will choose when given freedom."<sup>43</sup> While Appiah's interest is in citizenship, his description of the United States as an "instrument" works well in Coupland's fiction.

Florian, Janet, and Cissy come from very different backgrounds, arriving in the United States for a variety of reasons ranging from business to visitation to a hope for a better life, and through their interactions, they are able to conduct a miracle. The businessman finds the cure for AIDS in the prostitute, and by putting her into contact with the sick housewife—literal, hand-in-hand, contact—he saves the latter. Salman Rushdie, in his writings on transnationalism, expresses the belief in "the great possibility that mass migration gives to the world."<sup>44</sup> In *All Families are Psychotic*, Coupland gives an example of one (extraordinary) possibility: a cure for AIDS. Though the United States is the setting, this book is not about "Coming to America." Coupland uses the country as a meeting ground, elevating emigration and movement from various places in the world over immigration to the United States. The United States offers a cosmopolitan gathering, without putting Americans at the center of the action.

To highlight the way that this scene's location in the United States does not necessarily make it about Americans, Coupland has Janet referred to—wrongly—as an American, a mistake that then must be blatantly corrected. The danger of "interpellating alterity into ulterior sameness" is something of which Coupland, like most Canadian writers, is clearly keenly aware.<sup>45</sup> Rather than fight it, Coupland uses the danger as a moment of recognition of difference:

Florian said, 'Jan, why don't you take a quickie house tour of the rig. I'm sure you'll find the décor most enchanting. . . .

Outside the car, Florian said to Janet, 'You Americans just love your house tours, don't you?

'I'm Canadian, you're Swiss, and Cissy's Ugandan.'<sup>46</sup>

This exchange in which Janet reminds her interlocutors that no one is American here also acts as a kind of "primal scene" in Canadian literature. In *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*, Russell Brown describes the primal scene as one in which a Canadian is mistaken for an American—a moment in which that Canadian's "sense of cultural identity [is] threatened."<sup>47</sup> Brown locates it in A.M. Klein's *Second Scroll* (1951), Graeme Gibson's *Five Legs* (1969), Mordecai Richler's *St. Urbain's Horseman*

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<sup>43</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, Ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 105. For criticism of this positive view of cosmopolitanism, see Timothy Brennan's "Cosmo-Theory." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:3 (2001), 659-691.

<sup>44</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Penguin, 1992), 294.

<sup>45</sup> Kadir, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Coupland, *Families*, 244-5.

<sup>47</sup> Russell Brown, "The Written Line," *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*, Ed. Robert Lecker (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991), 3.

(1971), Matt Cohen's "Sentimental Meetings" (1983), Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), and Robertson Davies's *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958).<sup>48</sup> But with a Swiss-Bahamian, a Ugandan-Brit, and a Canadian-married-to-an-American doing the talking, rather than a manifestation of cultural anxiety, the passage comes across as more of a joke, reflecting not anxiety, but instead the *humour* of the concept of nationalism altogether—while at the same time, the conversation manages to underscore the nationality of the Canadian and insert the novel into a tradition in Canadian literature.

If Coupland's books continue to be simply classified under "American" literature, despite his references to Canadian literature, his novels' Canadian locales, and the singular focus on Canadian culture of his non-fiction, he is complicit in the misidentification, using it to inconspicuously insert Canadiana into his "American" novels and to employ "American" characters to poke fun at the very American ignorance of Canada he tries to rectify in his fiction. In *Miss Wyoming*, two young idealists tell the male protagonist, John Johnson, of their plan to literally *Canadianate* the American soil, and wreak havoc by doing so. They intend to go to Prince Edward Island to find a dormant potato virus there that, when brought into the tobacco fields of the United States, would turn the tobacco plants into sludge. John's response reveals his ignorance, not only of obscure island potato ecology, but also of basic North American geography, when he asks of Prince Edward Island: "Huh? Where's that—England?"<sup>49</sup>

One might speculate that even when Coupland sets his novels in the United States, he expects a Canadian "outing" such as the one given to the novel *Star*, written by Canadian-American<sup>50</sup> actress Pamela Anderson, in the *Montreal Gazette*: "Pam, you may recall, was 'discovered' when she was in the crowd at a B.C. Lions football game in Vancouver; and some show-biz hotshot spotted her picture on the big scoreboard screen. The same thing happens to her heroine, only at a Miami Dolphins game," writes journalist Doug Camilli.<sup>51</sup> Reminding Canadian readers of the Los Angeles-based actress's past, Camilli makes explicit what is at stake in the fictionalization of Anderson's biography: Canada. Coupland's use of Canadian material, however, goes beyond the reflection and doubling found in Anderson's novel. Canadians and Americans might read his Canadian content with differing degrees of foreknowledge and interest, but they will both be forced to recognize that the relationship between Canada and the United States is symbiotic and complex, rather than simply reflective. It is both a funhouse mirror, one that reflects, distorts, doubles, and changes the image that has come before it, and a window, that opens on to its neighbour, allowing the self to see not only the self but the other. Coupland, like Michael Moore in his films *Canadian Bacon* and *Bowling for Columbine*, uses the United States as his foil for Canada and vice versa, and yet his use of contrast is more sophisticated than Moore's. Rather than trying, as Moore does, to polarize the countries by claiming that all Americans lock their front doors, but Canadians do not, an entirely unrealistic example of national difference in *Bowling for Columbine*, Coupland tries to figure out how the differences between the countries

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 3, 22n.

<sup>49</sup> Coupland, *Wyoming*, 198.

<sup>50</sup> Canadian by birth, Pamela Anderson became an American citizen as well in 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Doug Camilli, "In this novel, the author's photograph folds out," *The Montreal Gazette* (4 August 2004), D6.

actually create interdependent self-definitions.

In *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland “outs” the Canadian settings of American movies and television shows, and then he analyzes the way the movie- and television-watching world understands the United States through images of Canada:

[To] much of the world, Canada embodies the way the United States was *supposed* to have turned out. Our suburbs are crack-free, chipper, metric and desirable, and in some senses, Canadian suburbs are the most luscious real estate on earth. When people dream the American dream, they’re often dreaming of Canadian suburban mainstays they see in films and on TV: the malls, the community centres, the highschool hallways, the garages and attics and basements and main streets.<sup>52</sup>

Claiming that “Canada embodies the way the United States was *supposed* to have turned out,” Coupland attempts to highlight the disjunction between the American Dream and Reality, and focus attention on a North American alternative to the American failure.<sup>53</sup> Although Coupland defines Canada in American terms, he clearly stakes out Canada’s territory—the territory of American Dream Reality. Canada and the United States here become, then, as in other places in his texts, separate but interdependent entities that are read through each other. Like the movies that portray, through Canada, idealized images of a better, cleaner image of United States, Coupland hints that his novels portray, through a Canadian writer, a better, more cosmopolitan image of the United States.

As such, Coupland is invested in icons of Canadian-American unity that do not collapse borders. A writer of road novels, he might have envisioned the sticker that graced the back windows of many a Canadian pick-up truck after September 11, 2001—perhaps, like Dag’s in *Generation X*, ones with Ontario license plates “covered in a mustard crust of Oklahoma mud and Nebraska”—a sticker of two separate and individual flags, one Canadian, one American, flags that are crossed at the bottom and inscribed with the logo, “United We Stand. God Bless America.” Although the United States takes the forefront in his books, as with the bumper sticker, both create pictures of two countries that have an interdependent relationship. This relationship allows each country to depend on the other for community, friendship, and identity—through communication, contrast, and extension.

### **Conclusion: Coupland’s Continental (Comm)unity**

In Coupland’s fiction, characters are repeatedly and temporarily tying themselves to the communities that they seek out in each location. Smug on their own cleverness though they may be, cracking twentieth-century Wildesque quips and asides, Gen-Xers derive happiness from sharing—be it bungalows, stories, crimes, or hotels. The communities they form are in lieu of a sense of nationalism; characters, “wary of traditional enclosures,” favour the cosmopolitan ideal of “voluntary affiliations.”<sup>54</sup> And when they are ready to make new connections, they move on.

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<sup>52</sup> Coupland, *Souvenir*, 110.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 3.

Because the globalized characters are engaged in voluntary affiliations, rather than pre-scripted national ones, they represent a new model of community through these forms of congregation. Some critics see community as yet another tradition disposed of by Coupland's characters. Grassian, for example, writes that, "Beginning with *Life After God* (1994), a collection of bleak but touching vignettes and short stories about young people searching for meaning in an isolating culture, Coupland investigated ways to frame contemporary lives other than by religion, family or community" (30). In fact, the idea of community has simply changed. The joiners of these groups have multiple identifications, and yet they unite despite them, suggesting a sense of unity that is, according to Northrop Frye:

the opposite of a sense of uniformity. Uniformity, where everyone 'belongs,' uses the same clichés, thinks alike and behaves alike, produces a society which seems comfortable at first but is totally lacking in human dignity. Real unity tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition, recognizes that it is man's destiny to unite and not divide.<sup>55</sup>

In Coupland's books, there is a tension between outsidership and insidership, a sense that, as Emerson writes in "New England Reformers," "The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated."<sup>56</sup> The characters are indeed isolated, as they see themselves to be outsiders. In *Generation X*, Dag, Claire, and Andy "live small lives on the periphery," and declare themselves marginalized.<sup>57</sup> In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Karen, Richard, Pam, Hamilton, Wendy, and Linus comprise the clique of outsiders who begin the book as "empty pagan teenagers" and end up as the adult version of "The Loser's Circle."<sup>58</sup> John Johnson and Susan Colgate, the two protagonists of *Miss Wyoming*, respectively live completely outside of civilization for months on end, and return to a world that they cannot fully comprehend ever again. In *Microserfs*, the characters inhabit a group house; Dan explains that "living in a group house is a little bit like admitting you're deficient in the having a life department" and getting a life is a hot topic of discussion throughout the book.<sup>59</sup> The characters, however, are generally so busy obsessing about their outsidership that they fail to realize that the groups they have formed means that they are inside of something. Although Coupland's characters insist on defining themselves as misfits, in other words, they clearly fit into their own social circles. The groups share houses and jobs, ramen noodles and stories; these constructs become a social glue, less ideological and lasting perhaps than nationalism, but significant nonetheless.

Coupland's characters are of an era of change and fluidity. They are not bogged down by traditional versions of history or geography, but they have not fully rejected the human particularities that make individuals and groups unique, either. Characters are Canadian or American or both; histories are Canadian or American or both; stories and lives cross borders and expand the possibilities of the continent. If the New World is not

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<sup>55</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi Ltd., 1971), xxvi.

<sup>56</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 599.

<sup>57</sup> Coupland, *X*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 7, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Coupland, *Microserfs* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 4.

the most perfect society now existing in the world, it at least *can* be, because the freeways gleam and the borders are, for the most part, open. People can continually join multiple, overlapping micro-communities that share voluntary, not biological, affiliations, and they can use these affiliations to find ways of making meaning in a “life after god.”

In *Microserfs*, Coupland takes the idea of isolated uniters one step further. Michael, a former employee of Microsoft transplanted to Palo Alto, is described in rather unattractive terms—the terms of an outsider:

pudgy; eyeglassed; ill-clad; short-sleeve shirt the color of yellow invoice paper; pale complexion; Weedwacker hairdo—the nerd stereotype that almost doesn’t even really exist anymore—a Lockheed junior draftsman circa the McCarthy era. But for his almost Cerenkovian glow of intelligence, he might be mistaken for a halfwit.<sup>60</sup>

Yet if Michael is a nerd who has to resort to the faceless terrain of the Internet to seek out love, so must be his soulmate, “BarCode,” the one Michael calls the only “person for me out there . . . my ally in this world.”<sup>61</sup> Coupland creates a love story that is both post-particular—“I don’t know who he-slash-she is, how old or anything,” Michael says of BarCode, and cross-border, with the only identity-based knowledge of he/she that keeps Michael “tethered to earth,” being that “The BarCode entity lives in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.”<sup>62</sup> His friends, loyal to the last, cross the border to find BarCode for him. And the arch-Canadian BarCode, wearing her “ancient hand-knitted Canadian-type jacket with trout knitted into the front and back,” and describing her love as a “bomb detonating over industrialized Ontario,” unites with her equally isolated American partner in the United States of North America.<sup>63</sup>

It is not incidental that BarCode resides in Canada and not Malaysia. The Canadian-American love affair in the age of globalization and the internet represented in *Microserfs* acts as a microcosm of Coupland’s grand project—to put Canada at the forefront of his American literature. Coupland might not find himself at the core of *CanLit* classes, but he plays a significant role in North American culture: he speaks to both Canadians and Americans and reminds them of their intimate, intricate, complicated, and sometimes even magical relationship with each other. In other words, by creating, in his writing, a North America of overlapping and interdependent nations and nationalisms that do not collapse into one unit, Coupland suggests the truly cosmopolitan possibilities and realities of his continent.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 333.