

Abstract

This thesis explores the global, local and regional intersections of Douglas Coupland's Vancouver fiction. Observing that Coupland's generation came of age during the most recent and most intense phase of globalisation, I postulate that Coupland's work shows how globalisation has affected his and subsequent generations by radically altering relationships to place including nation and region. I also argue that the rapidity of changes in the era of globalisation has led to anxiety about apocalypse and ambiguity about the idea of home. I examine evidence of this in Coupland's Vancouver situated texts, *Life After God*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and *Hey Nostradamus*.

Chapter One begins with a survey of recent writing on globalisation, arguing that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to fully understand the ramifications of globalisation, its relationship to culture, and its effects on nation and region. I then move towards a focus on literary criticism and the changing and overlapping connotations of region and nation in literary studies. Chapter Two investigates Coupland's visions of apocalypse, arguing that they are a product of geographical and generational anxiety. Geographical anxiety is illustrated by Coupland's literary mapping of the Northwest Coast and Vancouver as an apocalyptic space, and the generational anxiety stems from an upbringing in the Cold War and the instability brought by globalisation. I suggest that Coupland ultimately rejects the notion of the apocalypse in favour of prophetic eschatology which demands the revision of the existing world.

Chapter Three looks at ideas of home, how these are changing in the globalised world and how Coupland's work draws attention to this. I argue that although he advocates alternative, non-place based conceptions of home, he also he simultaneously reinforces the idea that home is attached to place by mapping Vancouver and the Vancouver suburb in which he was raised in much of his fiction. I conclude that he emphasises family and community throughout his texts and is consistently forward looking, imagining and envisioning the future locally and globally.

Introduction.

This thesis investigates how the global, national and regional intersect in Douglas Coupland's work. It postulates that, although the word globalisation is never uttered in Coupland's fiction, this condition and the anxieties that follow from its transformation of time and place are an extremely important feature of Coupland's work. Many critics have considered Coupland in relation to the generation he named with his first novel, *Generation X: Tales of an Accelerated Culture*, and while I too draw on this methodology at times, I emphasise that Generation X has been significantly shaped by the technological advances of the latest phase of globalisation, and consequently find globalisation a more appropriate overall context than looking at one generation. This approach widens Coupland's importance to the generations that followed X, the millennium children who are now nearing Coupland's age when he wrote *Generation X* and continue to find relevance in his work because it illustrates the difficulties they also have in coming to terms with a rapidly changing world and the constantly improving technologies that minimise the need for attachment to physical place.

Coupland has rarely been noted for his relationship to place, with critics often neglecting to discuss his nationality or the regional and metropolitan settings of his novels, instead focusing on his depiction of mass culture and his relationship to the post-modern. Alan Bilton analyses the author with a view to establishing whether he deserves to be considered as a great American writer, "leaving aside his Canadian citizenship for a moment," (220) but never returning to it. Daniel Grassian includes him in a generation of

“critically acclaimed or socially important American fiction writers,” (17) with only a parenthetical acknowledgement that Coupland is Canadian by birth. However, the upcoming publication of the first book length examination of Coupland, written by Andrew Tate and including a chapter on space, is perhaps the herald of an increasing critical interest in Coupland as “an artist who is sensitive to the limits imposed on individuals and societies by governing concepts of location and environment” (Tate, 2007: 126). Anticipating this, my thesis focuses on the first three books that Coupland set in his home city of Vancouver, and uses them to investigate how Coupland illustrates the transformations of place in society and the effects this has on individuals. I propose that, although it remains unacknowledged by either the author or his critics, Coupland’s work is significant in its exploration of the transformation of place in the global era whilst simultaneously showing allegiance to place—city, region, and nation—and illustrating the influence of place on world view. The specific area of world view that this thesis deals with is an anxiety that Coupland identifies amongst people of his generation—the self-named Generation X—who have come of age in this most recent phase of globalisation. This anxiety leads to a preoccupation with apocalypse and difficulty in constructing ideas of home. However, while Coupland focuses on anxiety and the difficulty of dealing with apocalypse and home in the globalised era, the conclusions of his texts show a positive attitude to the future.

My focus on apocalypse and home provides a timely in-depth examination of two topical themes. The Cold War, during which Generation X were raised, has been succeeded by the War on Terror, and as such we are consequently bombarded with apocalyptic images on a day to day basis via the now extensive tentacles of global media.

Additionally, the recent intensification of debates about global warming has permeated daily life with an awareness of the impermanence of the world and its resources, and humanity's power over their duration and the survival of other species. Though *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* predate 9/11 and the most recent phase of intense media interest in global warming, they are interesting in their apparent anticipation of these issues, showing Coupland's sensitivity to long term developments in societal anxiety. While other writers, notably Robert McGill and Andrew Tate, have written on apocalypse in Coupland's fiction, my integration of geographical, generational and global contexts allows the more detailed examination that the topic requires. Unlike other writers, I make the connection between apocalypse and the anxieties specifically felt by the members of the middle class raised during the Cold War. I additionally engage with popular culture, biblical frameworks and the real life contexts that Coupland builds into his apocalyptic visions.

To my knowledge, nobody yet has written about the idea of home in Coupland's fiction, though the value of different spheres of home is an important issue in the globalised world, which increasingly asks of us where our attachment truly is and where our loyalties lie. In the West a large number of people have the opportunity to choose their home from a vast number of options—some characterised by attachment to physical place and others by habits and improved communication technologies. Whilst continually evolving constructions of place make it difficult for Coupland's characters to conceive home in any fixed way, the author's repeated return to Vancouver as a setting paradoxically emphasises his own permanent attachment to place.

The mapping of Vancouver and the Northwest Coast in the three novels I study is another neglected area of Coupland's work. Coupland fails to acknowledge significant portions of Vancouverites—the 26.6 per cent who cite Chinese as their first language and the 49 per cent of the population that are a visible minority (“Multiculturalism and Diversity”)—focusing as he does on the middle class descendants of European pioneers. Yet his portrayal of this significant section of society should be noted. He paints a picture of a highly secular city and region (with one pocket of religious fervour—the bible belt of the Fraser Valley from which the character Reg hails, in *Hey Nostradamus*). Coupland's Vancouver is also a city overrun with film crews. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Coupland draws attention to the transformation of parts of the city into worldwide locations for the viewing pleasure of global audiences, arguably as a result of American neo-imperialism via Hollywood's presence in the city. Vancouver's location on the Pacific Rim, close to the U.S. border and proximate to eternal wilderness makes it a particularly interesting case study for the effects of globalisation on place, and this study examines Coupland's engagements with the contradictions presented by this city on the edge. Finally, my thesis proposes—and I borrow Terry Goldie's phrase—that Coupland's work contains “an Indian presence but no Indians present” (200). I argue that Coupland's implication of the restorative powers of nature, his interest in alternatives to linear time, and his portrayal of the guilt of the pioneers should be attributed to his awareness of indigenous issues despite the lack of explicit reference.

My thesis is split into three chapters. The first is essentially a theoretical prelude to a closer examination of Coupland's fiction. I examine the term globalisation and its recent

use by scholars in multiple disciplines, and argue that an interdisciplinary understanding of the term is necessary in order to fully comprehend the way global forces impact on place and the culture created in relation to place. I also look at how literary studies have traditionally dealt with region and nation and how this approach is changing in response to global forces and the increasing ephemerality of place. I begin to consider Coupland's work in relation to nation and region and problematise his relation to these constructs in view of the new developments in literary studies.

My subsequent chapters use the Vancouver-situated volume of short stories, *Life After God* and the novels *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus* to further explore Coupland's relationship to place in the global era whilst looking in detail at the themes of apocalypse and home. In Chapter Two I propose that the author's visions of apocalypse can be analyzed in the contexts of region and nation. Furthermore, Coupland's apocalypse is localised. It is inevitably influenced by his personal circumstances, and is consequently particularised and tied to place by virtue of his own ties to his local environment of suburban Vancouver. He is implicated in the creation of an apocalyptic region as his fiction maps the apocalyptic threats of the Northwest Coast. My third and final chapter deals with local environment in greater detail, looking at the concept of home in Coupland's work. I argue that *Life After God*, the first book set in Coupland's home town of Vancouver, signified a shift in Coupland's work from an ideological denial of home and identification with the global jet set, to an acceptance of Vancouver as his home and a renewed concentration on the values of home which sometimes tend towards nostalgia. However, an ambiguity towards home remains as constructions of it are complicated by

shifting regional, national and global forces. Coupland explores whether home is desirable in the global age and what alternatives there are to traditional conceptions of home as tied to place.

Chapter 1

Turbulent terms, multiple meanings: the fluctuating resonances of ‘Global’, ‘National’, and ‘Regional’ and their place in literary studies.

There have always been overlaps and paradoxes in the definitions of region and nation, and the phenomenon of globalisation certainly increases the difficulty of defining either. This chapter deals with the complex intersections between the global, the national, and the regional specifically in a literary context but also in a much broader sense. I argue that the way these terms are conceived in multiple disciplines—social science, economics, political science, and cultural studies—impact on the way writers write, and readers read, contemporary literature in relation to place. For despite the increasing difficulty of using these terms meaningfully as ways of understanding literature, I maintain that Coupland’s work is interested in and influenced by conceptions of the regional and the national, in addition to dealing with global themes.

There has been a great deal of scholarship on the subject of globalisation and its relation to the local, the regional and the national across a variety of disciplines in recent years. This has resulted in the term globalisation becoming a buzzword. It is used commonly to evoke the zeitgeist, yet often without any questioning of whether globalisation is really an accurate portrayal of the world we live in and the way we live our lives. Perhaps because of the term’s overuse, many theorists have avoided the term and explore its characteristics under different headings in order to bring out the subtleties of the

process that they are most interested in. Anthony Giddens, for instance uses the term “globality” and Arjun Appadurai writes on the “the global cultural economy”.¹ Since my thesis aims to investigate Coupland’s engagement with the processes of globalisation that transform the constructs of region and nation and impact on our attitude to the local, it seems appropriate that I should begin by examining what the term globalisation means, simultaneously problematising aspects of the globalisation debate, and considering the alternatives and their appropriateness to my aims.

Though the word globalisation only came into use at the end of the 1970s, most theorists acknowledge that it is not a recent development, but a long term process. People have travelled, traded and waged war across land and ocean for many centuries, and it is these global transactions that constitute globalisation. However, in the twentieth century there were a number of inventions that accelerated the movement of people, capital and ideas. Different theorists cite different inventions. Appadurai for example lists “the steamship, the automobile, the airplane, the camera, the computer and the telephone” as instrumental in creating a “new condition of neighbourliness, even with those distanced from ourselves” (585). Zygmunt Bauman alternatively dwells on the electronic technology that reduced the travel time of money to zero (56). David Harvey has written that these inventions have resulted in a time-space compression: “the general effect is for capitalist modernization to be very much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, social life” (230). The acceleration Harvey speaks of has occurred

¹ I, however, feel no need to replace the term globalisation for the purpose of this thesis. Substituting alternative terms for globalisation allows critics such as Giddens and Appadurai to explore particular aspects of the process, whereas I want to look broadly at the processes signified by the term ‘globalisation’ as exemplified in Coupland’s work.

for the most part since the 1950s. Since then, developments in information technology have allowed more complex records of economic systems in different parts of the world. The telephone, the television and the internet have enabled instant communication between distant locations and brought into the public arena information previously inaccessible, and improvements to the aeroplane have made it possible to travel across the world in one day. It is this latest period of globalisation and its ramifications in North America that, I propose, Coupland's work engages with. I am predominantly interested in an era and a continent where it has become common practice for people to travel to, communicate with or see live images of people at the other side of the world.

Such developments have facilitated the interweaving of each and every corner of the globe in economic and cultural systems, and it is this connectedness which has become known as globalisation. Yet many theorists have written about the implications of this connectedness, suggesting it erodes the ties between culture, capital and people to place. This erosion is commonly referred to as deterritorialisation and can be exemplified by the effects of the internet on social life and economic transactions.² The Internet, for example, has a deterritorialising effect by enabling social and cultural events to take place independently of geographical location. People can meet in virtual spaces, for instance chat rooms, and make purchases from online shops. In internet trade, instead of dealing with tangible goods—paper money, CDs, people—the internet allows us use credit card transactions, downloads and virtual personas.

² John Tomlinson writes, “several theorists have used the term ‘deterritorialization’ in relation to globalizing processes (e.g. Appadurai 1990; Garcia Canclini 1995; Milnar 1992; Lull 1995, Featherstone 1995; Mattelart 1994; Morely and Robins 1995; Latouche 1996) while others have preferred related terms such as ‘delocalization’ (Thompson 1995) or ‘dis-placement’ (Giddens 1990) to grasp aspects of the process” (107).

Roland Robertson's observation that "we live in a world which increasingly acknowledges the quotidian conflation of the economic and the cultural" (31), describes another central characteristic of contemporary globalisation. With increased global transfers of capital and goods, one is no longer required to buy the product located most conveniently to one's home. One can choose from producers and manufacturers worldwide. Increased access to the global market leads to increased competition, and consequently a greater emphasis on marketing. Marketing, like art, involves the framing of reality to create a certain meaning. Symbols are created to convey meaning in a memorable form. Sharon Zukin writes, "Because culture is a system for producing symbols, every attempt to get people to buy a product becomes a culture industry" (12). Moreover, aspects of life that weren't previously considered products are increasingly being treated like products. This is predominantly connected to the expansion of the tourism industry. Places are marketed to tourists as desirable destinations and the day-to-day existences of different peoples are marketed as cultural experiences or lifestyles. I further explore the phenomenon of framing place as a cultural and economic strategy in Chapter Three.

Other facets of globalisation that are commonly agreed upon include the increasing number of what Stuart Hall calls "supranational organisations", that is, organisations that function across, but independently of, nation states. Hall also refers to the existence of a global mass culture, though the exact definition of culture again places us on a slippery semantic slope. Janet Wolff notes that theorists use the term 'culture' to variously signify, "(i) ways of life (Hannerz); (ii) the arts and media (Hannerz; also Hall); (iii) political, or

perhaps religious, culture (Wallerstein; also Hall); (iv) attitudes to globalisation (Robertson)” (167). Additionally, a great number of theorists have become interested in the relationship between the local and the global, and their attitude to this generally falls into one of two camps, depending on their view of whether globalisation is a system imposed on localities, or whether localities are increasingly volunteering to be part of a global system. Wolff refers to the former as “systems theory” and the latter as “voluntarism” (164), though she suggests that they are not necessarily opposed. The reality of globalisation probably incorporates a mixture of the two.

Robertson bases his thesis of “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity” on a belief in “Voluntarism”. He refuses to believe that we are being homogenised by global systems and maintains that localities are active in producing heterogenisation. Robertson argues against theories of cultural imperialism advocated, for instance, by George Ritzer who uses the term McDonaldization to signify that homogenising forces have overcome the local in many parts of the world. On the contrary, Robertson argues that heterogenisation and homogenisation are “mutually implicative” (27). To illustrate this he advocates use of the term glocalisation rather than globalisation, arguing that, “It makes no good sense to define the global as though it excludes the local” (34). He stresses his belief that local/particular initiatives are more than just a reaction to globalisation/universalisation, as suggested by Giddens.³ For Robertson they are an integrated process. Thus in using the term globalisation, he means glocalisation. He writes, “globalization has involved the reconstruction, in a sense of production, of ‘home’, ‘community’, and ‘locality’” (30) and

³ Giddens uses the terms particular and universal, Robertson uses local and global.

means that the reconstruction has not occurred because of globalisation, but as part of it. I explore further this reconstruction of ‘home’, ‘community’ and ‘locality’ in Chapter Three.

I find Robertson’s idea useful, and believe his observations about increasing heterogeneity as a result of local action to be accurate—Coupland’s non-fiction books, asserting Canada’s uniqueness, are one example—yet I remain convinced that this is a reaction to globalisation rather than part of the original process. I am also somewhat unconvinced by some of his cultural examples. I accept that international exhibitions, “the internationally organized display of particular national ‘glories’ and achievements”, are evidence of a phenomenon emphasising the local in a global setting, and that the Youth Hostel Association illustrates the global spread of an organisation based on local interest (38). However these are also examples of how place is sold to global consumers, a symptom of the conflation of capital and culture that is associated with globalisation. Local appeal is manipulated in order to attract global attention. Robertson additionally proposes that CNN and Hollywood modify their products for a differentiated global market (38), using ‘multinational casts’ and a variety of ‘local’ settings. Whilst this might occasionally be the case, I see such initiatives as minor concessions made to court foreign audiences and the exception rather than the rule of Hollywood production. Moreover, the use of ‘local’ settings is often motivated by financial priorities and results in the alteration of the ‘local’ to fit with majority expectations, as seen in the example of the British Columbian Film industry.

Coupland’s non-fiction book on Vancouver, *City of Glass*, implies the author’s opinion of the film industry and whether it is an example of cultural imperialism and/or

globalisation. The illustrations “Real Vancouver” and “Parallel Universe Vancouver” (96-7) might be read as a literal representation of the globalisation of Vancouver (see next page).



Parallel Universe Vancouver



Real Vancouver

In ‘Parallel Universe Vancouver’, the neighbourhoods and landmarks of “Real Vancouver” are replaced with worldwide locations—Auckland, New Zealand; Hanover, Germany; Sapporo, Japan. This is, I believe, a comment on how Vancouver’s film industry frequently requires Vancouver locations to stand in for other parts of the world. In an earlier section of *City of Glass*, Coupland quips that “many Vancouverites feel damn pimpy about the fact that we never get to be our own city in any of these movies”. He explains that Vancouver’s ability to masquerade as elsewhere, combined with a favourable economic situation, has made Vancouver the third largest film production centre in North America behind Los Angeles and New York City and resulted in the nickname Hollywood North (6). Consequently, the globalisation of Vancouver stems from Hollywood’s presence, and Coupland’s illustrations can be read as evidence of American cultural imperialism. There is also resentment of America in his comments on the film industry and even a hint of nostalgia for English colonialism in preference to neo-American colonialism: “there is so much potential for a really great indigenous film scene reminiscent of Ealing Studios of Pinewood Studios in England of the 1950s and 1960s. But everybody is too busy slapping up *Seattle Times* Mailboxes and Denver Broncos billboards to even consider the option” (6).

Indeed, U.S. place names make up the majority of “Parallel Universe Vancouver” and corporate forces often seen as the embodiments of Americanization—Disney and Microsoft—have a place on the map. Granville Market, one of Vancouver’s top tourist destinations is renamed Disneyland and the University of British Columbia Campus (UBC) is called Microsoft. This might imply that Coupland sees both as products of

Americanization—designed according to models respectively popularised by Disney and Microsoft. I explore this idea further in Chapter Three. Yet I propose, considering Robertson’s examples of glocalisation, that Granville Island and UBC are also a result of local impetus, despite a somewhat generic layout chosen for international appeal. Granville Island is not just a tourist attraction but also a lunch spot for resident workers, and trades predominantly in local crafts and foods. The UBC Campus is home to number of distinct buildings including the Museum of Anthropology. The design of this building was inspired by indigenous Northwest Coast post-and-beam architecture and consequently reflects geographical and historical regional influences.

The idea that globalisation has produced the ‘non-place’ is at stake here, and this is a concept discussed by John Tomlinson in his book *Globalization and Culture*. The theory originates with anthropologist Marc Augé. For Augé a non-place is “a place that cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity” (Tomlinson, 9). His examples of non-place are usually associated with travel—airports, motorways, service stations and high-speed trains—and other places that involve minimal social interaction which include, for Augé, the supermarket. However, as I took issue with the idea that Granville Market was a generic Disneyland-type tourist destination, Tomlinson takes issue with the idea of supermarkets as precluding social exchanges. Places that appear as non-places to outsiders, he suggests, might be “an actively rich—if perhaps not a vivid—locale” to residents. Yet Tomlinson admits that non-places can be seen as “‘distinct’ instances of ‘deterritorialized’ locales, embodying distanced relations” (112). When shopping in a mall or staying in a hotel chain, Tomlinson suggests we are aware, on some level, that the place we are in has

been conceptualised elsewhere. According to Sharon Zukin, however, “Many Americans, born and raised in the suburbs, accept shopping centers as the predominant public spaces of our time. Yet while shopping centers are undoubtedly gathering places, their private ownership has always raised questions about whether all the public has access to them and under what conditions” (45). Although one does not have to be a consumer to access the space of a shopping centre (and consequently shopping centres become places for people to spend their leisure time even if they have no intention of making a purchase) experiences are often defined by the consumption that takes place there, and any culture created in the shopping mall is inevitably permeated with the desires of the owners whose control of the audio and visual environment prevents the shopping centre from being a genuine public forum for the creation of culture. The owners dictate the environment from a distance, and consequently I am inclined to add to Tomlinson and Augé’s discussion that non-spaces might be characterised by private ownership since this limits local involvement in creating space.

Coupland’s work frequently features shopping centres and other non-places in his fiction and non-fiction. In the “Parallel Universe Vancouver” illustration, a corner of North Vancouver is renamed ‘The Mall of America’, suggesting that on film it might represent any other mall in North America. Alternatively, Coupland might be highlighting its resemblance to the Minneapolis mall that uses that name. Either way this part of Vancouver, actually home to Park Royal Mall, is a non-place according to Tomlinson’s definition—a place which has been created elsewhere. Yet the fact Coupland writes this location into his fiction, describing his characters’ interactions at this specific Vancouver

mall—one that Coupland has no doubt used given that he was raised and continues to live in this part of the city—particularises the non-place. Although non-places increasingly dominate our environment, we still walk the streets, partake in everyday activities and engage with people in our communities. Tomlinson concludes his chapter on deterritorialisation, “We are all, as human beings, *embodied and physically located*”. Despite an increasing number of forces that “lift us out of our ties to place...the locality continues to exercise its claims upon us as the physical situation of our lifeworld” (148-149).

Another frequently cited example of globalisation’s deterritorialisation is the erosion of the nation state, that is, the decline of the nation-state as an autonomous and powerful entity. Bauman insists repeatedly “the three legs of the sovereignty tripod have been broken beyond repair. The military, economic and cultural self sufficiency, indeed self sustainability, of the state – any state – ceased to be a viable project”. He argues that since the end of the Cold War countries have increasingly relinquished their powers as nation-states to “supra-state formations” such as the European Market and NATO (North American Treaty Organization) (64). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), approved by the United States, Mexico and Canada in 1994, is a supra-state formation, one of an increasing number of alliances ratified by countries in a large geographical area, and consequently referred to as regional agreements. In accordance with Bauman’s argument, NAFTA is a threat to Canada’s sovereignty, facilitating cross border trade and the potential exploitation of a nation’s cheap land and resources by the other members of the regional pact. An example of this might be British Columbia’s film

industry. Its ramifications are noted by Coupland in his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* and his non-fiction work on Vancouver, *City of Glass*. Primarily involved in attracting Hollywood runaway productions, the film industry of 'Hollywood North' is an example of a larger trend resulting from increased transnational commerce. It is an area where national and regional actions are blurred by the influence of the global. British Columbia occasionally acts in tandem with Canada's governmental policy on Hollywood film production, but often acts independently of and even in opposition to it, as central Canada and British Columbia compete for business.

Shaun Breslin, Richard Higgott and Ben Rosamond explain in more general terms the phenomenon of regional authorities acting independently of their national government. They discuss sub-national actors and local authorities, who "operate on their own initiative" and whose preferences in relation to trade often "conflict markedly with those of national governments" (17). They draw attention to the various uses of the word region in international relations and commerce, including the difference between regionalism and regionalisation: the former refers to formal decisions ratified between local authorities (at the regional, provisional or municipal level) or between nations; the latter is a result of informal links that tie authorities together in regional trade and is often driven by transnational firms. Regionalisation consequently acts concurrently with globalisation. The distinctions are similar to Wolff's binary of globalisation as systems driven or voluntary. Those who believe in the systems theory would see nation-states as being regionalised, and those who believe globalisation is voluntary would see nation-states as opting for regionalism. In reality, as I previously suggested, there is a mixture of both in

evidence. Further uses of the term region include macro and micro-regionalism. Macro-regionalism is exemplified by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the European Union (EU), where regional agreements are authorised by multiple nations and often cover entire continents. Micro-regionalism refers to cooperation between nations or sub-nations in smaller areas, such as Franco–Spanish cooperation (cross border micro-regionalism), or specific sub-national regions which have developed a different trade system than the rest of the country, such as the Tijuana region of Mexico which derives economic advantages from its proximity to the United States (Breslin et al, 17).

British Columbian cooperation with Hollywood might be considered to be an example of micro–regionalism, but it could also be viewed as the negative result of regionalisation where the industry is in control and the sub-national region is subject to its whims. This is exemplified by BC’s recent increase in tax credits in order to maintain potentially fickle Hollywood business while the strength of the Canadian dollar decreases the appeal of filming in Canada.⁴ Equally, while macro-regional agreements such as NAFTA are ratified by the nations involved, they often favour large corporations, allowing sub-national trade links that a country might envisage as beneficial, but which effectively play into the hands of multinational businesses. Wayne Ellwood has written that NAFTA was “one of the first regional economic pacts developed to further corporate globalization”

⁴ A recent article in the Vancouver news and entertainment weekly, *The Georgia Straight*, observed that “Over the past decade, the dollar has risen dramatically, from 70 US cents in the late 1990s, to 96 cents in July [2007]... The B.C. film and television tax-credit program entitles production companies filming in the province to an annual tax credit based on a percentage of their qualified B.C. labour expenditures. In 2005, the B.C. Ministry of Small Business and Revenue raised that incentive from 20 percent to 30. According to Pastrick, that was probably to offset a depreciating U.S. dollar and to counter rising subsidies offered to film companies shooting in the U.S. In 2008, B.C.’s tax-credit program is up for review. According to Pastrick, the rate of 30 percent is likely to increase again” (Lupick).

(73) and suggests that its negative effect on Mexico has been extreme, further increasing the gap between rich and poor and resulting in the low growth of Gross Domestic Product (One percent in the ten years following NAFTA). In Canada the effects of NAFTA have been less obvious. John Britton wrote in 1998 that it was still too early to measure the exact effects. His work is also evidence of the difficulty in determining whether changes have occurred because of NAFTA or if they were already in process prior to the agreement. Despite expressing a suspicion that the weakening of east-west economic bonds was part of long-term economic shift that preceded NAFTA, he contradictorily concludes that, “FTA [Free Trade Agreement]/NAFTA appear to have weakened east-west economic bonds within Canada”. W. Mark Brown has suggested that, “the largest potential for increased trade is between regions that are in close geographic proximity”. Despite the ambiguity among critics, it might be said that neighbouring regions divided by the border have experienced increased trade as a result of continental regionalism.

The theorising of globalisation by social scientists (Robertson), sociologists (Bauman) and political scientists (Breslin et al) is relevant to culture, as seen with regard to the British Columbia film industry. Indeed, it is frequently accepted that an interdisciplinary approach to globalisation is necessary, because we need to understand “the underlying social and material relations in which culture is produced” (Wolff, 161). Lothar Hönnighausen is in agreement: “Since region is constituted as a physical, functional and symbolic space by a conglomerate of geographic and historical, social and cultural characteristics, only a cooperative effort of experts from several different disciplines can hope to do justice to it” (8). Consequently, it has been necessary for me to conduct a cross-

disciplinary study of the terms 'region' and 'nation' to draw attention to the reality that a) these terms are increasingly blurred and b) the various disciplines in which they are studied necessarily merge and overlap. I will now turn to an interrogation of the regional and the national in more specifically literary context, in order to facilitate a better comprehension of how Douglas Coupland fits into traditional ideas of regional or national literature, how these terms have always been problematic, and how they are further complicated by globalisation.

My assertion that regionalism must be examined in relation to multiple disciplines is strengthened by Frank Davey's statement, "I see Canadian literary regionalism as inextricable from political and economic factors" (3). He emphasises that regions have become what they are due to political and economic pressures, yet despite the importance of regionalism in other fields of study, Davey writes that in Canadian literature, regionalism has often been taken for granted. Whilst historians, economists and political scientists have interrogated the term, literary theorists have continued to publish volumes dealing with specific regionalisms, rather than interrogating the arbitrary nature of regional categories. He writes, "Regionalisms develop the appearance of having 'natural' boundaries—an inside and an outside—as if these boundaries were beyond culture. Appeals are constructed to the landscape and climate to explain cultural forms and customs" (Davey 3). Six years on, Janice Fiamengo defined region as follows: "in its simplest definition, regional literature portrays regional experience, using 'the details of real-world geography' to assert the value of the particular". However, she goes on to add that contemporary literary scholars extend the meaning of region to include social,

historical, economic and cultural factors as well (242). Thus the meaning of literary regionalism is not fixed, though it should be said that geography is the reason why region has become a defining characteristic of Canadian and American writing. The physical immensity of both nations has arguably resulted in a more pronounced sense of regionalism, as communities have grown up isolated from one another, experiencing vastly different geographical features of the landscape and climates. To quote Fiamengo again, “Northrop Frye stressed the importance of regions to the creative imagination, arguing that an imagination conditioned by prairie stretching to the horizon would develop differently from one shaped by the huge mountains and trees of British Columbia or the churning sea around Newfoundland” (242). She refers to Frye’s *The Bush Garden*, which was published in 1971, and consequently his assertions about the effect of landscape on writing are outdated given the recent revisions and problematisation of region that I am attempting to outline. Fiamengo’s paraphrasing of Frye draws attention to the pitfalls of identifying regions—there is increasing acknowledgement that regions are arbitrarily and sometimes inconsistently constructed. In the excerpt, region is equated with province in the case of British Columbia and Newfoundland, yet it also allows the Prairies, which covers part of three provinces, as a regional distinction. Whilst the reasoning behind this is that the Prairies share a distinct geography indicated by their name, the same reasoning can rarely be applied to an entire province. Not all of British Columbia is mountains and trees. Agricultural farmland is found in the Southeast, for instance, and in central B. C. there is a semi-arid landscape of barren rolling hills. As Davey points out, “Numerous regionalisms

compete here—West Coast, Vancouver Island, up-Island, Interior, Okanagan, Cariboo, Kootenay, Northern, Rocky Mountain” (8).

Due to the variation of landscape within provincially or politically-designated regions⁵ authors often write from one of these smaller areas, known as micro-regions⁶ (Fiamengo 243). Thus Sheila Watson’s novel, *The Double Hook*, evokes the Cariboo region, and the fiction of Jack Hodgins is regionally attached to Vancouver Island.

Douglas Coupland might be considered either a West Coast Canadian writer—given that much of his Vancouver fiction is set in a west coast suburb of the city, and his characters move up and down the coast—or as a writer from the micro-region of Greater Vancouver.

Neither Davey nor Fiamengo allude to the latter region, perhaps because it is a municipal region which exists for administrative rather than cultural reasons. Fiamengo does

however include a brief discussion of Coupland, and of Zsuzsi Gartner and Timothy Taylor whose fiction is also situated in Vancouver, in her chapter “Regionalism and Urbanism”.

The fact this title includes Urbanism as a separate heading to Regionalism suggests that it is distinct from it, yet in the subsection on urban writing she writes about regional traits in these works. Whether urban writing can be considered regional is a much-debated issue.

While metropolitan areas use the term ‘region’, including the Greater Vancouver Regional District, many argue that the physical landscape of cities is always changing and their pluralistic populations are constantly in flux, preventing the growth of regional ties.

⁵ Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Quebec and the West have been traditionally considered regions in Canadian politics, although British Columbia was given separate recognition, after a struggle, in 1996 when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien legislated towards the recognition of Quebec as a distinct society and offered a veto on constitutional matters to each region of Canada (Heard 339).

⁶ Note the similarity of the term to ‘micro-regionalism’ as previously discussed in an economic sense. The terms are not equivalent however, and economics usually refers to larger scale regions than the literary terms.

However, new concepts of regionalism focusing on cultural plurality and ethnicity have been proposed in recent years, and these are highlighted by Wyile, Riegel, Overdyke and Perkins (xiii) and Hönnighausen (6) in their respective volumes on re-evaluating regionalism in Canadian and American writing. These new concepts of regionalism almost certainly stem from the increasing change in communities that can be attributed to globalisation, and are a reflection of the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of the city.

The idea of cities as cosmopolitan potentially supports arguments that urban areas should not be considered as regions. As Tomlinson writes, “the etymology of the term ‘cosmopolitan’ is clear enough: from the Greek *kosmos*, ‘world’ and *polis*, ‘city’” (184). If a city is of the world, then how can it be of a region? Realistically, of course, the city is a mixture of both regional and global influences. Many cities remain integrated with the landscape, as suggested by Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison who ask, “What is Vancouver? It is indeed a cosmopolitan North American city, but it is also a place that includes the spectre of the wilderness” (207). Vancouver and other cities have locations that relate to the original landscape and the traditions that merged out of it, as well as more recently constructed generic landscapes shared by cities worldwide. In the case of Vancouver there are inevitably non-places, yet arguably less than many other North American cities. In *City of Glass*, Coupland suggests that Vancouver has remained relatively compact, due to the boundaries of the Coast Mountains to the north and east, the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the American border to the south (34). It has avoided the suburban sprawl—where many non-places are found—of other North American metropolises. Lance Berelowitz writes that Vancouver has “largely bypassed by the worst

of North American ‘urban renewal’: freeways, elevated and underground pedestrian systems, huge shopping malls, big box retail, over-sized curvilinear dead end streets in place of the traditional street grid” (2). On the other hand, Vancouver’s recent civil development has enabled absorption of more international influences than other cities.⁷ Several of its famous buildings reference architecture from across the globe: Canada Place is clearly modelled on the Sydney Opera House, the lions outside the Vancouver Art Gallery imitate those in Trafalgar Square, and the new Vancouver Public Library resembles the Roman Coliseum. This architecture not only contributes to the opinion that Vancouver is cosmopolitan, but that it is also post-modern, juxtaposing fragments of other times and places in its built environment. Notably, the only book length volume of cultural criticism published on Vancouver is entitled *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City*.

However, postmodernism does not necessarily preclude regionalism, and this is increasingly recognised in the new approaches to regionalism. Jeanette Lynes gives the examples of Wayne Johnston’s *Human Amusements*, Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook*, Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands* and George Bowering’s *Burning Water* as novels which bring aspects of the two together. Wyile et al suggest that postmodernism’s “counter universalizing and decentralizing tendencies potentially favour the local, the particular, and the specific” (xiii). This move towards decentralisation has contributed to a recent renewed interest in regionalism as an alternative to the “centralizing nationalism that privileges the cultural capitals of North America: New York, Los Angeles and Toronto” (xii). Yet Canada has the added complication of a canon that has often been characterised by non-

⁷ Vancouver has little more than a hundred year history, only becoming a city after it was decided that the Canadian Pacific Railway would terminate there in 1897.

urban writing. While Toronto is the centre of publishing and predominantly in control of the canon, there has been a significant wealth of canonical material to emerge from the regions, exemplified by the many Prairie novels and texts preoccupied with the wilderness and the region of the North.

Douglas Ivison and Justin D. Edwards are concerned that Canadian critics and writers are reluctant to accept that Canada is an urban nation. They observe that eighty per cent of Canadians live in cities (5) and the majority of us are now concerned with producing space and place in our everyday actions, rather than struggling against or imposing ourselves on a natural environment. They quote a number of recent critics and writers who still value the small town, the rural and the wilderness as intrinsic to Canadian literature, ending with the example of Andrew Pyper, who despite being

vocal in his denunciations of Canadian literature's obsession with the wilderness...reinscribes the wilderness and the 'north' as being central to Canadian identity, for his narrator in his novel *Lost Girls*, a self absorbed, venal 'city slicker', is only able to come to terms with his past and his self in a small town in the 'wilderness' to the north of Toronto (7).

Pyper's protagonist has a similar experience to Coupland's Scout, the protagonist of the concluding story from *Life After God*, and Coupland, whilst a predominantly urban / suburban writer, is arguably preoccupied with the region of the North, and a conception of Canada as North. Here the regional and national blur: while the political region of the North incorporates the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, Canada as a whole is

often conceptualised as the North, despite, as Ivison and Edwards point out, the majority of the population clustering in cities in the southern most portion of the country.

Publishing her book, *The Idea of North*, in 2005, Sherill E. Grace provided fuel for Ivison and Edwards' concern that Canadian literature is still preoccupied with the wilderness. She writes that Canadians "have located North almost everywhere within our national borders; even Vancouver, where I sit writing and facing north, is now as often called Hollywood North as it is Lotus Land" (xii). Vancouver has a mild climate which differentiates it from much of the rest of the Canada (prone to heavy snowfall and temperatures frequently well below zero degrees centigrade in the long winter months) and has led to its association with the phrase Lotus Land. Yet even if the icy fingers of the North rarely touch the inhabitants of Vancouver and other southern parts of Canada, writers have often looked to the North, as does Grace in the above quotation, finding that this geographical, yet somewhat mythical, place helps them conceive their identity as Canadians and as writers. As Robert Kroetsch has suggested, for Canadians "to write is, in some metaphoric sense, to go North. To go North is, in some metaphoric sense to write" (14).

Whilst Coupland is rarely remembered for his northerness, the stereotypes attributed to this regional conception of the nation do figure in his work. Often envisaged as 'The Great White North', the phrase has come to connote not just the physical colour of the landscape in Canadian writing but its white protagonists, stereotypically intrepid heroes who venture into the unknown in order to understand themselves, whilst exploring the great blank space they believed the north was (ignoring the indigenous people). There are

echoes of this in the characterisation of Douglas Coupland. His novels feature almost uniformly white people, identified specifically in *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* as the descendants of the pioneers. Coupland's characters search for meaning and frequently move to an area of quasi-wilderness in order to continue their quest. In *Life After God* the protagonists repeatedly journey north. In the first story of the collection the narrator makes the twelve hour drive to Prince George, in the second and the third there are two separate trips to North Vancouver which lies on the slopes of the Coast Mountains. In the penultimate section the protagonist travels north to Whistler searching for a lost sister and in the final part, the only named narrator of the collection, Scout, ventures north into the wilds of Vancouver Island to camp alone and reassess his life: "as long as there is wilderness, I know there is always a larger part of myself that I can always visit, vast tracts of territory lying dormant, craving exploration and providing sanctity" (1993: 279). Consequently, Coupland's fiction might be seen as partaking in a historical continuity of the idea of North as a metaphorical extension of the (white) Canadian pioneer's psyche. The excerpt also might be read as an example of what Terry Goldie has described as "indigenization": "In their need to become 'native', to be in their land, whites in Canada have required a process I have termed 'indigenization', the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" (194). Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is one of Goldie's examples of indigenization where there is "an Indian presence but no Indians present" (200). Atwood's conclusion bears a striking resemblance to the final passage of Coupland's story, where Scout lowers himself into an icy stream in a remote corner of Vancouver Island, and this is

also an example of indigenization.⁸ As I discuss further in both Chapter Two and Three, there are hints in Coupland's fiction of an interest in indigenous ways of life, yet the indigenous population never receive a mention.

It might be the case that the echo of earlier Canadian tropes is self-consciously enacted, as Coupland often responds with irony to his critics and this may be a reaction to those in the Canadian literary establishment who refuse to accept him as a Canadian writer.⁹ However, the overall seriousness of tone in *Life After God* and Coupland's statements in his non-fiction texts suggest his belief in a restorative connection to the land is genuine. Indeed, he is implicated in trying to construct ideas about national identity, via sweeping generalisations, in a manner not unlike Margaret Atwood's in her essay *Survival*. Yet while Atwood suggested Canadian literature was concerned with nature as an obstacle to survival, for Coupland it facilitates spiritual survival, as seen by Scout's acceptance of God while communing with nature. In *Souvenir of Canada*, the author expands the importance of a relationship with nature from individual survival to national spiritual survival. He tells the tale of his father's close call with a water spout: "the sky, and the earth and the water together conspired to deliver a message to my father and to all of us,

⁸ Atwood writes in *Surfacing* "I pile the blanket on the rock and step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper" (171). Coupland writes in *Life After God*, "I peel my clothes off and step into the pool beside the burbling stream, on to polished rocks, and water so clear that it seems it might not even be there" (288). Atwood's narrator continues to narrate after she has left her "false body on the surface", suggesting a positive transformation—a rebirth. In Coupland's novel it is not apparent what happens after Scout emerges himself, although it appears to help him "to become whole" (290). Both instances are quasi-baptisms facilitated by 'going back to nature' and are examples of what Goldie sees as indigenization.

⁹ In the film *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland jokes about how Canadian critics have struggled to recognise him as a Canadian writer: "I was perceived as not a Canadian writer. Next I started setting books in Canada, honestly, its easier; 'cause you know the place and you can put in no research at all. And four books later he's still not Canadian. It's kind of weird and now I'm doing books on Canada, and nope, still not Canadian [sic]".

that we are the land and the land is us, we are inseparable, and this knowledge binds us together” (142). Additionally, he states “In Canada when we speak of water we’re speaking of ourselves...wasted water means a diminished collective soul, polluted waters mean a sickened soul” (123). By concluding *Life After God* with the image of Scout immersing himself in water, Coupland is reinforcing the ideas of Canadian identity which he constructs in his non-fiction.

Thus Coupland, like Pyper, appears to reinscribe traditional national ideas of Canadianness and nature, whilst also writing the city. Karen Skinazi considers Coupland’s Canadian identity in relation to continental affiliation. She suggests that his fiction creates “a North America of overlapping and interdependent nations”, noting that that the border is simultaneously negated and drawn attention to by un-narrated border crossings and bi-national characters.¹⁰ Skinazi does not suggest that Canada and America are becoming one and the same, but proposes that Coupland’s work suggests “the truly cosmopolitan possibilities and realities of his continent” (14). In some ways then, she is writing against attachment to place in favour of cosmopolitan identification. However in advocating cosmopolitanism she insists that it must be a two way process that resists Americanization and advances what she calls the ‘Canadianation’ of the U.S.. Her belief that Coupland’s work is spreading Canadian culture throughout North America lends plausibility to the suggestion of John Gray: “What if the North American threat is not *to* Canada, but *from* Canada? ...The prospect of a transnational, aggressive Canadiana independent of national politics may not be absurd as it seems—in fact it might be happening now” (118).

¹⁰ For example, in *Hey Nostradamus*, Jason crosses the border whilst in a drug / alcohol induced blackout (2003: 123).

Coupland's work can be read as endeavouring to resolve the balance of Canadian and American culture in North America.

Whilst Skinazi is right to draw attention to Coupland's interest in Canada as part of the North American continent and the New World as a whole (Skinazi 2, *Girlfriend* 236-237), Robert McGill comes closer to my own interests in situating Coupland regionally. In many ways I build on his work's discussions of apocalypse and home in *Girlfriend in a Coma* in my subsequent chapters. McGill initially appears to consider the West Coast as the geographical context most appropriate for Coupland's work. He compares Vancouver with Los Angeles, suggesting they have the shared psychological burden of being cities on the edge, "always in danger of breaking away" (259), and "the last continental place on earth to experience a days closing" (256). They are also at the end of the new world. There are no further utopias to be imagined. "The California impulse is to live up to its utopian mythology through pretence if not through fact", McGill suggests, and "its superficiality and simulacra... extends northward along the Pacific Rim" (260-261).¹¹ Yet Vancouver and *Girlfriend in a Coma* are saved from simulacrum by the sublime landscape: "The sublime in its infinity, denies the power of the artificial apocalypse" (273). McGill thus ultimately considers *Girlfriend* in the context of the city of Vancouver rather than the West Coast, yet a number of other regions are mentioned in his work, illustrating the

¹¹ McGill's assertions about California and Vancouver bear similarities to the Red Hot Chilli Pepper's song "Californication" (Keidis). They speak of the simulacra—"Space may be the final frontier / But it's made in a Hollywood basement"—and the apocalyptic landscape—"And earthquakes are to a girls guitar / They're just another good vibration / And tidal waves couldn't save the world / From Californication". Also of note is the origin of the phrase Californication, which appears to have originated in the 1970s when inhabitants of Oregon and other Western states wished to resist a spread of Californian style growth, developments successfully resisted by Vancouver according to Berelowitz (2) and Coupland (2000: 34): "Oregonians snickered at California as the land of strip malls, endless sprawl and air pollution" and consequently produced bumper stickers that read "Don't Californicate Oregon" (Carson).

difficulties in defining and limiting literary analysis to just one region. He uses West Coast and Pacific Rim interchangeably, though the two have different connotations, the former referring merely to North America and the other to a multi-continental circular region. He fleetingly refers to British Columbia and Canada, suggesting that a salmon's desire for home is a British Columbian metaphor, and reflective of a distinctly Canadian desire (265). Here we see the overlap of region and national distinctions, yet a return to the more traditional way of thinking about region, suggesting the existence of homogenous geography—McGill refers to “British Columbia's mountain ecology”—and its resulting cultural manifestations. Yet as I have already discussed, geography is far from homogenous in British Columbia; only part of it is mountainous, and salmon is not found in the waterways of the entire province, but merely near the Pacific Ocean and a small number of landlocked locations. The roughly homogenous geography that McGill might more accurately refer to is the Northwest Coast, a cross-border region absent from his article, yet the most appropriate regional context for Coupland's work, at least for the simple reason that it combines elements of the other regions ‘North’, ‘West’ and ‘Coastal’, that are all represented in Coupland's work.

The region known as the Northwest Coast is most commonly referred to in discussion of indigenous people. For instance, the Northwest Coastal Indian is defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as a “member of any of the aboriginal North American peoples inhabiting a narrow belt of Pacific coastland and offshore islands from the southern border of Alaska to north-western California”. The Encyclopaedia continues to point out that the Northwest Coast was “the most sharply delimited culture area of Native North

America”, a suggestion that begs the question—might it still be a clearly delimited cultural area? Obviously it cannot be on a scale comparable with the time of pre-contact societies precisely because of the long term processes of globalisation and the movement of people, capital and ideas in and out of the area. However, the natural landscape perhaps remains enough to have a unifying effect and produce a characteristic way of life. This is suggested by Joel Garreau in *The Nine Nations of North America*. Garreau simultaneously complicates the issue of region and nation and the plausibility of Canada and the United States as nation-states. Garreau’s Ecotopia is roughly equivalent to the Northwest Coastal region. It ignores the forty-ninth parallel national divide and includes the coastal areas of British Columbia and beyond into Alaska, forming a long strip that runs from Homer in the far north to Point Conception, below San Francisco, in the south. The legitimacy of this ‘nation’ is grounded in its geographical isolation and low population; a common climate, temperate and moist; a claustrophobic landscape, “the vistas are framed and blocked by forests and mists [...] the exact opposite of the “big sky” country across the mountains” (249); and a tendency towards environmentally friendly policies and lifestyles. Garreau writes that “This is the first place in North America in which even the middle class has moved onto the idea that a person may have to lower his monetarily described standard of living in order to raise his overall quality of life” (262).

Statements such as the latter are hard-to-prove generalisations but they do draw a picture of Ecotopia that matches Coupland’s illustration of Vancouver as in *City of Glass*. He notes that Vancouver was the birthplace of Greenpeace and shares with “the so-called Cascadia region, a wellspring of dissent against the forces of bland corporate nothingness”

(42). The Cascadia region Coupland alludes to bears resemblance to Joel Garreau's *Ecotopia* and to the area known as the Pacific Northwest:

Definitions of the region's boundaries vary, but usually include the area between the Cascade Range and the Pacific Ocean, and some part of the Coast Mountains. Other definitions follow the boundaries of existed sub-national entities, and usually include the territory of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, while others also include parts of California, Idaho, Alaska and Yukon" ("Where is Cascadia?").

This definition is taken from the website of the Cascadian Independence Project, which, like Garreau, proposes that these areas have so much in common that it would make sense for them to constitute a nation. The website claims that much of British Columbia, Washington and Oregon comprise a natural 'bioregion' and draws on the previous unity of the region by indigenous cultures and later as the Oregon territory (though this existed under split ownership). The same arguments might be used to support the legitimacy of a Northwest Coastal region.

The regional characteristics described by Garreau and the Cascadian Independence Project are also evident in the descriptions of region offered by Canadian literary regionalist Laurie Ricou, though he uses the term 'Pacific Northwest'.¹² This term is generally defined as including all of British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Montana and

¹² Ricou also utilises the term *Ecotopia* in a conference paper, "Articulating Ecotopia". Notably, it is a term similarly utilised by Ernest J. Callenbach in his novel, *Ecotopia*, which envisions the secession of North West Coastal America and its formulation of an independent nation of that name. This is a fictionalised version of the Cascadia Independence project, although Callenbach differs in territorial definition by not including British Columbia in his imagined Ecotopia.

Idaho¹³ but Ricou is concerned only with British Columbia and Washington State, suggesting readers and critics interested in regional literature, from either side of the border, should not bind themselves by nation, but consider cross-border motifs. He looks in particular at the work of Canadian Daphne Marlatt and John Keeble, also born in Canada but a thirty year resident of Washington, and considers their work's location on multiple edges; linguistic, geographical, and psychological. He quotes a passage from Keeble's *Yellowfish* which describes a region bounded by two immense geographical features, the mountains and the ocean:

The mountains, [the cascades], the range – extending longitudinally from northern California into British Columbia, across Oregon and Washington, its peaks upwards of 14000 feet – a boundary between peoples, between the coast and the interior...with the descent into the coastal region he had developed a physical sense of blockage, of a rising impaction at the back of his head, and arriving at the coast of British Columbia, he felt scrunched, a short awkward animal journeying, a landlocked beaver. He looked out upon too much water to dam. (296)

The mountains figure as a natural and psychological divide from the rest of Canada / America, and Keeble's protagonist, feeling "scrunched", recalls Garreau's idea that the northwest coastal landscape is claustrophobic. The description of landscape in this quote

¹³ My definition of this the Pacific Northwest comes from a Tourist Information website for the region ("Welcome to Go Northwest! A Travel Guide"), but there is much variation depending on the purpose of the regional delineation; e.g., The Centre for the Study of the Pacific Northwest project touches only briefly on British Columbia ("Northwest Writing and Regional Identity: Introductory Essay"), while the Pacific Northwest Economic region includes Alaska, Alberta, British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and the Yukon ("Welcome to the Pacific Northwest Economic Region").

implies that Ricou's use of the term 'Pacific Northwest' is a misnomer, and he might more accurately describe the landscape of interest to him with the name Cascadia or Northwest Coast.

All this serves to illustrate the point of how arbitrary regions are. Different writers use different boundaries and regional titles to fit in with their own arguments and emphases. Yet as long as we live within a natural landscape, geography will continue to exert influence on certain writers, and will in turn help critics to understand them. However, in recent years critical theory has tended to question the validity of region and nation in the historical world, and as literary canons. As I have acknowledged, the concept of both has been widened to allow for cultural plurality and postmodernism. The generalisations once applied to geographical areas by regional and national approaches are revealed for their shortcomings and inaccuracies. The renewed interest in the regional and national is both a response to, and a result of the processes associated with globalisation, which has a) contributed to a movement away from the central control of the national state, and b) prompted a renewed look at literary regionalism following the increased theorization of the regional in relation to the global in other disciplines. Additionally, the increased movement of people, capital and culture has attracted attention to the malleability of place and the arbitrary nature of regional and national borders. In the words of Hönnighausen, what distinguishes new regionalism is the awareness that "regions are no longer idyllic areas of authenticity but problem zones threatened either by the tensions between 'multicultural squabbling' and 'consumerist monoculture' or by economic want and the aspirations of political hegemony" (14). Hönnighausen also refers to another central issue,

one I have only briefly touched on in relation to the city and how Ivison and Edwards define the urban relation to space. Hönnighausen quotes William Westfall in saying that “writers no longer simply reflect the region they describe; now they help to create the region itself” (17). I have alluded to evidence of this in Coupland’s work. The journeys his characters make and the locations he identifies map out region. I have also found that he is implicated in the construction of ideas of national identity. Investigating the themes of apocalypse and home, my subsequent chapters will go further in exploring how Coupland might be seen as interacting with nation and region as they exist in the globalised world.

Chapter 2

Visions of Apocalypse.

This chapter continues to deal with the changing conceptions of nation and region in relation to globalisation. It situates Douglas Coupland's visions of apocalypse within evolving concepts of region, nation and globalisation with the aim of understanding Coupland's relationship with apocalypse and his reasons for writing about it. I look at the conflicting theses of Robert McGill, who argues that Coupland's apocalypse is symptomatic of his novel's North American west coast location, and Marlene Goldman, who suggests that rewriting the apocalypse is an interest many Canadian authors have in common. While McGill looks closely at Coupland, Goldman merely mentions him in her introduction, focusing on an earlier generation of Canadian writers who she insists are symptomatic of Canada's interest in the apocalypse's non-elect. I propose that while Coupland seems preoccupied with envisioning apocalypse and relates it to his own generational and geographical anxiety, his novels implicitly criticise those who desire apocalypse and he eventually advocates prophetic eschatology.

The Cold War is over and it has become apparent that the world is not going to end anytime soon. Coupland calls for this realisation and for people to stop living their lives as though they are merely passing time on earth, waiting for the apocalypse. His work reflects definitions of apocalyptic and prophetic eschatology defined by Goldman. She writes, "In apocalyptic literature, hope does not lie in the anticipation of the restoration of an earthly community, but in the belief that God will bring to an end the profane world and create an

entirely new one”. Prophetic eschatology on the other hand “envisioned God accomplishing divine plans within the *here and now*, within ‘the context of human history and by means of human agents’” (15). Whilst Coupland’s work contains multiple visions of apocalypse and implies that anticipation of the apocalypse is characteristic of his generation, class and location, his prophetic eschatology, seen most clearly in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, asks that people make an effort to change the world themselves, and that they start doing it now. When Karen emerges from her coma she is appalled to discover that people appear indifferent to the future (153). Coupland demands that people take in interest “What’s Next” (1997: 271, Coupland’s capitalisation).

I postulate that Douglas Coupland’s apocalyptic imagery is inextricably linked to the anxiety of a middle-class demographic, the Generation X that he named. Coupland should be read as a case study for a cultural condition that has emerged among these sons and daughters of the baby boomers, a generation that Nick Heffernan suggests are “the collective creature of the dismantling of Fordist regulation, understood, as Coupland himself has put it, as ‘the collapse of entitlement’” (90). The anxiety that stems from this financial uncertainty, downward social mobility, and living in a world which is increasingly “invaded by violence, pop culture, technology, and drug addiction” (Bourland Ross, 154) results in a generational anticipation of the worst, and a fiction permeated with apocalyptic imagery.

I am yet to find a critic who explicitly links apocalyptic imagery with middle-class Generation X anxiety, although a number of articles in the 2006 collection *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* connect the violent imagery of contemporary fiction with consumer

society and the technological advances which have led to an increasing role for machines and media in everyday life. The introduction to this volume gives the following explanation of its subject matter:

Novels of the contemporary extreme—from North and South America, from Europe and the Middle East—are set in a world both similar to and different from our own: a hyper-real, often apocalyptic world progressively invaded by popular culture, permeated with technology and dominated by destruction where violence, often the only stable quality, operates as ethos (Durand & Mandel, 1)

While Coupland's work is at odds with many of the texts covered by these articles in that it does not include descriptions of extreme violence or sex, his work is marked by a sense of destruction and apocalypticism with a backdrop of popular culture and modern technology. Of all the authors covered in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*,¹⁴ those with the most in common with Coupland appear to be the Spanish novelists Ray Lorigo and Lucia Etxebarria, authors who are read as voices of the Generation X movement in Spain. Their work shares many traits with the North American version seen in Coupland's work—for instance, “the annihilation of the individual, moral apathy” (Everly, 143) and “nonchalance toward money and work ethic”(Bourland Ross, 155)—but, according to Everly, Spanish Generation X fiction has an additional interest in “grappling with mending the social and political wounds of Franco's dictatorship” (143). The publication of *Generation X Rocks*:

¹⁴ These include Brett Easton Ellis, Don DeLillo, José Yvon, Nelly Arcan, Alberto Fuguet, Richard Morgiève, Maurice G. Dantec, Michel Houellebecq, Amerlia Nothomb, Martin Amis, Ray Lorigo, Lucia Etxebarria, and Orly Castel –Bloom.

Contemporary Peninsular Fiction, Film, and Rock Culture in 2007 suggests an increasing interest in Spanish Generation X fiction.

If Spanish Generation X fiction is influenced by the legacy of Franco's dictatorship, North American Generation X fiction is a product of the Cold War. Although Generation X refers approximately to those born between 1961 and 1981 and consequently binds a rather large demographic group who inevitably have vastly varying perspectives, this group all share the experience of growing up in the tense atmosphere of the Cold War. Sixty pages into Douglas Coupland's *Life After God* he introduces the idea of Superman's death. The reference to Superman, an iconic figure of Cold War culture, has the effect of uniting Generation X readers over a shared symbol of anxiety about extreme good and evil in the world. The idea of Superman's death is not exactly an apocalyptic moment but plays on the idea that Generation Xers have replaced traditional notions of God with figures from popular culture. This is, as Coupland's title asserts, life after God. Instead of believing in the notion of a religious end time, fears of the apocalypse are exorcised by the consumption of popular culture and its various representations of Armageddon.

The Superman story is suggestive of the anxiety about potential disaster and the confusion of pop images and references to reality that characterises much of *Life After God*. The narrator is struck by a news story reporting that Superman will die in the skies above Minneapolis, a city he has visited just that month. Though unmentioned by Coupland, the death of Superman in the comic issue *Superman #75* on November 18th 1992 occurred at the hands of a character called Doomsday, implying that the end of Superman might also mean the end of the world, and thus exemplifying the legacy of Cold War preoccupation

with apocalypse. Coupland's narrator is sad at the prospect of Superman's death "because I have always liked the idea that there is one person in the world that doesn't do bad things" (66). Unlike many superheroes, Superman avoided hurting his enemies and banished them instead. Writing of the one occasion when Superman acted as judge, jury and executioner, Sean Hogan notes "Many fans were, of course, outraged by a story in which the iconic Superman intentionally kills". This reinforces the idea of Superman as a benevolent Godlike figure. By the end of the story, Coupland's narrator realises his mistake. It was the fictional city of Metropolis where Superman was scheduled to die, yet the confusion still remains in his anxious subconscious as the story concludes:

I dreamed I had taken a glass elevator to the top of one of [Minneapolis'] green glass skyscrapers, to the very top, and I was running around that floor from one face of the skyscraper to another, frantic, looking through those big sheets of glass – trying to find a way to protect Superman (70).

Coupland consequently creates a character that, despite his best efforts, is futile in preventing doomsday. Trapped in a glass tower he can only watch while Superman meets his fate. This is characteristic of *Life of God's* characters who feel they have lost control of their lives, but perhaps is an early hint that Coupland encourages the attempt to regain control, to find a solution to the problem however impossible it appears to be, taking an interest in the future.

The next story in the collection, "The Wrong Sun", features a number of visions more obviously apocalyptic than the Superman story. The story is divided into two parts, and whilst they differ in style, content and narrator, both revolve around the idea of

imagining atomic disaster. The first of these, “Thinking of the Sun”, again shows the influence of popular culture combined with apocalyptic fear. The narrator begins with a recollection of his first visit to Macdonald’s, a visit made memorable by the fact “it was also the date and time of the Cannikin nuclear test on Amchitka Island in the Aleutians...according to fears of the day, the blast was to occur on seismic faults connected to Vancouver, catalyzing chain reactions which in turn would trigger the great granddaddy of all earthquakes” (73). This story echoes biographical details given in Coupland’s non-fiction book on Vancouver, *City of Glass*. There, he writes that the incident “electrified two Vancouver generations” (42). Yet there are conflicting tones in the story. An older more cynical voice imagines the Park Royal shopping mall breaking in two, the Cleveland dam collapsing, and “the cantilevered L-shaped modern houses with their ‘Kitchens of Tomorrow’ perched on the slopes overlooking the city...crumble like so much litter – all to be washed away by a tsunami six hours later” (74). There is a slight sense of satisfaction in this description, as though the destroyed constructions were ridiculous anyway. The simile “like so much litter” implies the unimportance of buildings in the face of the apocalypse. They are disposable. This description highlights the paradoxical attitude Coupland has towards commodities. As Alan Bilton has suggested, when faced with consumer culture “artists can choose between accommodation and flight...what is most interesting (and problematic) about Coupland’s work is that it attempts the two simultaneously” (223). Coupland’s work offers a critique and a celebration of consumer society at the same time.

Coupland's attitude to Macdonald's restaurants is another example of this. In "Thinking of the Sun", Coupland recalls "sitting on my purple vinyl stool being unable to eat, gazing out of the window, waiting for the flash, waiting for the cars to float up into the sky, for the Hamburglar statue to melt, for the tiled floor to break apart and expose lava" (75). There is a playful engagement with consumer images, yet the story also suggests that "MacDonald's equals evil" (75). Due to the narrator's experience, he forever associates the fast food chain with nuclear disaster. Coupland goes on to recall further childhood "nuclear episodes": a story told by his family about preparation for Soviet attack on the air force base in Germany where he was born; a jet passing over his high school; a siren wailing for a civil defence drill in his neighbourhood; and the disaster movies of the 1970s (76). Reference to these time-specific incidents support my argument that the apocalyptic imagination is specific to a generation, a generation that experienced the "Cold War Boom culture" that Coupland describes in his essay on James Rosenquist's F-111 in *Polaroids from the Dead*. The colourful *Life* Magazine-style images Rosenquist uses in his painting—which juxtaposes an image of a little girl under a hair dryer next to an image of a mushroom cloud—illustrates the integration of atomic imagery and everyday life for this generation. None of the 1970s disaster films listed by Coupland are explicitly about atomic disaster, but *Silent Running*, *Soylent Green*, *The Andromeda Strain* and *The Omega Man* are set in post-apocalyptic landscapes. *Towering Inferno* and *The Poseidon Adventure* focus on the metaphorical micro-worlds of a burning building and a sinking ship respectively. *The Poseidon Adventure* is particularly apocalyptic in its invocation of religious imagery. Coupland suggests that watching *The Poseidon Adventure* was "to

watch the world tip upside down” (80). His hyperbolic description echoes the tagline of the film which was “Hell. Upside Down” (Keane, 39).¹⁵ The tagline introduces the religious theme that pervades the film. Though caused by a natural disaster—a tidal wave emanating from an earthquake—the Poseidon’s fate is figured as a vengeful act of God (Keane, 38).

The Poseidon Adventure’s act of God contrasts with the atomic images of manmade destruction that are the focus of the rest of “The Wrong Sun”. Yet it is part of the general apocalyptic anxiety Coupland is trying to reflect. In the non-fiction book, *Souvenir of Canada*, he suggests growing up during the Cold War was like seeing the movie that frightened you most as a child over and over, “everyday for your entire upbringing”. He describes the lessons of fear at school: “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 over the Canadian North...and thus Canadians were stuck with this grim geographical situation”. The passage shifts apocalyptic fear from a *generation*-based concern to *location*-based concern. Writing about the North American Air Defence lines of missile detection which crisscrossed Canada until 1965, he suggests “they had a profound and subtle effect on the Canadian psyche” (22). This is undoubtedly a speculative statement but one that perhaps illustrates Coupland’s own state of mind as a result of his generational and geopolitical circumstances.

¹⁵ This film is also referenced in the 2003 novel *Hey Nostradamus*, which I will subsequently discuss in more detail. Finding herself among the victims of a school shooting, Cheryl “remembered the ship turning upside down in *The Poseidon Adventure*, and the look on the actors’ faces as they clued into the fact that the ship was flipping” (56)

Returning to *Life After God*, the Cannikin incident that Coupland relates in “Thinking of the Sun” is another incident which casts Canada as the unfortunate bystander to the U.S.A.’s demonstration of power. Here, however, only one part of the nation is affected, the parts nearest to Alaska where the blast took place and those near to the fault line many feared it would disrupt. Consequently, the Cannikin test can be conceived as an atomic incident of regional concern, the region in question being the Northwest Coast of North America, at least as far south as Vancouver. Vancouver was “the nearest major city to the test zone at Amchitka Island, Alaska, which made it part of the “front line” (Hunter, 17). The Cannikin test was the catalyst for the birth of Greenpeace in Vancouver: “the new group started off Canadian, incorporated under the British Columbia Societies Act—a move that turned out to be brilliant. If the committee hadn’t started off in this particular country, it would have never evolved into Greenpeace, a powerful organization of international stature” (Hunter, 16). In the section headed “Greenpeace” of his non-fiction book, *City of Glass*, Coupland writes, “Greenpeace went forth from fringe obscurity to radicalise much of the rest of the planet” (42). The example of Greenpeace illustrates Roland Robertson’s concept of glocalisation. Greenpeace started off as a local movement and still depends on local action despite its global reputation. Yet it also defines itself in opposition to corporate globalisation, highlighting a paradox of Robertson’s theory and the use of the terms globalisation and glocalisation.

In a similarly paradoxical manner, “Thinking of the Sun” emphasises the local whilst simultaneously suggesting apocalyptic fear is universal. After referring to 1970s disaster movies, Coupland suggests that these films are no longer made because “they are

all so vividly projecting inside our heads” (80).¹⁶ No-one is exempt from his assertion that apocalyptic influences have been internalised. On the penultimate page of “Thinking of the Sun”, Coupland shifts his emphasis. His visions of apocalypse are not entirely global but, like most of his fiction, based on the middle classes:

In modern middle-class culture, the absence of death in most peoples’ early years creates a psychic vacuum of sorts. For many, thoughts of a nuclear confrontation are one’s first true brush with non-existence, and because they are the first, they can be the most powerful and indelible...At least this is what I tell myself to explain these images in my head that will not go away.
(85)

The narrator claims that he has interviewed both friends and strangers, and found that many people envision the flash of nuclear apocalypse. These people are apparently all Vancouverites, since the places they envision the flash map an apocalyptic geography onto southern British Columbia and northern Washington state: “Over the tract suburbs of the Fraser River Delta, over Richmond and White Rock...the Vancouver Harbour, over the Strait of Juan de Fuca, over the Pacific Ocean, the American border, over Seattle, over Bremerton, Tacoma, Anacortes and Bellingham” (87). The inclusion of Bremerton in the above list of imagined flash locations implies Coupland’s awareness of the devastating weapons stored in Washington. Bremerton is home to the largest submarine ever built, The Trident Ohio. This carries, according to Joel Garreau, ten warheads, each designed to

¹⁶ The apocalyptic imagination would, however, reign in Hollywood again, a few years after Coupland wrote these words. Keane notes, “In the late 1990s disaster movies returned in ever more composite and recycled form” (2).

“produce an airburst that would cause flash blindness, hurricane winds, spontaneous combustion, thermal radiation, and radioactive fallout” (282). Moreover, Everett, Washington, is home to Boeing’s cruise missiles. Coupland’s place-specific references construct a region of apocalypse.

The second part of “The Wrong Sun” reverts back to the universal apocalypse, at least, as universal as the middle class can be considered. “The Dead Speak” features five narrators who speak of their last moments on earth from the afterlife. Each experience the familiar effects of a nuclear explosion—flash, fireball, blast, firestorms and radiation—whilst in a generic location: a kitchen, a hair salon, a traffic jam, a mall and an office. Coupland appears to be emphasizing the everyday, suggesting that apocalypse could occur without warning as one goes about one’s usual daily business. The generic locations might be termed non-places according to John Tomlinson’s definition (112) which I discussed in the previous chapter. These places are common in the day-to-day lives of most contemporary middle-class people and Coupland’s situation of the apocalypse in non-places helps to universalise the experience. However, there several place names mentioned in the narratives. This sparse reference to place nonetheless implies that each apocalypse occurs in North America, and even that the origin of the missiles might be Russia, showing the influence of Coupland’s Cold War upbringing on his fiction.¹⁷ One story describes a news anchorman pointing to a map of Iceland; another refers to strategic events over Baffin Island and Minnesota. Brand name references also imply an American setting—a

¹⁷ Coupland was born both in the temporal and spatial heart of the Cold War – on a Canadian air force base in Baden Baden, Germany, 1961. While he has lived most of his life on the western extreme of the west, his birth was at the eastern most point of the western bloc, under the shadow of Soviet forces. (“Biography”)

Simpsons cup from Burger King, a Corvette, Kleenex, Xerox—though each of these are fairly ubiquitous despite their American origin. Such references are perhaps not intended as markers of place but as a method of emphasizing the material preoccupations of the contemporary middle-class mind even when the worst happens. Again Coupland's paradoxical attitude to commodities is evident. Plastic cups, cars, tissues and photocopying are taken for granted as part of middle-class day-to-day existence and on the verge of death Coupland's protagonists speak of these inanimate things around them. In contrast, once in the afterlife, they are surrounded by living things: "the birds are here with us now – this is where they went. And the fish in the sea—and the plants and all of God' fine animals" (99). Coupland portrays heaven as a place to enjoy nature and escape earth's day to day reliance on commodities.

The excerpt might also be read as a specific biblical reference. Zephaniah 1:3 reads "I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth declares the LORD" (New International Version). If this is the case Coupland's story ends with a post-apocalyptic vision. The nuclear annihilation that killed his speakers was the final judgment day, as envisioned in Zephaniah. Living creatures have left the world and the earth is desolate. Despite Coupland's irreligious upbringing his work shows a fascination with scripture and his prose often echoes specific verse. His research of the bible appears to be a reaction to living in what he believes is an unusually secular corner of the world. In an interview with Douglas Todd he claims that "British Columbia has one of the highest proportions in North America of residents who have no

religion whatsoever...thirty per cent of residents of British Columbia tell census takers they have no religious affiliation, compared to an average of ten per cent nationwide in both Canada and the United States” (85-86). Todd writes that Coupland “thinks the West Coast, particularly B.C., with its vast wilderness, lack of institutional history, and dearth of clear codes to live by, may be giving birth to a new worldview” (85). Coupland admits that this new perspective might take years to emerge and is unable to define it, but it is significant to note that he believes that region defines worldview, despite increasing global forces of homogenisation.

Todd has a similar background to Coupland—he was raised by staunch atheists in Vancouver yet, according to his employees at *The Vancouver Sun*, he has “gone on to become one of the most decorated spirituality and ethics writers in North America” (“Vancouver Sun Columnists”). Equally Coupland, though “he has never identified himself with any particular religious community or faith position...is now widely recognised as theologically dynamic and open to competing religious readings” (Tate, 2006: 155). I quote Andrew Tate here, who has written extensively on Coupland. Prior to his upcoming full length volume on all of Coupland’s work to date, Tate wrote on issues of ritual and epiphany in the *Journal of Literature and Theology* and on eschatology in a collection of essays called *Biblical Religion and the Novel*. Studies of Generation X theology by Gordon Lynch and Tom Bedouin also draw on Coupland’s work.

The final story in *Life After God* introduces readers to a character who has also reacted against his secular upbringing, though in a different manner to Coupland and Todd.

The narrator of the story runs in to an old friend to find him changed into a fundamentalist Christian prophesising doomsday:

God is descending into the suburbs, Scout.¹⁸ We never expected judgment in our time, but it is going to happen...The time is coming Scout. You will not have to live inside linear time anymore; the concept of infinity will cease to be frightening. All secrets will be revealed. There will be great destruction; structures like skyscrapers and multinational corporations will crumble. Your dreamlife and your real life will fuse. There will be music. Before you turn immaterial, your body will turn itself inside out and fall to the ground and cook like a steak on a cheap hibachi and you will be released and you will be judged...you may be driving in a car when it happens. You may be shopping in a fashionable store” (241).

The first and the last two sentences re-emphasise the implication of middle class consumer lifestyles in the apocalypse. Dana is described by the narrator as “the most experimental” (237) of a group of seven friends raised together in North Vancouver, blessed with “a life lived in paradise...charmed but without any politics or religion” (220). Unbeknownst to his friends, Dana appears in porn magazines and deals cocaine. Scout only becomes aware of this when Dana decides to change his ways, asking his friend to be his witness as he flushes a bag of white powder. Several years later, Scout is again a witness to Dana’s convictions when, after their chance reunion in a supermarket car park, Dana calls Scout to share with him the above revelation. He also informs Scout that he prays for him because

¹⁸ Perhaps coincidentally, Scout is also the title of a post-apocalyptic comic by Timothy Truman (Brians).

he believes Scout has no faith and thus no soul. Though Scout takes offence at the latter part of this statement, he admits he has no faith. However, by the end of the novel Scout has admitted that he needs God: “I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I can no longer seem to be 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” (289). Thus Dana’s message is not entirely rejected by Scout or by Coupland.

Dana’s prophecy contrasts with Scout’s description of their upbringing. It *is* political and it *is* religious. Since Dana suggests God is descending into the suburbs it is clearly a religious vision of apocalypse. The suggestion that “skyscrapers and multinational corporations will crumble” (241) hints at the politics of the prophecy. Symbols of capitalism, globalisation and technological progress are singled out as the objects of destruction. Mitchell G. Reddish has written that “apocalyptic literature is dangerous for the established order... [it] should be understood as protest literature” (26). The same might be said of Coupland’s vision of apocalypse through Dana. A protest against secular middle-class existence and capitalist consumer society is implied. However, Coupland does not directly explore how society should be changed. Apart from speaking of impending doom, Dana appears to be doing little to enact a transformation. He is still a participant in consumer society, shopping with his family at Save-on-Foods, driving a car, using a telephone. His attitude is an example of apocalyptic eschatology rather than the prophetic eschatology I believe Coupland advocates. Dana expects an apocalypse and thus waits for that to change the world, rather than trying to transform it in his own time.

Reddish also writes that apocalyptic literature should offer comfort and consolation. He suggests that it should “function in this dual capacity—by consoling and challenging, by offering comfort and demanding protest” (27). Whilst Reddish writes primarily about ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writing he acknowledges the influence of this on contemporary writers (36). I propose that the idea of the dual function might be applied to work like Coupland’s, obviously inspired by religious writings. As I have already suggested, Dana’s apocalyptic prophecy challenges the status quo and can be seen as offering consolation by means of an escape from the world as we know it. However, as Andrew Tate has noted, Coupland’s novels do not simply enact Christian eschatology” (156), they problematise it. Dana’s prophecy is complex, and contains a mixture of ideas that are both shocking and potentially appealing. He predicts a violent and painful death, typically imbuing his apocalyptic image with middle-class consumer culture reference (“you will cook like a steak on a Hibachi grill”). Yet the apocalypse promises to take away the fear of infinity and fuse dreamlife and real life. One might read this as a promise of the afterlife—a release from the body, from all material things and from linear time. This afterlife predicted here is reminiscent of the Australian aboriginal world view. Coupland refers to dreamlife; the aboriginal perspective of life is known as dreamtime. This world view does not acknowledge linear time; instead “the aborigines call it the ‘all-at-once’ time instead of the ‘one-thing-after-another’ time. This is because they experience Dreamtime as the past present and future coexisting” (Crisp). Coupland uses Dana’s apocalyptic vision to suggest the possibility of a different system of time.

Tate refers to different types of time in his chapter on the end of the world in Coupland's novels, suggesting that a sense of *Kairotic* time is evident in Coupland's work. Quoting Paul Kermode, he writes that "Kairos is the season, a point in time which is filled with significance, charged with meaning from its relation to the end" (Tate, 2006: 157). Whilst I agree that Coupland's characters, Dana included, derive meaning from visions of apocalypse, I propose that the author is attracted to alternative conceptions of time such as the Australian aboriginal one and also the North American indigenous world view, which sees time as cyclical. McGill has noted this aspect of Coupland's work, though without mention of indigenous world views. He sees Coupland's references to nature as evidence of Coupland's rejection of linear time, writing that "the sublime's permanence insists on the falsity of finite history, and its immensity rejects linearity" (265) and proceeds to discuss the cyclical life system of salmon. As the salmon is a significant food source for Northwest indigenous people and their own world view is similarly cyclical, the appeal of indigenous beliefs seems an unacknowledged subtext of Coupland's work.

As I have already noted, the visions of apocalypse seen in *Life After God* often evoke global concerns. Yet the apocalypse is made personal by references to the author's own experiences and to specific Vancouver streets and buildings. These track the author's habitation of Vancouver and map its apocalyptic geography as imagined by Coupland. In McGill's article "The Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's Geography of Apocalypse", he confronts the paradox of Coupland's universal and particular apocalypse, writing that although Coupland's "'we' is universal, it finds its quintessential embodiment in the inhabitants of the West Coast, 'people who had been raised without

religion by parents who had broken with their own pasts and moved to the West Coast”, people, I might add, like Coupland himself. McGill does not talk of how Coupland’s work reflects the author’s experience of Vancouver but instead “seeks to situate *Girlfriend in a Coma* as it demands to be situated: within the topographical and historical context of the late-twentieth century North American West Coast” (253). Whilst I find much of McGill’s argument useful, I propose that *Girlfriend in a Coma* might be seen within the topographical and historical context of a more specific area: the Northwest Coast. I will also look at Coupland’s apocalyptic novel in relation to other Canadian works of fiction dealing with apocalypse following the recent publication of Marlene Goldman’s *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction* which suggests a particular trend for such writings within the nation.

Goldman suggests that recent Canadian visions of apocalypse have been written from an “ex-centric” position:

Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada’s perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation”. Owing to this “ex-centric” Canadian perspective, the writers examined in this study do not portray typical heroes – the warriors and the victors; instead, they give voice to the “story and storytelling of the non-combatants or even the losers” (4).¹⁹

Goldman claims to focus on novels concerning injured, victimised or ethnically marginalised non-elect, including for instance Joy Kogawa, who writes of Japanese

¹⁹ Goldman quotes Linda Hutcheon, the source of the term “ex-centric”.

suffering in Canada during World War II, and Thomas King, whose novel *Green Grass Running Water* turns the coloniser's myths upon their heads. Her claims to ex-centricity are tenuous, however, with regards to the authors she chooses to study. Findley, Atwood and Ondaatje are considered canonical Canadian writers, and the former two had privileged white middle class upbringings not unlike Coupland, though in different cities and a generation earlier. Though Coupland's characters are from advantaged backgrounds, and are saved from the apocalyptic termination that befalls the rest of humanity, they are hardly cast as the winners. Each of the protagonists is indisputably dysfunctional, prone to drink and drug abuse and ill-advised relationships. Karen tells Jared, "Forget *us*. We're losers...go find some winners and worry about them" (216). Coupland recalls Leonard Cohen, whose phrase 'beautiful losers' is used by Goldman to describe her Canadian literary non-elect (4).

Goldman reads Coupland, along with fiction by Gibson, Gowdy, Michaels and Wiebe as offering "equally despairing images of failed apocalypses, the absence of an earthly paradise, and the violence leashed on the non-elect" (9). Despite her interest in prophetic eschatology, she fails to notice its existence in Coupland's work. The failed apocalypse does not cause despair, but a second chance to revise the world rather than replacing it. Moreover, those who do not survive the apocalypse in *Girlfriend in a Coma* suffer less than those who do. As Winston Wheeler Dixon has noted, "there is, after all, something comforting in the thought of destruction. All bets are off, all duties executed, all responsibilities abandoned" (2). They are allowed to sleep, which comes as a relief to some, notably Karen's mother, Lois:

she yawns and looks down at the frozen meat section. Her upper skull is tingly...*I think I've had just about as much of this world as I'm able to take. I'm pooped. I'm sleepy. I just want to go home.* She lifts her legs and climbs up onto the meat. She breathes deeply; the plastic-wrapped beef cool on her skin. She closes her eyes and goes home (182).

The excerpt is almost the opposite of the vision of annihilation preached by Dana in *Life After God*. Instead of cooking like a steak on a hibachi grill, cold meats provide Lois physical comfort as she peacefully drifts into death. Death is characterised for her as home, which implies the religious interpretation of a return to God. I suggest then that an understanding of the appeal of apocalypse and the end of all things is evident in Coupland's work, but that ultimately he is critical of this desire. Tate asks the question, "is Coupland's own reliance on apocalyptic moments evidence of a similar escapist urge or does it signify something more spiritually complex?" (162) In an interview with Andrew Anthony, Coupland gives an insight into his personality which suggests that he does have an escapist urge yet is nonetheless convinced that this is immoral. In what Andrews calls "a heartfelt revelation", Coupland admits, "There is part of me that wants to leave everything, like now. And I kind of fight that every day. The rational part of me says no you have to stay and engage in the culture and if you don't you're a coward". Although Lois thinks that the afterlife is home, Coupland accepts that earth is home and that however difficult life on earth is, he must deal with it. In many ways, then, it might be said that the idea of home is the opposite of apocalypse. If apocalypse is what we fear most, then home is what we

desire most. Yet if apocalypse is what we desire, it is because we are unable to accept earth as home.

The desire to sleep is a consistent theme in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and, less explicitly, in *Life After God*. Many of Coupland's characters yearn for sleep as a method of avoiding the future. In *Girlfriend*, Karen writes a note to Richard just before falling into a coma for seventeen years. She writes of the visions she has had, visions of a dark future where the world is not a good place. She confesses, "I feel like sleeping for a thousand years—that way, I'll never have to be around for this weird new future" (28). When Karen later asks Jared why she had to go into a coma he reminds her of her wish. Does Coupland imply, then, that the apocalypse is similarly brought on by humanity's desire to avoid the future? The title and imagery of the final story of *Life After God*, '1000 Years (Life After God)', foreshadows the themes of *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Its narrator, Scout, occasionally wishes that he could "go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world." (253) Later, he imagines "I will fall asleep for a thousand years, and when I wake, a mighty spruce tree will have raised me up high, high into the sky" (284). The phrase "I could sleep for a thousand years" is a common exaggeration to indicate extreme fatigue. It is also reminiscent of fairy tales, evoking the magical possibility of enchanted sleep, particularly in this latter quote, where it is combined with imagery from Jack and the Beanstalk and the possibility of reaching new worlds high above the earth.²⁰ The desire for a new world is also associated with apocalypse. In both

²⁰ The idea of transcending worlds via a giant tree or vine is additionally common to Western North American indigenous people such as the Hopi and Zuni people, whose creation myths use this idea and consequently are categorised as 'emergence myths', as a people emerge into a new world from an old one.

instances, Scout's longing for catatonia appears to be an avoidance tactic, a plea to avoid the status quo. Another reference in *Life After God* supports this idea. The narrator of "Patty Hearst" recalls "watching an old movie once where sleeping gas was sprayed over a city at war. When they woke up, the war was over" (209). He wishes he could wake up only when his lost sister has returned, thus avoiding the future without her presence. Therefore, Coupland's apocalyptic visions are a literalisation of cultural exhaustion and the desire to evade reality.

Coupland's apocalypse of exhaustion is a reaction to contemporary life, but the structure of *Girlfriend's* apocalypse shares some characteristics with ancient biblical texts. To understand the representation of apocalypse in *Girlfriend in a Coma* it is useful to examine how Coupland employs the characteristic tropes of apocalyptic fiction. Goldman includes a 'Grammar of Apocalypse' in her introduction, and along with Reddish's apocalyptic reader, this provides my guide to apocalyptic writing. Goldman writes, "Apocalypse...concerns itself with the unveiling of a secret, a divine plan, which inevitably involves the destruction and judgement of the old, earthly world and the creation of a new heavenly paradise" (16). In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the secret is unveiled by Karen. Before her coma she confesses her vision of a dark future to Richard, and after awakening she offers her revelation to the audience of an American talk show: "Three days after Christmas. That's when the world goes dark. There's nothing that can be done and there's no escaping" (167). Karen is the seer, and Jared is the angel who eventually interprets her

vision.²¹ Additionally, Coupland's apocalypse has both horizontal and vertical (or temporal and spatial) dimensions, another feature of apocalyptic literature according to Reddish:

The horizontal dimension is the interest in salvation beyond human history. This usually involves divine judgment in the afterlife, followed by rewards and punishments. The vertical, or spatial, dimension is seen in the descriptions of places of eternal reward and punishment (for example, heaven and hell), and the abode of God (21).

In *Girlfriend*, the horizontal aspect is seen in the final part of the novel, when the characters are alone in decaying Vancouver. They are eventually judged by Jared for their shiftless behaviour since the apocalypse, and given the option of an alternative future in the world as it was before if Karen returns to her coma. The post-apocalyptic world with its fires, random weather and increasing radiation might represent hell. The first chapter of the novel, which acts as a sort of prologue, tells us that the post-apocalyptic world exists in parallel to the world of humanity. Jared appears to be trapped there even though the others have gone: "they were here too—at the end of the world" (5). Coupland confuses spatial and temporal dimensions here—the *end* of the world exists at the same *time* as other dimensions. Linus is given a glimpse of heaven which blinds him for a week, and heaven is described by Jared as being "like the world at its finest. Its all natural...greater than the material world" (230). Coupland presents the additional spatial dimension of the place where Karen goes while in her coma—the moon. Karen remembers being there on page

²¹ Reddish writes "The author claims to have received a divine revelation. This revelation is usually in the form of a dream or vision and is mediated or interpreted by an angel" (21).

161, and Richard has a vision where he meets her there and she names their child (52). The visits to the moon are Coupland's version of the otherworldly journey which Reddish notes is a major feature of apocalyptic writing: "Of particular interest to these writers are...the location of the stars, planets, and other heavenly bodies" (21). Coupland also plays with the idea of Karen, descendant of the pioneers, reaching even more far-flung frontiers. From her home in Vancouver, which McGill suggests is "the last continental place on Earth in which to experience a day's closing" (256)²² she intends to go to Hawaii, the last island before the International Date Line. Instead she ends up on the moon.

Reading Coupland's apocalypse in the light of Goldman's grammar of apocalypse and Mitchell's apocalyptic reader has facilitated a serious reading of *Girlfriend* as a contemporary rewriting of apocalypse. However, McGill suggests that, "the novel is not apocalyptic; it is a response to apocalyptic literature. It collapses the boundary between real life and fictive ends in order to show that the characters' reactions to the apocalypse are stock responses just as generic as the apocalypse itself" (270). He suggests that Coupland uses irony to comment on society's relationship to mass culture. McGill notes several ironic moments in *Girlfriend*—such as Karen's comment that "the world was never meant to end like a Hollywood motion picture" when "that is almost exactly the form that Coupland's apocalypse takes" (McGill 272). The characters' employment in the film industry gives plenty of opportunities for intertextual references and playful confusion between the real and the fictional.²³ However, McGill does not comment on what I

²² McGill's image of Vancouver helps to situate it as a city on the edge, but in fact the far Western point of Alaska is the last continental place to experience a days closing ("World Time Zone").

²³ For instance on page 263: "'Look at the sky,' Linus says. 'this is so *Day of the Triffids*'" (My example)

consider the more absurd elements of Coupland's narrative, that is, the miracles that Jared performs for each of his friends. He gives Karen strong legs so she can walk, baby Jane sight and wisdom and Linus a glimpse of heaven. He frees Hamilton and Pam from their addictions, and impregnates Wendy by floating through her! Coupland's miracles might be an ironic play on the miracles of Hollywood movies, or, more controversially, a dig at biblical miracles. Jesus is replaced by Jared, a horny jock who died before his time. If this reading is correct, it clearly demonstrates Coupland's negative attitude to organised religion. This is also evident in the characterisation of *Hey Nostradamus* where grown up and adolescent Christians alike are portrayed as spiteful and interfering. If Coupland makes fun of religion, he perhaps also makes a joke of his apocalypse. Like the famous *Dallas* plotline or *The Wizard of Oz*, Part Three of Coupland's novel might easily be explained away as just a dream. Nothing concrete actually changes. At the end of this section, the characters return to where they were the night Karen awoke, and Karen returns to her coma. Jared, the boy who never grew up, might be an example of the post-modern unreliable narrators seen in several recent Canadian novels—Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and Michael Turner's *The Pornographer's Poem* are additional examples.

Trying to find common ground between Canadian writers will always mean forcing unnatural categories since it is always hard to prove that similarities are not coincidences and trends are not universal rather than specific to a single place. A case in hand is that of McGill, who suggests that Coupland's ironic approach to the apocalypse is characteristic of his Canadian identity:

perhaps Canadian writers, well aware of the American apocalyptic myth as both spectators and participants, develop their ironic sensibility in part as a response to their perception of its falsity, Linda Hutcheon is one critic who has nominated irony as a dominant mode in Canadian literature, and Coupland certainly adopts that mode in *Girlfriend in a Coma* (272).

It is ridiculous to claim irony for Canadian writers alone and it would be a generalisation to say that all Canadians use irony to deal with the apocalypse, as is evident when one considers the works chosen by Goldman. Equally, McGill suggests that Coupland's irony is grounded in the sublime topography surrounding Vancouver, again claiming for Canada a landscape that it actually shares with Alaska to the north, and Washington and Oregon to the south. For this reason, though again I am wary of forcing categorisation on literature, I propose that the Northwest Coast is the most suitable context for *Girlfriend in a Coma* since the text holds clues that the shared landscape and history of this region has influenced his work. McGill writes of Coupland's recurring metaphorical reference to salmon as "characteristically British Columbian" (265) yet the salmon is native only to coastal British Columbia rather than the entire province. It might be more accurately described as a typically Northwest Coastal metaphor as it is this region that truly shares the same ecology and geography. It is the tectonic instability of the west coast combined with the mountains and forest ecology of the Northwest (stretching from northern California to Alaska) that play an implicit role in constructing the apocalyptic anxiety which permeates Coupland's writing.

Talking to Noah Richler, Coupland has admitted the influence of place on his subject matter (169). The fictional eruption of Mount Baker in *Girlfriend in a Coma* echoes the actual eruption of another of the region's volcanoes, Mount St Helens, and might be seen as an example of the intersection of material reality with fictional representation. In the film based on his non-fiction book *Souvenir of Canada*, Coupland is seen on his father's farm in Abbotsford, South Vancouver, looking at the view of Mount Baker which is situated in Washington State. Coupland tells his father that he still has recurring dreams that "we're standing here and Mount Baker goes all Mount St Helens on us". The following excerpt shows the translation of these anxieties of regional instability into fictional form in *Girlfriend in a Coma*:

The silent city, pocked with burns and sores and rashes is spread below [Linus]. In the midst of this serenity comes a surf-like roar and then a catastrophic *bang*...The ground booms and Mount Baker in the east erupts with a fire pole of lava shooting up into grey cabbagey Nagasaki ash clouds (232).

Mount Baker might be added to the map of Coupland's apocalyptic landmarks—the site of the Cannikin test and the imagined locations of nuclear annihilation—that I suggested might be drawn from fictional and real events described in *Life of God*.

The somewhat precarious mountain suburbs of North and West Vancouver might also be included on a map of Coupland's tectonic and nuclear references. Coupland refers to a "winding suburban street on the mountain of West Vancouver" (14) close to the

beginning of *Girlfriend*, but the unnatural positioning of these homes is most clearly evident in a description from his 2001 novel, *Hey Nostradamus*:

I walked up a driveway so steep to feel dreamlike. From a real estate agent's point of view, chez Cecilia was a tear-down, but so is most of North and West Vancouver. This kind of 1963 house was so familiar to me that I didn't pause to acknowledge its ludicrous existence, at the top of a mountain where nobody should live (209).

Yet Coupland's characters *do* inhabit homes that have been built in defiance of nature.

Richard notes the striking binary in *Girlfriend*: "Up here we have our world of driveways and lawns and microwaves and garages. Down there inside the trees it's eternity" (149).

Much of the human world, especially urban locations, jars with nature and it might be said that the tension between man and the wilderness is a global concern. In 1990 Bill

McKibben wrote that "we have killed off nature — that world entirely independent of us which was here before we arrived and which encircled and supported our human society"

(88). This is something Coupland acknowledges in *Girlfriend* when Jared explains that the world can no longer repair itself in the absence of humans: "Earth is now totally ours"

(256).²⁴ I propose that the inhabitants of Northwest coastal cities feel the end of nature more intensely because they have achieved more successfully than many other locations

²⁴ A recent publication by Alan Weisman, "The World Without Us", referred to as a "non-fiction eco thriller" by the New York Times, bears a striking resemblance to the post-apocalyptic world imagined by Coupland. Reviewer Jennifer Schuesser writes, "Fire- and wind-ravaged skyscrapers would eventually fall like giant trees. Within weeks of our disappearance, the world's 441 nuclear plants would melt down into radioactive blobs, while our petrochemical plants, 'ticking time bombs' even on a normal day, would become flaming geysers spewing toxins for decades to come". Yet unlike Coupland and McKibben, Weisman believes the world will eventually recover; species would revert to their wild ancestors and only a collection of artefacts of human life would remain a million years on.

the convenience of living in a city whilst being only minutes away from wilderness.

Coupland's experience of this—he tells Richler he grew up in a suburb where there was “this weird binary reality” of modern humanity and eternal nature (170)—is evident in the preoccupations of his novels.

The particularly precarious geography of the Northwest coastal region might also contribute to Coupland's implication that humanity desires sleep. The Northwest Coast is often associated with the tragic impulse of suicide, and it should be said that if one wishes for eternal sleep, the desire expressed is not altogether different from the suicidal urge. Though eternal sleep has deceptive fairytale connotations, perhaps (despite the word eternal) with the imagined possibility of someone special waking the sleeper when the time is right. But what the desire for eternal sleep and suicide has in common is the urge to escape the world as it is. It is stylistically typical of Coupland to deal with serious issues without dwelling on their gravity, often seeming flippant and using humour to describe events of tragedy. Consequently I propose that when he creates a character who desires eternal sleep, he is representing those people who have considered ending their own life. Whilst suicide is sadly a universal affliction, it is common to describe suicidal people as ‘on the edge’. Similarly, literary sources such as McGill and Richard Hugo have linked suicide with reaching the edge of North America.²⁵ If one is running away from themselves, there is nowhere left to run. Yet the Northwest Coast inhabitants, attempting to civilise an inhospitable landscape, might also be exhausted by their struggles and driven

²⁵ McGill uses a quote from Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* as his epigraph, “Vancouver is the suicide capital of the country. You keep on going west until you run out. You come to the edge. Then you fall off” (McGill 252). Hugo writes, “In the 1930's Seattle was reputed to have a suicide rate second only to Berlin. One explanation went that suicides were people running away from themselves and their lives, and that after one reached Seattle there was no place left to run to” (13).

to suicide when this landscape becomes too much for them. Joel Garreau suggests that there are “very few geographic reasons for cities to exist on the northern Pacific coast” (258), giving examples of the lack of naturally sheltered areas for use as harbours, the formidable barrier of the mountains that trap Northwest cities on the oceanic edge, and the fact that most land in this region is “at a 45 degree angle to the horizontal” (259). It is man’s determination to defy nature and make a home on this inhospitable land that might be seen as the cause of his exhaustion, a metaphorical exhaustion that causes people to desire eternal sleep. This is tragically given literal meaning in the region’s suicide rate, the highest in North America (Garreau, 260)²⁶ and allegedly, for farmers and ranchers in this region, three times the national rate (Greutman). The high level of agricultural suicides is common in many countries, perhaps as a result of globalisation and the changing economy, which has led to the free market and cheap transportation of goods across large distances rendering agriculture an unreliable and unsustainable living. Farmers have to beat a worldwide system as well as manipulating nature.

Coupland also implies less specific, less-regionally orientated reasons for his characters’ desire for sleep. As I have already noted, their catatonic impulse is linked with avoidance of the future, feeling the blame for all the badness in the world, and because they cannot face the idea that “earth is now totally ours” (266). Bill McKibben quotes Norman Myers: “We have acquired the power of life and death for our planet and for most of its inhabitants” (146). This power belongs to all of humanity, but perhaps not equally, since it

²⁶ Joel Garreau proposes that this suicide rate is often attributed to the lack of sunlight. Another theory is that it signifies the massive problems of depression and disillusionment in North American indigenous societies (Shamwell).

is the ancestors of Coupland's characters—the pioneers who conquered the world—who have always wielded more power and consequently must take more of the responsibility. In a region where a once thriving indigenous culture has been, if not destroyed, then transformed considerably, the responsibilities that go with this power must weigh heavily. Though, as I noted earlier, Coupland never explicitly mentions the indigenous peoples that still comprise a significant percentage of the Northwest coast population, he does refer to the fish that were the basis of their culture for thousands of years before the 'pioneers' arrived. Metaphors concerning salmon and their interrupted life cycle are used in *Girlfriend* repeatedly. There is also a mention of salmon in "1000 Years (Life After God)", and more unusually, to "schools of Oolichan" (286). This fish is intrinsically linked with the culture of Northwest Coastal Native peoples who traditionally fed on the fish during the springtime: "The Oolichan were known to be the 'salvation' or 'saviour' fish as they were the first fish to arrive in the river after a long cold winter when most of their stored food supplies had been depleted" (Jarfagri). Though the reference is brief, the mention of a fish which had so much importance to regional life is symbolic of how the 'pioneers' have changed the Northwest Coast. It might consequently be taken as a signal of Coupland's awareness of the damage done to the planet, an awareness that sometimes causes his characters to yearn for the escape of sleep and even apocalypse.

Hey Nostradamus, published in 2003, exhibits similar regional and global tensions between nature and humanity, as the previously quoted excerpt illustrates. However its main focus is not nature per se but human nature, and the novel was apparently conceived in the aftermath of a disaster which has become symbolic of humanity's contemporary

troubles. Asked by an interviewer if the book reflects an interest in the Columbine high-school shooting,

[Coupland] embarks on an allusive explanation of how he began writing the book in December 2001 after a 'nightmarish 40-city tour that began on 10 September'. He talks about the 'collective sorrow' he witnessed and I gather that it was this experience, the fall-out from 11 September, that made him look again at Columbine (Anthony).

The apocalyptic image of the collapsing twin towers that became known worldwide is not referred to in the novel, which focuses instead on a fictional school massacre in North Vancouver. However, the title of the book comes from a part of the novel where Jason, the husband of a young massacre victim, rails against those who believe apocalypse is prophesised: “*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?*” (92, Coupland’s italics). Coupland perhaps recalls the hoaxes circulated following the 9/11 attack that suggested the event had been foreseen. Jason’s exclamation that this is the one and only Promised Land undermines the apocalypse; if there is only one Promised Land it must be revised rather than replaced.

Dixon suggests that twenty-first century cinema is defined by the events of 9/11, and this might also be true of literature. There are a number of titles more explicitly about the attack than *Hey Nostradamus*—Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, John Updike’s *Terrorist*, Phillip Beard’s *Dear Zoe*, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and

Christopher Bram's *Exiles in America* to name but a few. Yet Dixon suggests that 9/11 has not prompted new creativity but a tendency towards remakes and sequels in the cinema and a general nostalgia for the past in our imaginative lives: "We want our innocence back, but we now that is not going to happen. And so, we while away the time with sentimental paeans to a fictive, halcyon past, interspersed with digital spectacles of violence and destruction" (59). Dixon's theory does not apply to *Hey Nostradamus*, though strangely it does ring true in relation to the pre-9/11 novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The characters of *Girlfriend*, particularly Richard, exhibit a strong attachment to the past. Richard feels that "with the seventies left a sweetness, a gentleness. No longer could modern citizens pretend to be naïve" (45). Additionally, the multiple references to films, including *It's a Wonderful Life*—Dixon suggests the films of Frank Capra are the epitome of the small-town North America people are nostalgic for—implies the rehashing of old material which Dixon feels is typical. Violent and destructive images are conjured by references to Nagasaki (233) and the H-bomb (58). *Hey Nostradamus*, however, has noticeably fewer intertextual references to film and popular culture. The majority of intertextual references are biblical.

If *Hey Nostradamus* shows a stylistic shift from the post-modern referencing of Coupland's previous work, it also shows a shift in philosophy since *Life After God*, which acknowledged the woes of modern existence but suggested that they might be alleviated by a simple faith in God. Perhaps prompted by the events of 9/11, *Hey Nostradamus* examines the problems of faith. Speaking from the dead, the young massacre victim, Cheryl, begins the book by suggesting that "humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to commit all possible sins" (3). She has accepted God, and believes that "to

acknowledge God is to fully accept the sorrow of the human condition” (41). However, despite her faith, she has problems with the concept of religion: “I wondered why it is that going to heaven is the only goal of religion, because it’s such a selfish thing” (33).

Coupland uses Cheryl to conceptualise religion in a manner that reflects on the mindset of 9/11’s suicide bombers. The attraction of paradise often jars with humanist sympathy. Coupland further illustrates this through the righteous but unforgiving character of Reg, who disowns his son because he accuses him of committing the sin of murder, even though the ‘murder’—of one of the school gunmen—was regarded by police as self-defence.

However, Reg eventually changes his ways, and his narration of the fourth and final section of the novel brings an optimism that contrasts with Jason’s resignation that the world is not going to get any better. Jason is missing, apparently as a result of an accidental run-in with some dangerous criminals whilst intoxicated some years before. Yet Reg writes to him, explaining his lifetime decisions and how he came to understand that many of them were wrong. His faith has changed, but it is not erased. Reg’s letter, concluding the novel, ends thus:

But I haven’t lost you, my son. No no no. And you *will* find one of these letters. I know you will. You never missed a trick of mine, so why stop now? And when you do find the letter, you know what? Something extraordinary will happen. It will be like a reverse solar eclipse—the sun will start shining down in the middle of the night, imagine that!—and when I see this sunlight it will be my signal to go running out into the streets, and I’ll shout over and over, “Awake! Awake! The son of mine who was once

lost has now been found!” I’ll pound on every door in the city, and my cry will ring true: “Awake! Everyone listen, there has been a miracle—my son who was once dead is now alive. Rejoice! All of you! Rejoice! You must! My son is coming home!” (244)

Coupland echoes Luke 15:24, “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry” (New International Version). This passage is from the parable of the prodigal son, which teaches about repentance. In the bible it is the son who has sinned. He repents and asks for his father’s forgiveness for leading a shiftless and excessive life, spending his father’s money. In Coupland’s book, it is the father who repents, asking his son’s forgiveness for his cruel treatment. This treatment was founded on a twisted version of faith: “I was so insecure about my own beliefs that I feared being exposed by my own child. That was wretched of me” (234). The concluding image is also quasi-apocalyptic. The reverse solar eclipse is a fantastic phenomenon yet Coupland’s employment of it metaphorically transforms a personal event into one of global importance. The final passage mirrors the epigraph of the novel, which presents a more explicitly apocalyptic image, also taken from the bible: “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 1 Cor. 15:51-52.” The passage is in the form of a revelation, and its reference to sleep, the raising of the dead and the need for change make it an equally appropriate epigraph for *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in which the apocalypse is reversed and those that died from the sleeping sickness are brought back to life on the basis that the protagonists

promise to work for change. The possibilities for change and the necessity of faith is a theme that rings loud in the conclusions to both novels. *Girlfriend* ends with Richard's conviction that "we will change minds and souls from stone and plastic into linen and gold — that's what I believe. That's what I know" (281). *Hey Nostradamus* ends with Reg's transformation and his deep faith that his son will return.

It seems, then, that Coupland believes anxiety about apocalypse should inspire change. He hopes not for an entirely new world but for a revision of the old one. His work however lies in an awkward space between the distinctions of prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology, as I have discussed. The many visions of apocalypse show Coupland's fascination with the idea due to generational or geographical circumstances and perhaps his own struggle with the desire for everything to end. Yet the conclusion of *Girlfriend in a Coma* and the subtle critique of those who want to evade the future on earth in all three texts fall firmly on the side of prophetic eschatology.

However, since Coupland's characters do not take it upon themselves to try and change the world until after the apocalypse, a year in a post apocalyptic world and a telling of by their quasi-angelic friend Jared, critics might be concerned that Coupland does not envisage human initiative for change without the prompt of a devastating event. As Jared says in the opening to *Girlfriend*, "People, I have noticed, only seem to learn once they get their third chance—after loosing and wasting vast sums of time, money, youth, and energy—you name it. But still they learn, which is a better thing in the end" (5). The comment might be read on an individualistic level, a comment on how people live their own lives. Or it might be a wider comment about humanity, and the time, money, youth,

and energy lost in destructive acts against nature or each other. If humanity only learns after it gets its third chance, is it necessary for World War III to break out before change can occur?

If Part Three of *Girlfriend in a Coma* is read as a dream or a vision, as I have previously suggested, then we get a more useful message from Coupland. The visions of apocalypse that are constantly replaying in our minds, as Coupland suggests in “Thinking of the Sun”, should be impetus enough to change. Actual apocalypse is not necessary. Ghosts and angels, miracles and supermen are all in the imagination, dreamt up by humanity to provide hope. It is now time to move beyond these dreams and take action in the world. To reiterate a message from *Girlfriend*, “the earth is totally ours” (266). We might need faith, but rather than faith in God, I believe Coupland’s ultimate conclusion—at least at the time of writing *Hey Nostradamus*—is that the real necessity is faith in our ability to be better people. The global future is in our hands.

Chapter Three

Ideas of Home.

In Chapter One, I suggested that the various intersections of the terms global, national, regional and local in multiple disciplines—social science, economics, political science, and cultural studies—impact on the way writers write and readers read contemporary literature in relation to place. An interdisciplinary approach is also necessary when looking at the term ‘home’, which is a multifaceted idea that has undergone analysis in the fields of anthropology (by academics such as Shelley Mallett and Neil Smith), urbanism (Witold Rybczynski), social policy (Peter Somerville), cultural and historical geography (Theano S. Terkenli and J. Douglas Porteous), design (Tim Putman), and cultural studies (Fran Martin). Most of these critics acknowledge that there are multiple spheres of home. While the house in which one lives is most commonly indicated by the word home, the term is also used to refer to the community, town, city, region, country, or even continent in which one lives, or has lived for a significant portion of one’s life. Erin Manning, for example, considers how nations are constructed as home or homeland in her book *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home and Identity in Canada*. She admits she feels a sense of territorial homelessness and argues that “we continue to be in a state of flux whereby the homes we construct remain ephemeral” (xx). This state of flux, which troubles constructions of home, has always existed but, I propose, has accelerated in recent years due to the forces associated with globalisation. As I suggested in Chapter One, shifting regional, national and global forces constantly transform the various spheres of

home to which I have referred. In this chapter I will show how evolving and multi-disciplinary ideas of home inflect Coupland's writing and how Coupland creates alternative ideas of home.

It is first of all necessary to establish a working definition of home. Though it is a frequently-used word, its specific meaning is complex. In his article, "Beyond the Modern Home, Shifting the Parameters of Residence", Tim Putnam proposes that, "The ambiguity of the English word 'home' can no longer go unremarked: does the image indicate an environment encountered, relationships enacted, an ideal envisaged, or an articulation of all three?" (155) Peter Somerville's identification of home with multiple signifiers suggests that it must be seen as the latter; an articulation of environment, relationships *and* ideals. Somerville writes that "home can be argued to have at least six or seven dimensions of meaning, identified by the key signifiers of shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots, abode and (possibly) paradise" (532). Some of these signifiers describe the environment encountered and others the relationships enacted. Some, like 'Hearth', describe both—the literal and psychological warmth of a place. The idea of home as an ideal envisaged is expressed in Somerville's suggestion that people might look for paradise in their home, a final resting place providing ultimate contentment. Yet for many people a number of Somerville's signifiers are merely an envisaged ideal. Only a small minority are fortunate enough to have a home in each and every sense of the word suggested by Somerville, and even more rarely are all of these signifiers of home embodied in one physical place.

Somerville attempts to unearth the meaning of home by looking at its opposite—homelessness. The title of his article, "Homelessness and the Meaning of Home:

Rooflessness or Rootlessness?” highlights the physical and emotional properties of home. It asks which is more important—to have a permanent roof over one's head, or to have an emotional sense of security in one's origins and identity. A recent piece of writing on the idea of home and homelessness by a U.K. Big Issue Vendor offers a personal perspective on Somerville's dilemma:

To me, [home is] somewhere you look forward to getting back to. A haven. Somewhere you feel comfortable, secure, snug. The lonely guy who lives in some seedy bedsit having lived most of his life in institutions until ‘care in the community’ knocked him sideways. Homeless! The widow next door, alone, struck with grief beyond belief for the man that's no longer there—her long days filled by staring through a window at a world she'd afraid to enter. Homeless! The guy whose flat's a cesspit full of take-away corpses and empty vodka bottle dreams. Homeless! The young girl who lives in middle-class suburbia, with a roaring fire, over-stacked fridge, holidays abroad and a father who visits her bedroom late at night. Homeless! How much would that young girl envy the girl with traveller parents, living in the back of a bus, itinerant—and to others, homeless—yet living a life that is rich in guidance, security, happiness and love (Walker, 45).

This writer clearly sees home as based on relationships rather than a physical environment. Homelessness for him is rootlessness, not rooflessness, and he challenges those who assume that material security ensures emotional security. The emphasis on home as an idea based on relationships is a more appropriate definition for the time and the generation that

Coupland writes about. His books are concerned with the 1990s and 2000s, decades in which global flows have become more extensive leading to the increasing use of the term ‘globalisation’. Theano S. Terkinli suggests that as communication and transportation systems become increasingly improved and accessible, conventional home ties based on physical propinquity are threatened. However, he suggests, awareness of locality and family roots are intensified (333). In other words, due to contemporary globalisation people spend less time in one place, yet have greater opportunities for communication, enabling the maintenance of relationships across distance and the establishment of communities detached from place, for instance, on the internet. Additionally, Coupland is concerned with the generation known as Generation X, who, according to Gordon Lynch, “share a particular peer personality” (20). One trait of this peer personality is that “Generation X is a generation whose prospects (for the first time in many generations) appear worse than that of their parents’ generation, yet who do not necessarily equate well-being with material prosperity” (21). With less chance of, and perhaps less interest in, owning one’s own home, Generation Xers construct home from relationships, habits, and shared interests rather than a place-based structure or community. In this chapter, I intend to develop these arguments further using specific examples from Coupland’s Vancouver texts. However, I also explore the paradox that while Coupland highlights problems with the traditional place-based idea of home in the contemporary globalised era and suggests alternative concepts of home, he simultaneously reinforces the idea that home is attached to place by mapping Vancouver and the Vancouver suburb in which he was raised in much of his fiction.

In Chapter One I suggested that *Life After God*, the first book set in Coupland's home town of Vancouver, signified a shift in Coupland's work from an ideological denial of home and identification with the global jet-set, to an acceptance of Vancouver as his home and a renewed concentration on the values of home which sometimes tend towards nostalgia. This chapter analyses how Coupland writes about home in *Life After God* and his subsequent Vancouver novels *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus*. I argue each of these books, separated by several years, shows a logical progression in Coupland's attitude to home. As a young man, he travels the world, and his novels reflect the following theory, suggested by Coupland in interview: "I think that there is a state of mind that you have in your young life, if you grew up in a western media democracy, where you think of yourself more as a citizen of the world than a citizen of a country or a city or a province".²⁷ After writing *Life After God* in his early thirties, his concept of home starts to focus increasingly on a personal rather than universal definition of home. Though ambivalence towards the idea of home remains in all three texts, they suggest as a whole that he increasingly becomes more comfortable writing about the place where he grew up, and the locations of his narratives reflect this. However the idea of home constructed by Coupland remains complex and ambiguous and I suggest that this is illustrative of Coupland's interest in the consequences of globalisation and the specific demands on his generation. In *Life After God* Coupland explores the different ways in which one's belief in the possibility and the desirability of a home is undermined. The various stories Coupland tells show the difficulty in achieving a home with even half of the qualities

²⁷ This interview is found on the DVD of the film *Souvenir of Canada*, based on Coupland's two non-fiction books and narrated by the author.

suggested by Somerville. The difficulty for middle-class Generation Xers is not so much putting a roof above their heads—most have their parents home to return to if necessary—but establishing and maintaining the kinds of relationships that make one’s home meaningful. For some, even a comfortable home with loving relationships is not considered enough to provide complete fulfilment. Many of Coupland’s characters are searching for meaning and sensation which takes them away from home.

Coupland’s work has frequently suggested that the search for meaning and sensation must take one away from the home into a situation that, in its unfamiliarity, is more likely to challenge or surprise. Consequently the narrator of “My Hotel Year” chooses an abode which lacks the other qualities usually associated with home. Aiming to sever ties with his past and find inspiration in solitude he “had moved to a cold water downtown hotel room...believing 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”. Instead of family and friends his “fellow tenants were a mixture of pensioners, runaways, drug dealers and so forth” (25). This protagonist, while not denying himself basic shelter, chooses to deny himself the comforts often associated with home. The intrinsic relation of home and comfort is suggested by Witold Rybczynski’s book “Home: A Short History of an Idea”. Despite the title, Rybczynski is primarily concerned with the idea of domestic comfort rather than any other signifier of ‘home’. He tracks the history of comfort, looking at changing trends in interior design and arguing that “the interior furniture of houses only came with the interior of minds” (36). By this he means that people only started to think about the interiors of their homes after they developed a sense of their own interiority—an

awareness of how they felt and how they appeared to others. It was only in this context, when the words self-confidence, self-esteem, melancholy, and sentimental came into use, that comfort became important. Rybczynski provides a case study of a seventeenth century bourgeois Norwegian family to illustrate a transitional period in the idea of home. He writes, “Comfort in the physical sense was still awaiting the eighteenth century and the improvement of such technologies as water supply and heating, as well as refinements to the internal subdivision of the home. But the transition from the public, feudal household to the private family home was under way” (49). Rybczynski argues that privacy and intimacy are additionally interwoven with the conceptions of a comfortable home that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet Graham Thompson suggests that privacy in the home is a myth. He argues that industrialisation and capitalism brought increased surveillance of the workplace and the home. Corporations aimed to create “citizen workers”, building factory towns so that they could retain control over their employees’ so called ‘private’ lives: “George Pullman went as far as to select the plays that could be performed in the town theatre, to charge excessive membership rates to keep workers from joining the town library, and to ensure that alcohol could only be purchased—again at a high price—in the town hotel” (137). While this is an extreme example that might seem a far stretch from the lives of the contemporary middle class characters of Coupland’s novels, Thompson draws attention to the fact that, in a capitalist system, employers have a vested interest in regulating their employee’s home-life. Improvements in communications and surveillance technology can only diminish the boundaries between home and work. As I will explore later in this chapter, many workers

chose to make use of this technology to allow them to work from home. Indeed, the phrase ‘from the comfort of your own home’ is often employed, underscoring Rybczynski’s association of the modern home with comfort and with privacy—though, as has become apparent, the relationship is more complicated than he suggests.

Rybczynski suggests that since 1920, comfort in the home has undergone a further transformation:

Comfort has not only changed qualitatively [with the modern inventions that aid home-life—central heating, indoor toilets, running water, electric lights, power and elevators] but also quantitatively—it has become a mass commodity. After 1920, especially in America (somewhat later in Europe), physical comfort in the home was no longer the privilege of part of society, it was accessible to all. This democratization of comfort has been due to mass production and industrialisation (220).

Rybczynski does not acknowledge, however, that though most homes have basic devices for domestic comfort, not everyone in America owns a home of their own. As I have already mentioned, the generation born roughly between 1961 and 1981, known as Generation X but also the baby busters or the Thirteenth Generation (Howe & Strauss, 324), were the first generation to experience a decrease in prosperity. According to Neil Howe and William Strauss, they were the victims of decreasing real wages and increasing house prices and taxation on the young: “Thirteeners are coming to realise that they bear much of the burden for the Reagan era prosperity that so enriched the Silent and G.I.s [their parents and grandparents]. In inner cities, their impoverishment has caused alarm; elsewhere, it

has been less noticed, thanks to a veneer of family subsidized teen affluence” (330). Coupland draws attention to the plight of this generation in *Life After God*, where a number of young adults struggle to recreate the domestic comfort provided in the family home. Howe and Strauss suggests of Xers or 13ers that “a rising number are masking their economic problems by ‘boomeranging’ back into the parental house after a few years of trying to make it on their own” (331). While none of *Life After God*’s protagonists actually move back in with their parents, many of them maintain a close connection with the family home and continually compare the difficulty of their adult lives with their privileged childhoods. The story “Things that Fly” best illustrates the idealism of the family home and the difficulty in building ones own life in the contemporary economic climate described by Howe and Strauss.

The narrator of “Things That Fly” appears to have his own living space but after a break up, his depression at being there alone leads him to neglect its upkeep. He is so uncomfortable with solitude that he finally “swallowed my pride and drove to my parents at their house further up the North Shore: up on the mountain – up in the trees to my old house – my true home, I guess” (58). The narrator returns to his parent’s house for company, consolation and comfort. This is provided not only by his parents but by the many things that fly around the family home—numerous species of bird and a flying squirrel named Yo-yo. The home is endowed with edenic qualities due to its location in amongst nature, “up on the mountain – up in the trees” (58). It is an idealised home, an example of Somerville’s suggestion that some people look for and find paradise in home. Both parents still reside there, underscoring the failure of the narrator to maintain his own

relationship and to recreate the example of home provided by his parents. Shelley Mallett suggests that “in Western contexts at least, it is commonly expected that young people will reach a point in their life when it is appropriate for them to leave the birth family home. At this time they will ideally establish an independent place of their own without severing all ties to their birth family home” (15). Coupland’s characters in *Life After God* are struggling to achieve this. Some have tried to live up to the ideal but are facing failure when a spouse leaves, and others choose to rebel and live their lives in an entirely different manner.

The narrator of “My Hotel Year” chooses to abandon his roots and live on the margin of society with people who by choice or circumstance live a transient lifestyle lacking in home comforts. Passing the suburb in which he was raised, the narrator observes that “these houses seemed as far away from my present life [in a seedy downtown area] as to seem like China” (34). In contrast to the utopian view of suburbia and the family home presented in “Things that Fly”, the narrator of “My Hotel Year” views suburbia and the family home with suspicion. Believing an epiphany is possible only in discomfort, he is disparaging of those who opt for a conventional life: “I think the people to feel the saddest for are people who are unable to connect with the profound - people such as my boring brother-in-law, a hearty type so concerned with normality and fitting in that he eliminates any possibility of uniqueness for himself and his own personality” (39). Though the link between suburbia, normality and spiritual impoverishment is not explicitly made in “My Hotel Year”, it is a theme that is pervasive throughout Coupland’s work. “Brentwood Notebook”, which is the last essay of *Polaroids from the Dead*, suggests that there is a

disparity between the projected appearance—“a secular Nirvana”—and the actual reality of the suburb—“secularism in crisis” (148). In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, one character comments that the North Vancouver suburb is like “the land that God forgot” (39), but it is more accurate to say that Coupland’s work presents the suburbs as the land that forgot God. The frequently paradoxical representation of suburbia with which Coupland engages is outlined more fully in an article by Annamarie Jagose, Fran Martin and Chris Healy. They propose a number of dystopian qualities—cultural homogeneity; whiteness; straightness and heterosexual coupledness; political conservatism; a narrow parochial view of the world; materialism; self-satisfaction; social-isolation; subjective alienation; spiritual impoverishment—which are often imagined as characteristic of suburbia (70). In contrast, the following qualities are emphasised in utopian representations of the suburb: family; community; neighbourliness; connection with others; a clean environment; peacefulness and safety; health and ‘good living’; communal activities; public facilities; local clubs and community associations (71). Coupland’s fiction explores both dystopian and utopian associations. What he appears to find interesting about the suburbs is that their apparent conformity encourages outsiders to imagine illicit goings on: “people across the city believed our hillside neighbourhood to be the cradle of never-ending martini-clogged soirees and bawdy wife-swaps. The truth would have bored them silly, as it was middle-class dull to the point of scientific measurability” (Coupland 1997: 39). The point is, however, that outsiders will never know either way. The suburbs are a mask—keeping up appearances ensures that, whether the interior lives of suburban homeowners are sordid or square, outsiders remain unable to tell the difference.

Life After God has one other narrator who explicitly rejects the way of life lived by his parents and opts for an unconventional idea of home. The narrator of “In the Desert” was “raised without religion by parents who had broken with their own pasts and moved to the west coast—who had raised their own children clean of any ideology in a cantilevered modern house overlooking the Pacific Ocean” (144). He blames this upbringing for his difficulty in forming and articulating beliefs. Yet in living his life differently to the way his parents lived, he simultaneously follows their pattern of breaking with the past and divorcing himself from his childhood home. Rather than simply moving house, however, he lives his life on the move and makes the highway his home. He is unsure “exactly what was lying at the end of the road for me, in all senses of the word” (143) and comes to the conclusion that there is nothing and no-one. The narrator has “never really felt like I was ‘from’ anywhere...I used to think mine was a Pacific Northwest accent, from where I grew up, but then I realised my accent was simply the accent of nowhere—the accent of a person who has no fixed home in mind” (140). Yet despite feeling like he comes from nowhere and is going nowhere, the possibility of having a home still exists, a possibility that the narrator only desires after he experiences a more extreme form of isolation and comes close to being lost permanently in the desert. After several hours of walking alone he “wanted to be in a city or a town—a community—*any* community” (160). There is a thin line between being free and being lost. Coupland’s narrator crosses this line and decides that he wants to be found.

Despite denying an attachment to a fixed home, the narrator of “In the Desert” suggests an alternative idea of home. This is a home comprised of familiar media,

experienced in “radio stations from all over the West—those fragments of cultural memory and information that compose the information structure I consider my real home—my virtual community. I was hearing the sort of information that would make me homesick if I were stuck in Europe or dying in Vietnam” (136). The radio provides continuity and company—two qualities often associated with home—even for a person who spends his life on the highway. Coupland’s story reminds us of Terkenli’s argument that home ties in the era of globalisation are less reliant on physical propinquity, and people look for familiar and habitual patterns in other contexts than place. He suggests that “repetition is an essential element in the transformation of place into home” (326), and while Coupland’s protagonist is not concerned with transforming a single place into home, he similarly constructs a home out of the regular shows and stories about the inhabitants of familiar towns that he hears on the radio. Terkenli concludes his article on home with the insight that “home regions in this world are no longer place bound; they are systems of interlinked patterns of habitual association and attachment” (333). The latter part of his statement certainly seems an accurate description of the bond with radio experienced by the narrator of “In the Desert”. Yet the narrator’s “virtual home” is nonetheless tied to place—North America—to the extent that he claims he would be homesick on another continent. Whilst, as Terkenli observes, home regions are no longer place bound in that the signifiers of home can reach across time and space, Coupland’s story illustrates that the feeling of being at home is still geographically located. Though the narrator of “In the Desert” has a larger conception of home than is conventional, it is still place based and constructed by the same methods of repetition and familiarity.

Jefferson Faye writes that *Life After God* is “a book about young adults coming to grips with adulthood and all its trappings” (505). “In the Desert” stands out amongst the other short stories as its narrator almost entirely escapes these trapping—he lives somewhat like an outlaw with infrequent human contact, and no responsibilities to anyone except other outlaws. He has put more distance between himself and his family than other narrators. He has left his home (presumably in Vancouver, though this is not confirmed) for a life on the move. What remains unsaid is why he has felt the need to escape his home. Reading between the lines, Faye’s observation applies to “In the Desert” as well as the rest of *Life After God*. I assert more specifically that the text can be read as being about the struggle to recreate the ideal family home experienced as a child. The narrator of the final story, “1000 Years (Life After God)”, writes that the childhood experienced by he and his friends was “a life lived in paradise” (220). Yet each grows up to realise that the sense of paradise was a transient illusion that can not be recreated in adulthood. His friend Julie has come closest to the ideal, with her “nice-guy husband” and “suburban as suburban gets” (231) home in North Vancouver. Yet even she becomes lonely and is only half-joking when she wishes she could join the narrator in what she calls his bachelor pad—signifying her belief that he has a freedom she has lost. The narrator on the other hand thinks that he would give a million dollars to be in the position of her husband, living their life (235).

The conflicting desires of the two characters highlight Coupland’s concern that Generation Xers struggle to lead a fulfilled life due to the changes in society which have affected his generation more than any previous one. Due to economic downturn and

increased relationship instability, Generation X characters are unsure whether a home of their own is financially and emotionally achievable. Moreover, the alternative temptation of travel—a nomadic pursuit of new experiences—which has been made easier by increased global communications and technology, prompts the questioning of whether home ownership is necessarily the best route to a fulfilled and happy life. Coupland also implies that it is not merely the change in circumstances that causes Generation X's uncertainty, but the accelerated change that is occurring due to globalisation and the technologies associated with it. In "1000 years" Julie suggests that in the past a generation assumed that the next would live lives identical to their own whereas "now you assume that life for the next generation—hell, life next week—is going to be shockingly different than life today. When did we start thinking this way? What did we invent? Was it the telephone? The car? Why did this happen? I know there's an answer somewhere" (233). Such inventions free us from our locale and are often considered central to the possibilities of globalisation, along with the development of train travel, passenger air travel and the Internet. All facilitate freedom in negating the restrictions of distance. When distance becomes less of an issue, as suggested by Terkinli, home is no longer necessarily tied to place. This is, Coupland implies, the particular problem of his generation who do not have the responsibilities and ties that the previous generation had. They have opportunities for freedom beyond the imagination of those who came before.

Later in the story, Coupland proposes that freedom is the dominant image of his generation's experience. The narrator, Scout, suggests,

You know what people will probably think of when they think of these days a thousand years from now? They'll look back upon them with awe and wonder. They'll think of Stacey – or someone like Stacey – driving her convertible down the freeway, her hair blowing back in the wind. She'll be wearing a bikini and she'll be eating a birth control pill – and she'll be on her way to buy real estate. *That's* what I think people will remember about these times. The freedom. That there was a beautiful dream of freedom that propelled the life we lived (276).

There is a divided sentiment in the picture painted of freedom. The girl in the vision has the freedom of the roads, the freedom to wear what she pleases, to have sex without the responsibility of children, and to purchase property. It is significant that Coupland writes “real estate”. She is not on her way to buy a home, which was the aspiration of previous generations. The entire image suggests transience and the term “real estate” contributes to this by implying the business of buying and selling houses rather than buying property as a place to make a home. The image is given its dark undertone by prior knowledge of Stacey from earlier on in the story. One of the narrator’s “fellow foetuses” (225)—suburban children who “floated at night in swimming pools the temperature of blood” (219) but who eventually had to grow up—Stacey has become an alcoholic and “has that hard look of people who flirt with coke” (227). She is beautiful but divorced and lonely. The narrator implies that she, and much of his generation, has “broken the link between love and sex” (230). Coupland proposes the paradoxical quality of this golden age of freedom. It propels the life we live, but life as a result is often unpredictable, uncertain and unmeaningful.

In her review of *Life After God* for *The Boston Herald*, Frances Katz writes, “Your parents did it. The boomers did it. And now, Generation X-ers, you must do it, too. You must grow up. And how do we know this? Because author Douglas Coupland—who first named you—says you must”. I, however, am not convinced *Life After God* does send out the signal to grow up. Coupland’s stories feature protagonists who between them amass a collection of irresponsible actions: moping at their parent’s place, earning money running morally questionable errands, complaining about life’s disappointments with their friends, taking spontaneous trips to Washington, and last but not least, calling in sick to work and bunking up in an apartment for a week before heading off on an ill-prepared-for camping trip to the North Vancouver Island wilderness. There is a self-indulgent immaturity and lack of responsibility in *Life After God*’s protagonists that suggests that while Coupland might have acknowledged that growing up sooner or later might be necessary, he has not quite accepted this fact and put it into action. Only the last few pages, where Scout admits he needs God to make him give, love and be kind, might be read as a mature awareness of ones own actions and how they affect others. The title of the book, tied to the idea that its protagonists were raised without religion, suggests that this is the single defining problem of the middle-class Gen X protagonists.²⁸ This implied resentment of the parents for such an ideologically bare upbringing prompted another reviewer to write, “At 31 Douglas Coupland should have grown out of blaming his parents for his problems” and reads the book as an illustration of two conundrums, the first being “children who blame their

²⁸ Katz’s review also includes excerpts from an interview with Coupland. Again, there is a sense that Coupland blames the last generation for the emotional difficulties of his own: “My family didn't go to church - not even on Christmas. My mom decided that religion and politics weren't for the Coupland children...I come from an extremely inexpressive, non-touching family. So, I have to reveal myself exclusively on paper. Unless I put all this stuff on paper, I would burst or literally go nuts” (Katz).

parents cannot really get on with their own lives” (Milton). I agree with this analysis but see *Life After God* as representative of a transitional stage in Coupland’s life and Coupland’s work. Realising that irony alone is not enough to sustain the interest of readers,²⁹ he has switched to the more serious subject of religion (or rather lack thereof) but perhaps fails to convince readers that God is the remedy for generational malaise. The second of Milton’s conundrums expresses this: “If belief in God is a necessary vent for restless spirituality, then He cannot be Our Creator”. *Life After God* lacks the pragmatism and optimism that Coupland’s later works offer. Having not quite shaken off his preoccupations with the childhood home—Stacey grumbles in “1000 Years”, “why couldn’t they just have told us ‘Kids, this is as good as it gets. So soak it all up while you can?’” (227)—Coupland is unable to postulate a convincing idea of home for the adults of his generation.

However, as I suggested in the introduction, *Life After God* paradoxically is the herald of Coupland’s increasing tendency to write fiction situated in and around Vancouver. Though Coupland will return to the United States for the situation of his fourth novel *Microserfs*, *Life After God* introduces Coupland’s readership to his home city and suggests that he does not necessarily speak for an entire generation, but for himself and others like him, raised in the suburbs of a city on the edge of the Pacific Ocean and a mountain range that stretches up to the arctic. Whilst the physical landscape of the Northwest coast surrounding Vancouver is a significant feature of *Life After God*—the

²⁹ “The 32-year-old Coupland said he has to move on, beyond the pop-culture, slacker lingo and lifestyles of the generation he unwittingly christened. ‘You can drop pop culture references all the time,’ he said from his home in Vancouver, B.C. ‘Everybody can mention ‘The Partridge Family’ or ‘Jeopardy,’ but as you get older and life goes on, you find that that kind of thing is not enough to get you through. Irony just isn’t enough’” (Katz).

reader is introduced to the protagonists of “Little Creatures” and “Patty Hearst” as they drive north into the mountains—the city itself is mapped more completely in *Life After God* than any other of Coupland’s novels. The diverse neighbourhoods of Vancouver are represented as the homes of Coupland’s characters: the narrator of “Little Creatures” begins his journey in “the farmlands of Fraser Valley with its cows and sheep and horses” (4); “My Hotel Year” is situated in the heart of Vancouver’s downtown on a seedy strip of cheap hotels, sex shops and nightlife; Scout, in “1000 Years” lives in “Kitsilano, a scenic, hilly, Jeep-clogged beer commercial of a neighbourhood” (264), while his friend Todd “shares a 1940s house off Commercial Drive” where “teenagers drag-race...[and] performance artists agitated by too much caffeine screech the *Jeopardy!* theme song like randy tomcats. There is a feeling of colourful, smug chaos” (244). There are also references to Chinatown and a number of downtown bars including the Yale Hotel and the Sylvia Hotel. Coupland seems keen to record his vibrant city and its diverse neighbourhoods. This might be read as a reaction to the accelerating effects of globalisation which has rendered home a more ephemeral concept than ever before.

The variously located homes of Coupland’s protagonists in *Life After God* contrast with Coupland’s subsequent Vancouver novels. *Girlfriend in a Coma*, *Hey Nostradamus* and *Eleanor Rigby* are predominantly set in the suburbs of North and West Vancouver. *JPod*, his latest novel, moves away from these suburbs and again introduces readers to a multiple Vancouver settings. In addition to the change in approach to location, the book signifies a change in tone that demands analysis beyond the scope of this work. As Andrew Tate has noted,

Its two immediate predecessors, *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003) and *Eleanor Rigby* (2004), are structured around melancholy, introspective and, ultimately, redemptive plots that eschew self-conscious experiment or playfulness. Although *JPod* shares their contemporary Vancouver setting – frequently a signifier of a more solemn, contemplative mode than the chaotic comedy of Coupland’s US set fictions – its atmosphere is boisterous, irreverent and cheerfully lawless (175).

Tate makes an interesting observation about the use of Vancouver to signify a more solemn tone of writing. I agree with him. Though there are moments of humour in all Coupland’s books, the Vancouver texts (until *JPod*) dwell on personal and community tragedies—marital breakdown, missing persons, teenage pregnancy, terminal disease, coma, and a school shooting. I suggest this stems from the fact that Vancouver is where Coupland was raised and continues to live, and consequently his books set in this location adopt a more personal tone, particularly after he is well into adulthood and has decided that Vancouver is the location of those most important to him and will be his permanent home. Frances Katz’s review of *Life After God* with accompanying interview is a useful indicator of Coupland’s intentions and inspiration for *Life After God*. She notes that *Life After God* was originally intended as a series of vignettes for Coupland’s close friends and quotes his explanation of their tone: “When you’re younger, you think you [can] invent yourself and start all over, but by the time you’re 30 it’s all changed...Most probably, someone you know has died, you’ve been hurt, you have fallen in and out of love—maybe more than once”. This attitude seems compatible with the narratives of his fiction. The characters of

Generation X upped sticks and restarted their lives in Palm Springs and Tyler, of *Shampoo Planet*, is able to explore a new version of himself in Europe and looks forward to the opportunity of a new start as a student in Seattle. The characters of *Life After God* on the other hand have ties in Vancouver and know that even if they did move away and start over, as the narrator's sister might have done in "Patty Hearst", the roots that are severed will remain raw for some time. If *Life of God* is somewhat self-indulgent and represents a not-quite-fully-mature Coupland, it at least shows awareness that home and loved ones still remain even if one moves away.

I have referred to a tendency toward nostalgia present in Coupland's Vancouver texts that signifies his growing acceptance of the city as home. Though nostalgia commonly connotes a desire for a return to a period of the past, Terkenli points out that "the English word nostalgia is rooted in the ancient Greek word *nostos*, which translates as 'return home'" (328). Since the suffix *algia* refers to pain, the term denotes homesickness.³⁰ This might be applied to a literal home or an idea of home that perhaps no longer exists, as noted by Linda Hutcheon. She writes that although the term originated as the curable medical condition of homesickness, "as early as 1798, Immanuel Kant had noted that people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a *place*, but to a *time*, a time of youth". Such nostalgia, evident in *Life After God* when Coupland's narrators long for lost loved ones and for the idealised memory

³⁰ Linda Hutcheon writes of the term's origins: "It was coined in 1688 by a 19-year old Swiss student in his medical dissertation as a sophisticated (or perhaps pedantic) way to talk about a literally lethal kind of severe homesickness (of Swiss mercenaries far from their mountainous home). This medical-pathological definition of nostalgia allowed for a remedy: the return home, or sometimes merely the promise of it. The experiencing and the attributing of a nostalgic response appeared well before this, of course. Think of the psalmist's remembering of Zion while weeping by the waters of Babylon. But the term itself seems to be culturally and historically specific".

of childhood, is even more pervasive in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. This is Coupland's second work set in Vancouver, published four years on in 1997. After a prologue narrated by a ghost, Jared, framing the events of the novel, Coupland switches to a first person narration by the character Richard, who looks back on his teenage years and the night he and his girlfriend had sex for the first time. Several hours later she would fall into a coma. Coupland has created in Richard a character full of nostalgia for those carefree days before the tragedy of Karen's coma, and for the city of Vancouver as it existed back then. It is idealised as "a city so new that it dreamed only of what the embryo knows, a shimmering light of civil peace and hope for the future" (6). Yet the fragility of this vision is evident in Coupland's second description of the city as it was. He writes that Richard and Karen looked "at the lights of Vancouver before the 1980s had its way with the city—an innocent, vulnerable, spun glass kingdom" (14). This is Coupland's image of the city seen at night from a distance, looking small and delicate, its artificial lights tracing an intricate outline. Such an image ties in with the general perception in the 1970s of Vancouver as still a rather small city, its metropolitan potential as yet unrealised and barely imagined. Ray Tomalty notes that "The [Greater Vancouver] region has undergone rapid population growth over the last 30 years, growing from a 1971 population of 1,082,187 to 1,831,665 in 1996, a cumulative increase of almost 70 percent" (5). Between 1991 and 1996, which are in *Girlfriend in a Coma* the years immediately prior to Karen's awakening, the Greater Vancouver Regional District was the fastest growing metropolitan area in Canada.³¹ As the

³¹ The 1996 Census population data, released on April 15, 1997 by Statistics Canada, indicates that the Greater Vancouver Regional District (Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area) grew by 230,000 people (or 14.3%), from 1,603,590 on June 1, 1991 to 1,831,665 on May 14, 1996. The growth rate of Greater Vancouver Regional District was the highest of any metropolitan area in the country, more than

city grows, Coupland's characters seem unhappy with the new developments, and a sense of nostalgia pervades. For Richard, "with the seventies left a sweetness, a gentleness. No longer could modern citizens pretend to be naïve" (45). Meanwhile, comatose Karen represents "some frail essence from a now long vanished era...a world of gentle pacific rains, down filled jackets, bitter red wine in goatskins, and naïve charms" (75). While Karen sleeps, the city and its citizens drift away from these romantic qualities into the more cynical world of the 1980s. The characters of *Girlfriend in a Coma* are swept up in this cynicism. Richard turns to drink, and Hamilton and Pamela find refuge in heroin, "the Port of Vancouver having in recent years become a salad bar of cheap Asian drugs" (93). Innocence has been lost. The fairytale kingdom evoked by a teenage Richard has shattered—as surely as its spun glass consistency suggested it would.

Coupland's description of Richard's home further into the novel might be read as a continuation of this theme of nostalgia and home represented by the metaphor of glass. When Richard buys a two bedroom condo he is in his thirties and appears to have finally grown up. He chooses "a ragtag old seventies condo with slatted cedar walls, and Plexiglas bubble skylights" (94). By this time it is the mid 1990s and his choice of accommodation, built in the decade of his youth—the carefree years he spent with Karen, emphasises his equation of home and the past. The Plexiglas skylights, however, are also a contrast to the vulnerability of the spun glass city of his youth; the most notable property of Plexiglas is that it will not shatter. Not coincidentally, this is a place in which Richard feels safe: "it was the first place I'd ever lived in that actually felt like my own. I was glad to be home" (95).

twice the national average ("Greater Vancouver - the fastest growing metropolitan area in Canada 1991-1996")

The Plexiglas condo provides a haven from the disappointments of the city and of life; he rushes back there after learning that Pam and Hamilton have been using heroin, and, even more upsetting for Richard, when Hamilton informs him that “there is nothing at the centre of what we do” (94). Richard retreats from this cynical revelation, the corruption of adulthood and the shattered city of his youthful dreams to his own secure Plexiglas bubble of nostalgia.

It is significant that Coupland decides Richard should live in North Vancouver. This is the suburb that Richard and his friends were raised in and in this respect Richard is markedly different from the several protagonists of *Life After God* who live in different parts of the city from their childhood homes—including young, hip, counter-culture neighbourhoods such as Kitsilano and Commercial Drive. As the author gets older, his protagonists increasingly live in locations closer to where they were raised, not unlike the author himself who admits on the back cover of his tribute to Vancouver, *City of Glass*, that “I spent my twenties scouring the globe thinking there had to be better city out there, until it dawned on me that Vancouver is the best one going”. Although, in *City of Glass*, Coupland celebrates the diversity of the city and its continual evolution, his fiction is full of characters who long for the suburban life of their youth. In *Girlfriend*, the characters indulge their nostalgia and hide away from change by opting to live in these suburbs. In comparison with downtown Vancouver, West Vancouver has barely altered. Awakened from her seventeen-year coma, “Karen is both relieved and annoyed by the absent signs of time’s passage” in her suburban home (*Girlfriend* 140). In contrast, when visiting the downtown area, “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 telephones” (151). Although she initially likes the city, her attraction to it is superficial and she soon articulates a concern about the way the world has turned: “the whole world is only about work: *work work work get get get...racing ahead...getting sacked from work...going online...knowing computer languages...winning contracts*” (153). Hutcheon notes that the “original theory of nostalgia as a medical condition was developed in Europe ‘at the time of the rise of the great cities when greatly improved means of transportation made movements of the population much easier’; in other words, you would be more likely to be away from home and thus yearn for it”. She goes on to imply that that the recent resurgence of nostalgia—which Coupland is concerned with—stems from the rise in Information Technology that “made us question not only... what would count as knowledge, but what would count as “the past” in relation to the present (Hutcheon). I suggest that recent nostalgia is a reaction to the acceleration of change to place caused by capitalism and the resultant global flows. The city centre is the locus of contemporary capitalist and globalised society, but the suburbs remain somewhat timeless.

It is the resistance to change in the suburbs which makes them an obvious place to construct home. Home is connected to the notions of domain and territory, and thus it might be thought of as the place where one has most control. Complete control however is made difficult by change, and change has perhaps accelerated in recent years as a result of globalisation. Home might therefore be seen as a place where one can retreat from the changes that are occurring due to globalisation. Although the city is caught up in global

transfers, there is less reason for the home to follow suit. Traditionally, work could be left at the office, but new advances in technology—mobile phones, faxes, laptop computers and the internet—allow work to be taken home, and as Karen observes, many choose to allow this. Thus the idea of home as a place of personal control and a haven from outside pressures is threatened. It might be, as I discussed earlier, that home has never been such a haven, just as it has never been entirely private. However, the development of electronic technology certainly diminishes any control over boundaries that the homeowner might have retained. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Coupland shows how quickly Karen adopts the money orientated, getting ahead ethos of 1990s society when she agrees to appear on a television show. Although her motivations are not out of personal greed—she plans to invest the money for her daughter—she sacrifices privacy for financial gain. Displaying an increasingly common tendency in contemporary society since the introduction of Big Brother and the plethora of reality shows that followed, Karen exhibits herself and her home to an audience of strangers. The American production team “descend on Karen’s doorstep for a Thursday shoot” (159) and Karen “feels like she’s in a movie in which scientists discover alien life-forms inside a suburban house” (161). Her house has been transformed from home into a studio, and this leaves her literally alienated.

Despite the invasion and the compromise of privacy, Karen manages to retain control over her domain and the television show. Her friend Pam observes that television transforms her, acknowledging its role as a mediator of reality rather than a window on it: “She came across as so...sugary, gooey. Not Karen at all. *Well, that’s TV – that’s what TV does.*” (183). Nonetheless, Karen conducts the interview according to her own agenda. She

does not cry when the host wants her to, and she completely changes the intended tone of the broadcast, causing chaos and throwing the chat-show-host when she prophesises the end of the world. Coupland presents Karen as a character who is very much in control of her home and her privacy. In her youth, she is the one behind the camera, “an avid photographer, flashbulbing away at school, at Park Royal Mall, or in the wild” (36). She captures her locality and community on film whilst maintaining her own anonymity by avoiding photographs: “when any one of us searched for stray photographs of Karen, we looked almost in vain, rifling full box loads of our teen filled snaps, finding the most meager rewards: a left arm here, half a head there; legs cut off at the thighs” (37). During her coma and even after her ‘miraculous’ awakening Karen flees the cameras with the cooperation of her faithful friends who resist bribes offered by desperate reporters. She only moves in front of the cameras when they can be of use to her. The theorist Joshua Meyrowitz has suggested that privacy has shifted in contemporary society due to the pervasiveness of the media. He writes, “By merging discrete communities of discourse, television has made nearly every topic a valid subject of interest and concern for virtually every member of the public. Further, many formerly private and isolated behaviours have been brought out into the large unitary public arena” (308-309). However, Coupland reminds us through Karen that even since the dawn of reality television, most individuals retain control over whether to exhibit themselves or whether to watch others—even those whose image is in demand (Karen’s image is “the golden fleece of journalism” (138) when she comes out of her coma).

Coupland's representation of Karen in front of and behind the camera as exhibitor and voyeur speaks of the increasing role of cameras in our daily lives. This is a fact particularly true in Vancouver, where filming for runaway productions is usually underway in multiple parts of the city at any given time. Vancouver is home to very little primary industry—it was originally a lumber town but these days, according to Coupland, lumber is today shipped elsewhere for manufacturing.³² Yet Vancouver has excelled in the industries that Sharon Zukin has described as part of the symbolic economy. The City of Vancouver website claims that Vancouver is the top North American city for International Meetings and it has held the most successful World Class Exposition. In 2010 it will host the Winter Olympics and Paralympics. It is the third largest film production centre in the world and all in all is thriving on the production of images rather than products. Zukin writes, "What is new about the symbolic economy since the 1970s is its symbiosis of image and product, the scope and scale of selling images on a national and even a global level, and the role of the symbolic economy in speaking for, or representing, the city" (8). She gives the Disney Company as an example of this development, suggesting that strategies evident in the design of Disney World are now being implemented in cities. Disney World, she writes, "offers a model of privatization and globalization; it manages social diversity; it imposes a frame of meaning on the city, a frame that earlier in history came from other forms of public culture. This frame is now based on touring, a voyeurism that thrives on the video camera and the local television news" (77).

³² In *Souvenir of Canada* Coupland writes, "I'd naively thought that British Columbia, being one of the world's largest wood suppliers, would be drowning in cheap and good wood. Wrong...we don't actually do anything with what we reap—we ship it somewhere else, and then other people apply brains and intelligence to it and make something more valuable—and sell it back to us" (102).

John Sayles' 1999 film, *Limbo*, imagines executives planning the transformation of the Alaska's coastline into a theme park, potentially at the expense of local business and employment. Characters are made redundant when a salmon cannery is closed due to its unsightly appearance and unpleasant odour. The idea of managing entire states or provinces with visitors and visual culture rather than inhabitants and primary industry in mind might not be far from reality in the case of Alaska and its neighbour British Columbia, which shares the same awe inspiring landscape and increasing number of cruise ships of tourists paying to view the Northwest coast. On two occasions in *Limbo* we hear the sales pitch of an unidentified business man who suggests that his audience should "think of Alaska as one giant theme park". The business man refers to Disney's innovation in creating fake backdrops for stories which the consumer can imagine themselves a part of, and states his plans to go beyond this. The next step is "not bigger and better facsimiles of nature, but nature itself". Disney's idea was taken to its extreme in the corporation's very own town, inhabited by regular American citizens rather than paid employees. Naomi Klein has written that "For the families that live there year-round, Disney has achieved the ultimate goal of lifestyle branding: for the brand to become life itself" (155). For those in Alaska or British Columbia, should people such as John Sayles' fictional businessman have his way, the risk is that their life will become a brand. As the film's cannery employees joke, they might eventually end up in a diorama.

Andrew Tate has discussed Coupland's interest in the Disney phenomenon in several of Coupland's non-Vancouver-situated texts. He quotes Wade, a character in *All Families are Psychotic*, who suggests that the whole world is being turned into a giant

casino, and proposes that this is reminiscent of Baudrillard's proposal that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real...whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real" (Tate, 2007: 113). This highlights the increasing sense of unreality in a world where place is designed to be seen through a camera lens. Coupland draws attention to this in the illustrations "Parallel Universe Vancouver" and "Real Vancouver" in his non-fiction book *City of Glass*. I have commented on these illustrations in Chapter One in relation to Robertson's theory of glocalisation and Tomlinson's idea of the non-place, yet they might also be read as a comment on the increasing importance of the camera eye's version of reality. "Parallel Universe Vancouver" substitutes real Vancouver locations for other sites that these locations have represented on film or bear resemblance to in the nature of their design. Thus Vancouver's popular tourist destination, Granville Island, is substituted by Disneyland. Like Disneyland, it is designed as an idealised version of reality, an artificial and aesthetically managed plot of land where local produce and crafts are sold and carefully selected performers entertain camera wielding tourists.³³ Yet to people who live in Vancouver, as I pointed out in Chapter One, it remains a pleasant spot for lunch and one of the best places to get local food. It is real to them and a part of everyday life.

Coupland's illustrations question which Vancouver should be prioritised —Vancouver as home or Vancouver as film location and tourist attraction. It is the latter which provides

³³ Lance Berelowitz writes, "The centrepiece of the island is the so-called Public Market, where everything has been carefully designed to convey the sense of being in a traditional, organically evolved space. The aisle widths are deliberately undersized. Stall leases in the market are assigned according to a strict set of guidelines to maximise product variety and profits. Vendors are required to abide by an equally strict set of regulations concerning the display of the produce. Even the buskers are programmed. It is the closest thing Vancouver has to a theme park, complete with taste police. And yet...everyone loves it! Granville Island is the most visited attraction in all Vancouver" (256)

much of Vancouver's income in the contemporary symbolic economy, but it is the former that provides meaning.

Coupland plays with the idea that it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between real and framed perceptions of place. As early as 1979 Stanley Cavell wrote "One can feel like there is always a camera left out of the picture" (127) and this is certainly evoked by Coupland in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The novel's repeated reference to film, the character's employment in the film industry and their own awareness of the filmic qualities of their lives encourages a reading of the novel, or at least the post-apocalyptic part of the narrative, as a film within fiction. This is supported by Coupland's description of his protagonists return to the world as they knew it: "Near dawn, [Richard] feels the tremors—the world is resuming. There is an enormous camera flash. He can feel it happening—the world returns" (280). In the last chapter, I proposed that Part Three of the novel might be read as a dream. These readings of *Girlfriend's* conclusion are not exclusive. I am merely suggesting that Coupland plays with narrative convention and blurs the boundaries between reality, dreams and fiction. He draws attention to the fact that all representations of reality, including his own picture of Vancouver as his and his characters' home, are framed so that they exclude certain aspects of reality and replace them with ideals and fictions. Coupland also highlights the voyeurism that characterises modernity in *Girlfriend* and draws attention to its manifestations in Vancouver. In *City of Glass*, he goes as far as suggesting that Vancouver is a voyeur's paradise due to the many see-through buildings that inspire the title of his book, referred to as "blue glass towers" by Karen in *Girlfriend* (151). Whilst none of his characters live in these see-through towers, the

acknowledgement of them shows Coupland's awareness that the home is increasingly a place for voyeurism and exhibitionism, but perhaps not for communication—while glass buildings allow a visual connection between those inside and outside, they remain isolated from one another.³⁴ The glass buildings are also an example of Coupland's framing of Vancouver as a city of glass, most explicitly in his non-fiction tribute to the city, but also in *Girlfriend's* description of the city as a "spun glass kingdom". In using this multifaceted metaphor as a symbol of his home, Coupland frames a certain image and sells it to his reader, in a manner not unlike the strategies of Disney suggested by Zukin.

Despite his own participation in the framing of Vancouver, Coupland appears to be concerned about the way his home city is being framed and sold to outsiders. The British Columbia Film Commission promotes the varied scenery of Vancouver and the rest of the province as "a world of looks", highlighting its potential to look like other parts of the world. This is described in *Girlfriend* by a fictional "LA film guy" who explains to Coupland's protagonists, newly recruited to the location finding industry, that "'They film everything here because Vancouver is unique: You can morph it into any North American city or green space with little effort and even less expense, but at the same time the city has

³⁴ Richard Sennett has written of how glass architecture has affected divisions between the public and private in cities, not dissolving the barriers of experience between inside and outside as engineer Paul Scheerbert predicted (106), but creating a 'social aloofness' as buildings are constructed as isolated works rather than to fit in with their surroundings. Sennett blames Mies van der Rohe for "fathering a soulless environment of glass towers in which men and women are as cut off from one another as from the outside." (111) Whilst Vancouver, unlike its eastern counterpart Toronto, is not home to van der Rohe structures, it has its fair share of individualistic glass towers, symbolic of how, in the modern city, people tend more to live in isolation, preferring to view the world from a protected stance rather than interact with its many elements. On a similar theme, Lance Berelowitz suggests that Vancouver's urban planning is particularly engineered towards viewing rather than communicating. Public spaces are platforms to admire Vancouver's scenery rather than for social interaction. Vancouver has forfeited public interaction for private contemplation and "reduced their public spaces to serving private experience: the public *flaneur* becomes the private voyeur" (163).

its own distinct feel” (87). In *City of Glass*, Coupland expresses concern that “whatever the movie, the crew is always busy disguising Vancouver as some other city. There’s a bit of self loathing as we let our identity be stolen so regularly” (6). Whilst in *Girlfriend* Coupland’s characters find employment as location finders, and later as special effects artists, there is an underlying criticism of their readiness to accept and participate in Hollywood’s invasion of their home-city that is implied by the aftermath of the apocalypse when the characters are told they must ask questions rather than going along with the system.

The presence of American film crews in Canada leads us from the discussion of city as home to nation as home. The runaway film production can be seen as a general symptom of globalisation and the increasing dominance of supranational organisations who exploit economically attractive locations to increase profits. This is suggested by Winston Wheeler Dixon who writes about “the tentacle of twenty-first century mega conglomerates reaching out to colonize new international territories for cheaper production” (29)—in this case Hollywood production companies such as Fox or Paramount would be seen as supranational colonising forces and Vancouver the cheap location due to the tax breaks which I outlined in Chapter One. However, Vancouver’s film industry might also be seen more specifically as a symptom of American imperialism in Canada. This is postulated by Faye as the primary concern of Coupland’s fiction: “his vision depicts Canada’s future as it becomes increasingly assimilated into U.S. material culture” (510). Whilst I find Faye’s assertion that Coupland writes “almost exclusively about U.S. cultural imperialism” (501) an oversimplification, I agree that Coupland has become gradually more interested in the

idea that nationality is a significant part of his identity. In an interview that accompanies the film *Souvenir of Canada* on DVD, while acknowledging other spheres of home, Coupland suggests that the nation is the basis of identity:

I think that there is a state of mind that you have in your young life, if you grew up in a western media democracy, where you think of yourself more as a citizen of the world than a citizen of a country or a city or a province. What seems to happen in the end is that your country almost always wins...Your country is kind of like your hard drive, it formats you whether you like it or not. Your culture is your software and the two of them run together. And you're always patching in upgrades and finding new programs you never knew existed.

This is evident in his works and provides interesting material for the discussion of nation—in this case Canada—as home.

Jefferson Faye notes that there is “an absence of concrete characteristics that can be identified as clearly Canadian” (509) in Coupland’s fiction. Indeed, Coupland’s characters do not discuss their Canadian identity, and Coupland rarely explicitly refers to Canada in *Girlfriend in a Coma* or his other Vancouver located texts. However, Faye perhaps falls into the trap of defining Canada by its differences from the United States. Coupland’s characters might after all strike Canadian readers as very characteristic of their experience; there is no reason why the United States should claim middle-class suburban existence as its own. Coupland points out in *Souvenir of Canada*, “for millions of Canadians, the suburbs are life’s main experience”, and highlights the mistake of defining Canadianicity

by commoditised stereotypes. He suggests that, “In many senses, in Canada, you’re not even a citizen—you’re a *brand*” (107). Instead of using widely recognised but perhaps inauthentic symbols of Canadian life, such as Mounted Police and maple leaves, Coupland marks his work with specific Canadian landmarks—addresses, place names and companies that are only recognisable to inhabitants of Canada, or at least those very familiar with the country. Sometimes the references are even more specifically local to British Columbia or Vancouver. For instance, the characters of *Girlfriend* “hunkered without hunger over cheeseburgers” in a White Spot restaurant (29). Since White Spot restaurants are only found in Western Canada, the reference to them is geographically exclusive.

In his non-fiction work, Coupland has more explicitly expressed his interest in national identity, creating two volumes of Canadiana entitled *Souvenir of Canada*. In creating such works, Coupland might be seen as reacting against globalisation. His catalogues of Canadian items attempt to reinforce the nation despite homogenising global pressures, heeding the warnings of critics such as Bauman that the nation is on the verge of collapse, as discussed in Chapter One. The *Souvenir of Canada* books are designed for the understanding and enjoyment of Canadians and are meant to baffle Americans. The foreword to *Souvenir of Canada* reads “Americans should look at these photos and think, “Huh? Everything looks familiar, and yet nothing is familiar”. These photos are an example of what Coupland refers to in the film *Souvenir of Canada* as “insider handshakes”, and include a vinegar bottle (104) and a “stubbie” (86), which is a small beer bottle (both of these are legacies of British colonisation). There is also Ookpik—a stylised owl made of sealskin that was once adopted as Canada’s world fair symbol (83).

Coupland's interest in "insider handshakes"—codes that are only known by Canadians—is suggestive of his interest in maintaining the exclusivity of the home. Though I have already suggested that privacy is limited, many still believe that home is dependant on exclusivity, on "the sanctity of the threshold" (Porteous, 384). Mallet similarly suggests that "the understanding of home is founded on several related ideas, most obvious among them, the distinction between public and private, and the inside and the outside world" (9). Coupland's endeavours to recreate the exclusivity of home are perhaps understandable as a reaction to the threat of mass media and the technologies associated with globalisation to our (mis)conception of home as an exclusive haven from the outside world.

However, when one considers nation as home then the creation of insider codes lurks dangerously close to nationalism. It threatens to exclude those who perhaps have every right to consider Canada their home but who haven't been there as long as Coupland or have not shared the same middle-class suburban experiences. For while Coupland includes both French and English Canadian culture in *Souvenir of Canada*, there is only a brief mention of First Nations people and no mention of other ethnic minorities. His decision to place a model of a two headed Canadian goose on the cover of *Souvenir of Canada 2* as a symbol of the nation's two solitudes (French and English) represents his simplified and somewhat dated vision of the country. In contrast, recent cultural criticism in Canada has featured an emphasis on the ephemeral nature of home and encouraged people to understand it as a shifting and evolving concept in order that newcomers to the nation are not unfairly excluded. Erin Manning claims to write a story of the nation through the figure of home in her book *Ephemeral Territories*. The nation in question is

Canada, and despite its reputation of being welcoming and benevolent, she suggests that it still deals in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ at the border and insists that this and our conceptions of home and nation should be reconsidered:

If we refrain from questioning the validity of the political structures that guarantee our “safety” within the discourse of the home, we are blinded to the ways in which the home mirrors the politics of state—sovereignty, offering protection from the outside by condoning an ethics of exclusionary violence on the inside. We must therefore develop an awareness that, as we mortgage our lives and construct fences and walls, install security systems and guard dogs, we are offering unwavering support to a vocabulary that is at the heart of the imaginary of the nation (xvii).

As an alternative, she suggests that despite a tenuously held desire to ‘belong’, she has accepted homelessness as “an intimate insight into my own alterity” and concludes that “a certain territorial homelessness is not necessarily at odds with ‘being Canadian’. ‘Being Canadian’ has always presented itself to me as somewhat coterminous with homelessness, if one can gauge a nation by its incessant preoccupation with its own sense of elusive identity” (xvii). In contrast, Coupland, in his *Souvenir of Canada* books at least, shows a determination to encapsulate this elusive identity. However, he perhaps is not quite as guilty of exclusion as I previously inferred. Though his ‘Canadian’ artefacts and themes often hold more meaning for people of his generation, race and class, in publishing these books and explaining the artefacts he is sharing his Canadian codes with others.

Whilst Coupland's non-fiction work offers an insight into his idea of home, it sometimes seems at odds with the representation of home in his fiction. Apart from the possible link between the insider codes more explicitly referred to in his non-fiction and his fiction's local references, the former sheds little light on the complexities of the idea of home evident in the latter. I maintain that *Girlfriend's* increased focus on the suburb where Coupland was born signifies his increasing acceptance of home, but the novel's conclusion presents the simultaneous and paradoxical sentiment that homelessness, as Manning suggests, might be desirable or at least necessary. There are certainly paradoxes in the relationship of home to apocalypse. In Chapter Two I proposed that the idea of home is in many ways the opposite of apocalypse. If apocalypse is what we fear most, home is what we desire most; home, if we are lucky enough to have one, is a refuge when disaster strikes. In *Girlfriend*, characters head for home when the sleeping sickness begins—Richard struggles to get from the airport to Rabbit Lane, Wendy gets lost in the forest trying to walk home, and the protagonists' parents are variously stranded coming back from their Christmas vacations. Coupland however, questions the natural impulse of his characters to retreat to home in the face of the apocalypse. An omniscient narrator observes, "*Is everybody going home? Will home be safe? Or perhaps home is only familiar. What do they expect at the other end that will make them feel safe? What will make them strong?*" (187, Coupland's emphasis). Coupland implies that people look for the constancy of the home in response to extreme tumult and that they believe home will provide shelter from the encroaching threat. Since Coupland's protagonists all manage to get home and find each other when the apocalypse occurs, I suggest that Coupland

proposes that the company of loved ones, more than the safety or familiarity of a physical place, is what people rush home to find. *Girlfriend's* protagonists experience the end of the world together, walking the streets of their community and consequently inhabiting their shared home after Karen insists they must go out for a walk (206). There she relates her vision of the last death by sleeping sickness and proclaims that the world is over. This vision of apocalypse differs strikingly from the nuclear destruction envisioned in *Life After God's* "The Dead Speak", where each victim is either alone or with colleagues or acquaintances rather than family or friends. In *Girlfriend* Coupland is more concerned with the relationship between apocalypse and the sphere of home as community than in his previous work.

In my previous chapter, I also suggested that if one believes they can only get home through death and apocalypse, an inability to accept the world as home is signified, and this is exemplified by the character of Lois in *Girlfriend*. My assertion draws attention to the fact that despite its immensity, the world is one of multiple conceptions of home. This is the last scale of home suggested by Neil Smith in his article "Homeless/Global Scaling Places". The first sphere of home on Smith's scale is the body. I propose that the idea of body as home is connected to the idea of world as home because death is the only way of escaping either. Smith writes, "Since the emergence of AIDS at the beginning of the 1980s, the most unprecedented contest for the body has been played out on a global scale" (103). Since Coupland emphasises the emergence of AIDS in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, he is perhaps interested in the change in attitude to this scale of home. Some fight to retain their

body as an efficient home, others, like Lois, want death and the apocalypse to relieve them of it.

The characters who survive the apocalypse, despite acknowledging the world as their home, in some senses remain homeless. Explaining the conditions of the world's second chance, the ghost Jared tells his friends that "they will be forever homesick" (270) as they work to question and overthrow the old order for "what's Next" (271). "What's Next"—Coupland capitalises the N—is undefined, and emphasises the sense of homelessness because the characters, like the narrator of "In the Desert", don't know what lies at the end of the road for them. Additionally, they are instructed to destroy many of the ways in which home is constructed, such as putting down roots and repeating activities. He tells Pam "it's as though you've had to dig up a massive tree and untie the roots which have been tied into complex knots" and tells Wendy that there must be "no repetition or insulation" (271). Such rhetoric, demanding a radical new order and the rejection of history if it hinders the truth, implies that systems such as nationhood might be challenged and overthrown. Yet despite the suggestion that his characters will be forever homeless, the idea of home in the sense of community and family is maintained as a vital construction. Unlike the narrators of "In the Desert" or "My Hotel Year", or Linus who embarked on a solo walkabout earlier in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, at the conclusion of the novel the characters are not alone and they remain in Vancouver. This implies that whilst it is necessary to overcome nostalgia and dissatisfaction with the present, this is not achieved by running away. In essence, a localised group of people are given a global mission. As I have already suggested, *Girlfriend in a Coma* offers a more practical solution than *Life*

After God. Whilst *Life After God* relies on God to take care of the future, *Girlfriend* gives full responsibility to humans to take care of their home on earth and carve out “what’s Next”.

What’s next for Coupland’s Vancouver fiction is *Hey Nostradamus*. This comes six years after *Girlfriend*, and in these years Coupland’s work has journeyed further from home than ever before. 1999 saw the publication of *Miss Wyoming*, a novel which takes readers all over the U.S. on the trail of a beauty queen. 2001 saw the publication of *All Families Are Psychotic*, a novel predominantly set in Florida (though with flashbacks to its characters’ previous home in Vancouver) and an illustrated novel called *God Hates Japan*, produced with Vancouver animator Mike Howatson and published only in Japanese. *Hey Nostradamus*, however, is a return to the mountainous suburbs where Coupland was raised, and following the pattern suggested by Tate, returns to the more solemn subject matter that characterises Coupland’s Vancouver work. There are also echoes of his previous Vancouver scenarios. As in *Girlfriend* we are introduced to a narrator who speaks from the afterlife, a young girl frozen in time at seventeen and a boy growing into a man without ever getting over his lost first love. As in *Life of God*, we meet a fundamentalist Christian and are witness to the struggling loved ones of a mysteriously missing person. Yet *Hey Nostradamus* differs from his previous works in its conventionality. For the first time Coupland’s art school origins seem to have been relegated to the backburner. There are no gimmicks—no Holzer-esque chapter headings, no doodles, no neologisms defined in the margins. The first of four sections is somewhat experimental in its use of a dead narrator whose monologue is interspersed with the prayers she hears in her undefined afterlife

location, the whispered pleas of people trying to deal with God in a time of tragedy. Yet the three remaining sections return to the much more traditional convention of epistolary narration. Jason scrawls a letter to his infant nephews on the back of pay slips, Heather writes word processed letters to herself, and Reg explains his unsympathetic past in a letter to his son. The form of the novel has been explained by reviewers as a reflection of his graceful passage into middle-age, a theory that fits with my own conviction that Coupland's attitude to home develops chronologically with regards to the three texts I am looking at. However, I propose the stylistic change is also related to the sensitive subject matter. Described by Coupland in interview as a look at the other side of Columbine, the victims rather than the gunmen, Coupland has decided that *Hey Nostradamus* is not the place for irony and intertextual playfulness.³⁵ As I noted in the previous chapter, the only notable intertextual references are from the bible.

Home in *Hey Nostradamus* is a beautiful planet marred by senseless human acts. The book opens with Cheryl's description of how, on the last day of her life, she was struck by the beauty of the world and felt thankful to have such a good home. Yet in the aftermath of the shooting, home in a domestic and community sense is broken and divided. Divisions spring from the question of Jason's guilt. Reg's conviction that his son is guilty results in the break up of their family home. Jason's mother evicts Reg and temporarily whisks Jason away to the far side of Canada in order to avoid the backlash of a community looking for someone to blame. Years after, Jason has returned to Vancouver and has got

³⁵ Coupland claims, "Some people say, how come you never explored the motives of the ones who did the shooting. To my mind, that was all people talked about. I'm very much a fan of JG Ballard, where you have people in this fantastically quotidian situation that goes suddenly wrong, and how people deal with that. Killers get too much press already" (Anthony)

himself a place to live by sheer fluke—Coupland writes that it was won in a poker game (65). He suggests that Jason is living, but without any engagement with the world. Like Richard in *Girlfriend*, Jason claims he is a good citizen, but is emotionally ‘checked out’ of life, refusing to form close relationships, drinking and taking drugs to pass the time. He refuses to make a home in the world, acting as though he is just passing through, and Coupland’s description of his home functions as a device to emphasise this aspect of his character: “The place is nicer than something I would have found on my own; I even have a balcony the size of a card table which I’ve managed to ruin with failed houseplants and empty bottles that will someday enter the downstairs recycling bins” (65). Jason’s living space reflects his conviction that he has failed in life and believes he does not deserve to have a comfortable home. Jason’s apartment creeps above the status of mere shelter, however, by virtue of his sharing it with a dog. His home is consequently not just an environment but a place where a relationship is enacted, though with a dog rather than a person. While it might suggest, as Coupland does, that it signifies Jason has stopped trusting humans altogether, it illustrates that he is capable of forming a relationship with another living creature and of taking care of it (50).

Reg’s apartment is also described in detail, and it appears that Coupland subscribes to the Jungian suggestion that “the individual’s house is a universal, archetypal symbol of himself. The house reflects how the individual sees himself, how he wishes to see himself, or how he wishes others to see him” (Porteous, 384). In the case of Jason, his apartment reflects how he really views himself. In the case of Reg, who is according to Jason, “the opposite of everything he claims to be” (178), it is more likely to be a reflection of how he

wants to see himself—a man of God, rock solid, traditional, and proper. Thus “the contents of his dresser were all folded and colour-coded as if waiting for inspection by some cosmic drill sergeant on Judgment Day”³⁶ and his bedside table contains “Bibles, *Reader’s Digest* Condensed Books and clipped newspaper articles” (96). However, Coupland imbues the apartment with signifiers of how the reader should see Reg. The furniture is repeatedly described as dark and stained, and it smells “like a dead spice rack”. Reg’s inhumanity is conveyed by his home. His religious beliefs are represented by Coupland as stale and representative of something shady and sinister. The third home to be described in detail by Coupland is Allison/Cecelia’s. The reader does not have to interpret the description themselves—one look at Allison’s home triggers Heather’s realisation that “Allison/Cecilia is basically me – an older version of me, but a woman marooned, manless and geographically remote, contemplating a life of iffy labour, a few thousand more microwaveable meals and then a coffin” (210). Jason also sees the similarities between he and his father’s apartments, and it becomes apparent that all the characters are in similar positions, trapped in unfulfilled existences and essentially alone. Whilst offering privacy, shelter and abode there is nothing about these homes that suggests Somerville’s further signifiers of hearth, heart, roots or paradise.

Hey Nostradamus follows the pattern of *Life After God* and *Girlfriend* by drawing to an uncertain conclusion. There is optimism, but no resolution. Only with his fourth Vancouver novel, *Eleanor Rigby*, does Coupland opt for an all-ends-tied romantic happy

³⁶ The reference to Judgment day in relation to Reg, at this point in the novel an unsympathetic character, recalls Coupland’s preoccupation with apocalypse and his criticism of those who anticipate it.

ending. Yet *Hey Nostradamus* is given a perhaps coincidental conclusiveness in that the final word is “home”. Though an ideal representation of home is not seen elsewhere in the novel, Reg’s transformation from a cruel and hypocritical man, who justified his actions with the word of God, to a genuine warm hearted man of faith, allows the belief in the possibility of home—though, like the precise nature of spirituality subscribed by Coupland, the idea of home remains ambiguous and elusive due to ever changing circumstances. However, as in the conclusion to *Life After God* and *Girlfriend*, Coupland’s concluding emphasis is firmly on looking to the future. *Life After God* looks to a personal future after a reconciliation between the mind and that first sphere of home, the body. *Hey Nostradamus* looks to the future and the rebuilding of the family home, and *Girlfriend in a Coma* portrays the character’s acceptance of the world as home, and the character’s pledge to work towards a better future.

Conclusion

This exploration of Douglas Coupland's work has found that there is an underlying theme of globalisation which drives the plots and creates the concerns of the characters Coupland writes. My thesis began by exploring the connotations of the word globalisation in various disciplines and its intersections with constructions of region and nation generally and in literary criticism. As a result of globalisation the relationships between economics, politics and culture is increasingly interwoven and thus interdisciplinary analysis is necessary in order to assess the transformation of place in literary studies. Coupland shows concern about the homogenizing effects of globalisation, or perhaps more specifically Americanization through his references to Vancouver's film industry. However, he is also involved in constructing and exhibiting the local although seemingly as a response to globalisation rather than as a parallel process. I found that Coupland's efforts to create ideas about national identity jarred somewhat with recent revisions of Canadian regionalism, which are moving away from the inaccurate portrayal of Canada as dominated by wilderness and of Canadians as of Northern European descent. He also appears to be guilty of 'indigenization'. Coupland's Vancouver fiction might be analyzed in the context of a number of regions—the west coast, the Pacific Rim, the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia, Cascadia, the Northwest Coast or Greater Vancouver, but that many overlapped and were variously defined according to the requirements of the user. Although urban areas are more likely to be considered as regions following recent revisions of literary regionalism, the Northwest coast is the most appropriate context for Coupland's work. In

accordance with the characteristics of new regionalism, I have found that Coupland is active in creating and mapping this region rather than merely representing it.

Chapter Two dealt with Coupland's visions of apocalypse. Coupland imagines the apocalypse extensively in his Vancouver fiction, and I attributed this to a sense of anxiety common among the middle-class who grew up during the Cold War, Coupland's Generation X. This anxiety also stems from economic instability and the expansion of mass media, bringing real and pop images of destruction into everyday life. Geographical precariousness, in the form of tectonic instability and the proximity of nuclear weapons in the Northwest Coastal region, is mapped in Coupland's fiction and also contributes to its apocalyptic anxiety. Coupland combines popular culture, biblical reference and real life events in his visions of apocalypse, and often adopts playful intertextual reference which results in a certain ambiguity over whether the author is sincere, ironic or a mixture of the two. *Girlfriend in a Coma's* apocalypse closely followed the pattern of Judeo-Christian apocalypses yet at the same time Coupland implied disapproval of organised religion which suggested that his apocalypse should not be taken seriously. However, what should be taken seriously is his advocacy of prophetic eschatology; the revision of the world in the here and now. Coupland has suggested that he sometimes wants to escape from life and this impulse is transferred onto a number of his characters who long for eternal sleep or welcome the apocalypse. However the conclusions of each Vancouver text emphasise the necessity of change and looking toward the future of this world rather than passing time until death or the world's end occurs.

Chapter Three explored the idea of home in Coupland's work and began with an interrogation of the concept in multiple disciplines. I found that the idea of home as relationships enacted is most relevant to Coupland's fiction due to his emphasis on family and community. A number of the same factors that caused anxiety in Generation X and subsequent generations who have grown up in the era of globalisation results in confusion about the desirability and achievability of home. People today are faced with a number of alternatives to the traditional concept of home and therefore struggle to feel at home in the way that earlier generations did. Many Generation Xers also have a highly idealised view of home after an affluent upbringing by baby boom parents, yet an inability to match it due to economic disadvantage. Following Rybczynski, I have argued that the idea of comfort is closely associated with home in the modern age but found that some of Coupland's protagonists in *Life After God* rebel against home comforts and hope to gain insight through discomfort and isolation. Rybczynski's assertion that home was ever completely private or a haven from the outside world is questionable, but whatever privacy there was in the home is diminished as a result of increased surveillance technologies and shifts in private life due to the extensiveness of mass media in the globalised world. I concur with Andrew Tate that the use of Vancouver as a setting signifies a more solemn subject matter. Coupland appears to try and work through his ambiguities towards the idea of home in his Vancouver novels, dealing with attachment to the family home, with the attraction of freedom as an alternative to home-making, and negotiating the varying appeal of different spheres of home and different ways of constructing home. One way of constructing home is through habits and familiarity, and Coupland is an active participant in this process when

he creates ‘insider handshakes’. Although critics such as Erin Manning are concerned that the creation of national codes is unfairly exclusive and insufficiently flexible to represent ever-changing ideas of nation as home, Coupland’s interest in constructing nation and region provides shared points of references and emphasises local culture in reaction to the homogenizing forces of globalisation. Coupland also shows concern about a tendency that has accompanied globalisation—to sell place to outsiders rather than making it a better home for insiders. This is exemplified by the British Columbia film industry and by tourism. Nostalgia for a time where Vancouver did not appeal to outside investment quite so frequently is particularly evident in the characters of *Girlfriend in a Coma* and illustrates dissatisfaction with the current place and time. However, Coupland ultimately advocates acceptance of change and responsibility for creating the future as an alternative to nostalgia. His characters find a home in family and community and have faith that their own feelings of homelessness will help them create the future and retain the world as a home for future generations.

Throughout the chapters there is a common theme of taking action. Although Coupland illustrates in detail his character’s disillusionment with the world, their nostalgia for less complicated times and desire for a get out clause, his conclusions always witness a turn-around. His protagonists change their approach to life and consequently believe that bigger changes are possible and desirable—they can decide their future. However, whilst Coupland’s attitude to the future is clear, his attitude to the present is not. There are a number of paradoxes in his work that baffle critics trying to make sense of his world view, including his simultaneous embrace and critique of mass culture, his ambiguous spirituality

which appears to critique organised religion yet utilises many of its tenants, his obsession with apocalypse contrasted with his advocacy of prophetic eschatology, and his emphasis on family and community as construction of home despite the necessity of feeling homeless for the sake of enacting change. However, this thesis has explicated these ambiguities and helped show that they are in many cases a response to the increasingly ephemeral nature of place—including locality, region and nation—due to globalisation.

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