"Talking 'bout my Generation":
Douglas Coupland's Generation X
and the Construction of a Generation
for Postmodern America

Hausarbeit
zur Erlangung des Magistergrades
der Philosophischen Fakultät
zu Münster (Westfalen)

vorgelegt von
Tim Stelzer
aus Wilhelmshaven
1998
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Für meine Eltern,
die Generation X gelesen haben und mich fragten,
worum es da eigentlich geht.
"I'm not trying to cause a big sensation
I'm just talking 'bout my generation"

— The Who, "My Generation" (1965)
"It is important just when a generation first sees the light—and by a generation I mean that reaction against the fathers which seems to occur about three times in a century. It is distinguished by a set of ideas, inherited in moderated form from the madmen and outlaws of the generation before; if it is a real generation it has its own leaders and spokesmen, and it draws into its orbit those born just before it and just after, whose ideas are less clear-cut and defiant."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, "My Generation" (first published 1968)

"Was man einmal schöne Literatur nannte, ist heute offensichtlich allenfalls noch Auslöser, nicht aber Gegen- und Widerstand von Debatten, die sich dann auffallend schnell und willig vom literarischen Anstoß lösen und verselbständigen. Nur nicht aufmerksam lesen—mitreden um jeden Preis: das ist die Parole."

—Jochen Hörisch, "Was generiert Generationen: Literatur oder Medien?" (1997)

"I read Douglas Coupland's book Generation X. I didn't get it, but I liked the name."

—Karen Ritchie, Marketing to Generation X (1995)
1. Prologue: Generation Yps

1.1. Are You a Member?

16. Are you a member of Generation X?
   
a. Yes.
b. I think so — what’s the age range again?
c. No, “Generation X” is a convenient label used by the popular media in an attempt to classify people of my age into an easily-definable group so that they can pander to us and convince themselves that they really understand what our lives are about.¹

Back in the fall of 1996, I saw a stack of Douglas Coupland’s Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture in a book shop in Münster. Just a few months earlier, I had come back from a year at a college in the U.S.A., where I had been studying American culture, literature, history, politics, TV programs, supermarkets, inhabitants, and customs. Still digesting all the bewildering, exciting and wonderful things I had experienced, I felt oddly out of place in Germany, and was looking for some type of diversion. ¶I bought a copy of Generation X, along with a TV guide. ¶The concept of the so-called “Generation X,” supposed to be my generation, had both puzzled and annoyed me. I do not remember when I first heard about it, but I recall rejecting the notion that such a label could universally apply to millions of young people—not only in America, but also in Germany, where that label had been increasingly used. The more I learned about the “Gen X” stereotype, the more inappropriate it seemed to me. “Postmodern, disillusioned cynics?”—well, maybe that applied to some of us. “Whiny, apathetic slackers?”—hardly, as I knew plenty of people my age who were determined go-getters. ¶Then I started reading Generation X. ¶And I was smitten. ¶After the first few chapters I felt that Coupland’s novel actually did “connect” with my life, my experiences, and my per-


² To clearly distinguish between novel and supposed generation, the term for the latter is used with quotation marks: Generation X = novel; “Generation X” = supposed generation (and discourse on it).
spectives like no other book I had read in recent years. In other words, I liked it. As I read on, I realized that many aspects of it connected to memories of my year in America, and I recognized a certain attitude I had encountered in some people of my age group. So this book proved to be more than just a diversion: it gave me a frame of reference for my experiences, a philosophy I could use to make sense of them—on a very personal level, it told me something about my world.

Then I started thinking.

If I reject the concept of a "Generation X" and like the novel Generation X, what does that say about the relationship between the two? From where did I get my ideas about "Generation X," and from where did all those others who talked about it get their ideas about the concept? How does the fiction relate to the facts—and, to begin with, just what are the facts?

I decided to investigate the issue.

I started reading more of Coupland’s work; I collected newspaper and magazine articles about it, watched "Gen X" movies and TV shows, listened to "Gen X" music, read "Gen X" books, and talked with my friends about the "Generation" we were supposed to be. And it all just got "curiouser and curiouser." Trying to find clarification only lead to more questions. Finally, being a student of literature, I pragmatically narrowed down my questions to the one that had kindled my interest—and so I decided to write a thesis about Douglas Coupland's novel Generation X and how it relates to the popular notion of a "Generation X," hoping to find at least one reasonable answer.

If you answered c you are a member of Generation X.

1.2. We're Writing about it

This personal prologue introduces several aspects of my thesis. Key assumptions of the "New Historicism" provide the methodological basis for it, and beginning with an anecdote or an episode from the critic’s own life is a common and "classic" New Historicist practice. As the writer of this study, I can and will not conceal my personal involvement in the matter I am discussing. Although I will revert to a seemingly objective stance in the following parts, restricting first-person statements to footnotes, the decidedly subjective opening section serves as a qualifying emblem for my thesis: I have assembled the data for it, I have imposed a structure on all this information, I have written it—I have constructed it. I am aware of what one of the leading New Historicists, Stephen Greenblatt, points out:

The order of things is never simply a given: it takes labor to produce, sustain, reproduce, and transmit the way things are, and this labor may be withheld or transformed. Structures may be broken in pieces, the pieces altered, inverted, rearranged. Everything can be different than it is; everything could have been different than it was.


Furthermore, "Generation Yps" is not just parody of the "Generation X" concept for me. *Yps* is the magazine I grew up with, and it taught me and many of my peers a lot of things. What made *Yps* so attractive to us was that each issue included a "Gimmick" in its plastic wrapping. These "Gimmicks" were little gadgets and devices, playfully demonstrating technical and scientific principles, or tools and materials for experiments, seeds growing exotic plants, or the infamous "Urzeitkrebse:" a dry substance that, dissolved in water, evolved into tiny creatures that *lived*—and soon died again, in most cases. These Gimmicks evoked wonder and joy in us, or, perhaps more often, tears and grief when they did not "work" properly. Moreover, they were presented in a magazine that combined stories, jokes, scientific and technical information, the wonders of nature, and comic strips between its covers—a colorful collage that today would probably be dubbed "postmodern." However, what made these Gimmicks so appealing was that they came as *construction kits*, to be assembled (or broken in pieces) with our own hands—do-it-yourself toys—so that by reading *Yps* and constructing its Gimmicks, we all became *bricoleurs* in the truest sense of the word.5

"Words, words, words," Andrew Palmer, *Generation X*’s narrator, laments in one chapter ("Re Con Struct"). I learned to use *words* and *ideas* to produce other kinds of constructions when I started studying literature. And even before that, listening to pop music taught me that "words don’t mean a thing" and "names make all the difference in the world"6—or, as Jacques Derrida claims, the *différance*.

Giving *names* to phenomena is one of mankind’s most basic activities ever since Adam started with it (cf. Genesis 2:19-20). Exploring new territories, both intellectually and geographically, we assign names to them—"America" is but one example of this. It is not surprising, then, that the authors of *13th Gen*, when faced with the accusation that giving names to generations is "like trying to read the song title on a record that’s spinning," concede: "we’re writing about it, so we have to give it a name."7 It takes labor to present the way things are, as Greenblatt remarked, but names and labels can be assigned easily—while often being simplifications and generalizations that may conceal "the way things are."

While I am *writing* about "Generation X" and *Generation X*, I do not want to create the impression that written texts are the *only* cultural phenomena where the matters discussed in this thesis become visible. Thus, whenever possible and appropriate, visual material—cartoons, pictures, etc.—will be incorporated into my text. Also, the quotations from pop and rock songs at chapter beginnings show that the much-derided pop lyrics often partake in the same discourses as "serious" literary or philosophical statements. To make this *multimedial* approach complete, a soundtrack tape recording for this thesis is available.

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5 The concept of *bricolage* will be explained in part 2.5. *Yps* still appears weekly in Germany and can be visited in the Internet at http://www.YPS.de.
2. Talking 'bout a New Lost Generation

There's a word for it
And words don't mean a thing
There's a name for it
And names make all the difference in the world [...] 
Let X make a statement

—The Talking Heads, "(Give Me Back My) Name" (1985)

We grew up way too fast
And now there's nothing to believe
And reruns all become our history

—The Goo Goo Dolls, "Name" (1995)

2.1. The X Guy

Shortly before Douglas Coupland’s first novel was published by St. Martin’s Press in March 1991, Rolling Stone magazine announced Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture as "a fictional guide for the generation born between 1960 and 1970." In reference to a current debate about the younger generation in America, the so-called "Twentysomethings," its author was introduced as the voice, or at least a representative of this new generation: "With all this talk about the new lost generation, somebody should have consulted Doug Coupland." Yet in the same article Coupland already vehemently denied and refused being a spokesperson for anyone, because "he doesn’t want to speak for others," and he obviously does not want others to speak for him: "I just got sent this article by Bret Easton Ellis and he’s like 'We think…' and 'Our generation…' I thought, 'Fuck off.' I can only speak for myself. I don’t want to be typecast as the X guy."

Time warp: seven years later, spring 1998. Coupland has just published his sixth book, Girlfriend in a Coma, a novel (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). Its review in The New York Times is titled "The Gen X Files;" Internet bookseller amazon.com hails Coupland as "the poet laureate of Gen X" in its review of his new novel, and even his latest publication, a book about a popular computer game, is being introduced as "a love letter from definitive Gen X scribe Douglas Coupland to definitive Gen X pinup girl Lara Croft." Furthermore, 1998 also saw Coupland canonized and included into the new Norton anthology of Postmodern American Fiction with an excerpt from Generation X. The brief introduction to its author notes that Coupland "was quickly anointed as the spokesman for the generation he described in his first book" (568).
Indeed, Douglas Coupland was typecast as the "X guy" very quickly after his first novel became exceedingly successful and achieved "cult" status. What was even more successful, however, was the phrase it reintroduced into the vocabulary of the 1990s, "Generation X." The third edition of Webster's New World College Dictionary (1996) defines it as "the generation of persons born in the 1960's and 1970's, the children of the baby boomers, often variously regarded as apathetic, materialistic, irresponsible, lacking purpose etc." During the course of the decade, "Generation X" not only became an official Library of Congress subject heading (in 1994), the phrase also achieved a certain notoriety.

Supposedly denoting a new generation of young Americans, "Generation X" appeared in countless articles in magazines and periodicals as diverse as Time, Advertising Age, Psychological Reports, American Demographics, and even Food Technology, to name only a few. Numerous books aimed at or dealing with this "Generation X" appeared. Among them were the titles The GenX Reader, Marketing to Generation X, Generation X Goes To College, Gen X TV, Beyond Generation X: A Practical Guide for Managers, making a Generation X Field Guide & Lexicon seem indispensable—although it does not cover such stray phenomena as Generation Ecch! The Backlash Starts Here, or the autobiography of former Playboy playmate and (M)TV celebrity Jenny McCarthy, ingeniously titled Jen-X.

In 1995, Coupland himself had enough of all the talk about "Generation X," which he calls a "tinny discourse" in his Details article "Generation X'd." Feeling misunderstood and misrepresented, he tried to explain what he meant by the "X:"

And now I'm here to say that X is over. I'd like to declare a moratorium on all the noise, because the notion that there now exists a different generation—X, Y, K, whatever—is no longer debatable. Kurt Cobain's in heaven, "Slacker"s at Blockbuster, and the media refers to anyone aged thirteen to thirty-nine as Xers. Which is only further proof that marketers and journalists never understood that X is a term that defines not a chronological age but a way of looking at the world.

15 The term "Generation X" is in fact older than Coupland's novel and can be traced back to a Holiday Magazine article from Dec. 1952. In 1964, Generation X was the title of a book about British Mod youth culture, which inspired punk rocker Billy Idol to name his first band Generation X in 1976. This history of the term will be discussed further in ch. 7.5.1.

16 "Baby boomer" is defined as "a person born in the U.S. during the great increase in birthrate (the baby boom) in the years following World War II" in Webster's New World College Dictionary. All references to Webster's are taken from the 1996 edition.

17 According to the Library of Congress Subject Authority Record, "Generation X" became an official subject heading in May 1994: "Here are entered works on members of the generation born between 1965 and 1976."


22 Quotations from "Generation X'd" and from other texts acquired through the Internet have to appear without references to page numbers.
Coupland’s attempt to set right what he obviously considers to be a wrong interpretation of his work is joined with an effort to shut down “the noise” about it all. However, the phrase "Generation X" has proven to be remarkably durable, and the "tinny discourse" could not be stopped by the author who had provided a title for it with his first novel.23

"In decades to come, it will be interesting to find out which will be regarded as Douglas Coupland’s most significant cultural contribution: the fact that he heralded Generation X, or that he wrote a body of literature," Douglas Rushkoff remarks in his Gen X Reader (17). There are more questions arising out of this: If Coupland’s first novel had such a significant impact on American culture, why is he not happy about being the "X guy?" Is there really a discrepancy between what the media refers to as "Generation X" and what Coupland wrote in Generation X? Furthermore, is the latest new generation of young Americans just a "rerun" of (literary) history, as the references to the "Lost Generation" suggest? Or was the notion that a "Generation X" exists just created by the media?

### 2.2. Pop-PolitX: Even One Book

In 1994 the "Generation X" issue apparently became a matter of national interest, prompting the first "Baby Boomer" President of the U.S.A. to lament, "Americans of my generation have been bombarded by images on television shows, and even one book, about the so-called 'Generation X' filled with cynics and slackers."24 Addressing students of the University of California (UCLA) on May 20, 1994,25 Bill Clinton says he sees "a generation of seekers," not slackers. He compares the new generation to the one that attended UCLA after World War I. At that time, "there was also wrenching change and enormous anxiety," and the "nation’s hottest new novelist was a man called F. Scott Fitzgerald. He described the so-called 'lost generation’—the first that would graduate from UCLA. He said that they grew up—and I quote—'to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.'"

Clinton is quoting from Fitzgerald’s first novel This Side of Paradise (1920), hailed by some as "the first of the lost-generation novels."26 However, Clinton does

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23 In the following, the term discourse (on "Generation X") is employed in a sense that Madan Sarup sums up as follows: "Discourses are perhaps best understood as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993: 64). For further information on discourse, cf. ch. 3, "Foucault and the social sciences," in Sarup's Guide (58-89).

24 Bill Clinton, "Remarks By The President To UCLA 75th Anniversary Convocation." Pauley Pavilion, University of California (UCLA), Los Angeles, California. 20 May, 1994. http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/uri-res/12R?urn:pd://oma.eop.gov.us/1994/5/20/3.text.1. — The President’s syntax is not very clear here, but he seems to imply that the images, the book, and the "Generation X" are filled with cynics and slackers.

25 Unless indicated otherwise, the following quotes are taken from Clinton's UCLA speech.

not mention the "X guy," the author of that "one book" about the "Generation X." The President's presumption that Coupland's book is filled with cynics and slackers is not supported by any quotation from or synopsis of the novel itself.

Interestingly enough, Clinton first mentions the bombardment by "images" about the "Generation X" on television in his speech before UCLA students, and only then the book about it. After talking about his generation's "heavy" responsibility to the younger one, assuring that "[w]e are working in Washington to meet it," the President makes clear where he thinks part of the intergenerational problems come from: "We have been caught up in [...] a culture of critique. One sure way to get instant public standing in our popular culture is to slam somebody else. If you work on bringing people together and you talk about it, you're likely to elicit a yawn. But if you bad-mouth people, you can get yourself a talk show."

Popular culture and talk shows—Clinton obviously shakes his finger at certain media phenomena he identifies as bad for a country that "was not built by bad-mouthing," as he claims. When he says how his generation has been "bombarded by images on television shows" (my italics), he seems to imply that there is a war going on—but who are the parties fighting it? The older generation of "Baby Boomers" and the younger "Generation X?" Or the media and "the larger community that is America," to use Clinton's phrase? What does the "Generation X" consist of, except for "cynics and slackers?" If, according to the President, "it is the destiny of America to remain forever young," why does this new generation of young Americans seem to be a problem, one that everyone is talking about?

Thankfully, there is "even one book" involved, Coupland's novel Generation X. If it really is a "fictional guide" for the new "Generation," and if one considers the impact on American culture the novel (or just its title?) seems to have had, receiving attention from the highest political level, and if this new generation is dubbed a new "Lost Generation" in reference to an earlier "Generation" in American literature, then literary criticism surely must have jumped to this chance to prove how important its domain still is in contemporary culture.

\[2.3. \text{AcademX: Doing the Clinton}\]

The 1990s have bestowed to us yet another label. And it is indeed tempting for the academy, an establishment whose fragile self-esteem resides largely in its status as one of the prime institutional arbiters of cultural production, to blame that label's creation and irritating ubiquity on our two most abiding scapegoats: the media, with their addiction to simplistic taxonomy, and Madison Avenue, with its corresponding fixation on the latest target market for this season's commodification of values.\textsuperscript{27}

James McKelly, in "Defying Medusa: Generation X and the Future of English Studies," brings to attention the "massive pandering to what has been identified as 'Generation X' on the part of MTV, Hollywood, network television, the video store around the corner, the campus radio station, the shelves of the campus bookstore,

and the magazine racks in the local Café Pretense” (1). While he is primarily concerned with the future of English Studies, "a profession increasingly content to stew [...] in its own scholarly effluent," and less with Coupland's novel, which he calls "the eponymous touchstone for both media and message" (1), McKelly nevertheless is one of the few members of "the academy" who have at least taken Generation X and the media attention devoted to "Generation X" seriously.

It seems that literary criticism has largely yielded to the temptation to blame the label's creation on the media and ignore the work of fiction that might have had some impact, too. The surprisingly low number of publications that deal with Douglas Coupland's work and the "Generation X" phenomenon within an academic context, preferably literary studies, makes it possible—if not necessary—to take a closer look at them.

The results of a keyword search for the name "Douglas Coupland" in the MLA International Bibliography creates the impression that the attention academia has devoted to him is "zero." A search for "Generation X," on the other hand, produces five publications:

(1) Laura Wright's "Anti-Feminism Generation X-Style" (1994) is not even about Generation X or Coupland; it is a critique of Katie Roiphe's The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1993), a book that "expresses a sort of post-feminist Ivy League conservatism for the slacker generation" (129). The term "Generation X" appears only in the title of the essay; it is neither explained nor associated with Coupland's novel.

(2) Bernd Herzogenrath, in "From the Lost Generation to Generation X: The Great Gatsby vs. Kurt Cobain" (1995), spends about 12 pages of his 18-page essay to present an interpretation of Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby before admitting he does not know where the term "Generation X" appeared for the first time, though it was "certainly not Douglas Coupland's book by that name that coined the phrase" (134). Except for one short quote from the novel, Herzogenrath does not pay any further attention to Generation X. He raises the question whether any new "generation" might be "just a verbal construct after the fact?" (134), nevertheless maintaining that the Lost Generation and the Post-World-War-II-Generation were "real" generations. He claims that only from "the early 80s onwards, 'generations' are mainly generated by the media" (134).

(3) Gen X TV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place by Rob Owen (1997) is a book about TV series and films that either influenced "Gen X" members or were geared towards a younger audience.

28 The search was conducted in the MLA CD-ROM, version 1981-8/1998.
30 The GenX Reader (ed. Rushkoff) features an excerpt from Katie Roiphe's The Morning After (The GenX Reader 85-88). "Harvard graduate Roiphe, in characteristic GenX fashion, blasted the feminist movement with a gentle but scathing appraisal of its inability to comprehend the subtleties of sexuality in the 1990s," Rushkoff introduces Roiphe (The GenX Reader 85).
32 Herzogenrath quotes the definitions for "Historical Underdosing" and "Historical Overdosing" in Generation X (7, 8), but misquotes its title as Generation X. Tales of an Accelerating Culture (cf. 140n20).
to attract them, and not about literature—although, quite interestingly, Owen's definition goes, "TV = Gen X Literature" (cf. 6-11).

(4) "Talking About Generation X: Defining Them as They Define Themselves" (1997) by Angie Williams et al.33 is a "response to a recent explosion of media attention to so-called Generation X" and investigates "young people's responses to media constructions of this generational category label" (251). Referring to "media reports," the authors explain that "the term 'Generation X' was taken from a novel by Douglas Coupland" (252). When they note how "Xers," for "at least the last 3 or 4 years, have been the subject of an outpouring of journalistic and media attention as journalists, marketing experts, demographers, and sociologists endeavor to understand this relatively newly identified and labeled generation" (252), literary critics are suspiciously absent from their list. Using "intergroup theory" (cf. 255-7) as the methodological background for their study,34 the authors report how the 26 participants, aged 19-23, "reject the negative stereotypes of Generation X" they find in the media. Yet their discussions reveal that "the media may be one of the defining characteristics of their intergenerational identity" (251).

(5) Finally, Jennifer Reed's "Roseanne: A 'Killer Bitch' for Generation X" (1997)35 examines the popular TV sitcom Roseanne—without any references to Coupland. Except for a few brief comments, these five essays have little to offer as far as questions about Douglas Coupland and Generation X are concerned. There are more academic contributions to the discourse on "Generation X" and Coupland's novel than those recorded in the MLA International Bibliography, however, though not many more. The Humanities Index (HUM)36 records four essays that deal with Generation X, of which McKelly's "Defying Medusa" is one. The other three are:

(1) "Literary Pointillism" (1992) by David Shields37 is a very brief review of three "books that cast doubt on a reader's capacity to distinguish among fiction, autobiography, and reportage. These works, which tend towards the pointillistic and fragmentary, undermine genre in order to emphasize the destabilized nature of identity at the end of the twentieth century" (239): Bernard Cooper's Maps to Anywhere (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990), Douglas Coupland's Generation X, and Brian Fawcett's Cambodia: A Book for People Who find Television Too Slow (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986). Shields describes the "tales" in Generation X as "only loosely connected by the same cast of characters, but tightly organized by the inability of any of the characters to feel, really, anything" (240). He does not mention the success of the term "Generation X," which might indicate that by 1992, it had not yet achieved its later notoriety.

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34 The authors see a strong correspondence between intergroup theory and Coupland's definition of *Clique Maintenance*: "The need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego" (Generation X 21).
36 The CD-ROM edition of the *Humanities Index* was used, version 2/1984-10/1998.
(2) Raymond Gozzi Jr., examining "The Generation X and Boomers Metaphors" (1995), maintains that the phrase "Generation X" was first used "in the 1970s as the name of Billy Idol's band in London," then "became the title of a book by virtuoso Canadian writer Douglas Coupland," and then was "picked up by the mainstream media and seeped into the consciousness of the culture" (331). He offers no further references to the novel.

(3) "Generation X and the End of History" (1996) by G. P. Lainsbury can be credited with being the first "serious" discussion of Coupland's novel as a literary text, and Lainsbury begins it by pointing out what might cause this restraint (229):

Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* is an example of that rarest of literary phenomena—a "serious" novel that has achieved widespread popular recognition. According to the perverse logic of the literary establishment, the novel's popularity calls into question its validity as a literary text. And yet this is a novel worth looking at seriously, if only for the influence it had on contemporary culture.

Concentrating on the novel's "postmodern" aspects, the essay presents a perceptive interpretation of the text and comes to the conclusion that "Generation X challenges its readers to avoid the dangers of reduction, of trying to bring the many things that the novel does into an agreement with a preexisting worldview" (238). It stresses the necessity to practice, in Jean-François Lyotard's words, a "resistance to simplism and simplifying slogans." So Lainsbury's essay raises an important question: Could it be that the same novel that titled a discourse on a supposedly new "Generation" can be read as a text against the principles of reduction and simplification that are involved when such a "Generation" receives its name?

Another notable exception to the general restraint concerning Coupland's work among literary scholars is Michael Porsche's "Alternative Nation? Die 'Generation X' in der amerikanischen Gegenwartsliteratur." First held as a lecture at Paderborn University, Germany, on June 25, 1997, it later appeared in the series *Paderborner Universitätsreden*, but is not recorded in the bibliographies examined above. Porsche offers a brief, but comprehensive introduction to the "Generation X" phenomenon and Coupland's novel, noting that academic literary criticism had so far ignored *Generation X* and its author. Beginning his essay with accounts of the "Lost Generation" and the "Beat Generation," Porsche fits the "X Generation" into the tradition of these previous "Generations." He is less interested in a detailed critique of Coupland's *Generation X*, but rather in the discourse it created in American culture, with all the multimedial aspects it spawned. According to Porsche, it is Coupland's merit to have shown under which circumstances literature is produced in contemporary, "accelerated" American culture, and how cultural stereotypes

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42 "Die akademische Literaturkritik ignorierte den Roman völlig und hat Coupland bis heute ignoriert" (13). Porsche obviously did not know Lainsbury's essay from 1996.
emerge. Also, Coupland inspired a number of young writers to express their cultural consciousness in a broad spectrum.

Searching for "Generation X" in *Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI)*, a good example of this "inspiring" effect Coupland's work had can be found. "The Lost Generation: A Generational Novella" by Shawna R. Pedego (1993) is "a creative thesis that focuses on the 'twenty-something' generation or 'Generation X' as the media refers to it." Pedego explains why she wrote a fictional text: "I chose to write a creative thesis because I felt it was the best way to apply the knowledge I gained from my literary background. Studying about character, plot, description, point of view, and action enabled me to create my own work" (DAI 32-06: 1525).

In her dissertation "The Dystopian Novel: A Theory of Mass Culture" (1997), Marianne Sadowski investigates the "dystopic literary tradition that wrestles with the complex relation between politics and mass culture, a tradition developed in later twentieth-century American literature." Coupland's *Generation X* and *Shampoo Planet* (1992) are among the novels she examines, novels that "continue this tradition by examining how advertising, media, schools, corporations, malls, and theme parks condition the masses to submit to dominating powers." Drawing on Marxist, poststructural, and psychological theories, Sadowski comes to the conclusion that "fiction does not merely reflect reality but functions as a vital instrument for ideological analysis" (DAI 58-08A: 3123).

As the survey shows, academic literary criticism did not contribute much to the discourse on the new "Lost Generation" and Coupland's novel *Generation X* so far. However, so much more has been written about the "Generation X" discourse and Douglas Coupland outside the seemingly narrow and enclosed circle of academic literary criticism that one can easily be overwhelmed by this exorbitance.

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44 "Es bleibt Couplands Verdienst, deutlich gemacht zu haben, unter welchen Bedingungen Literatur in der beschleunigten Kultur Amerikas entsteht, unter welchen Bedingungen kulturelle Stereotypen entstehen. Er hat jedoch vor allem eine Reihe—eine Generation—von jungen Autoren beflügelt, ihr kulturelles Bewusstsein in einem breiten Spektrum künstlerisch auszudrücken" (20).
45 Master's thesis Central Missouri State University, 1993. DAI 32-06: 1525.
47 There are three more Master's theses listed in DAI that examine the "Generation X" within a methodological context of cultural or literary studies, but without a clear focus on Coupland's work: Wesley Schyngera, "Experiencing Media: The Resonance of (Post)Modern Culture" (Master's thesis. Concordian University, Canada, 1993. DAI 32-06: 1525.); Louis Soulard, "La 'Generation X' dans le Roman Quebecois Actuel" (Master's thesis. McGill University, Canada, 1995. DAI 34-05: 1766.); Paula G. Miles, "Generation X: A Social Movement Toward Cynicism" (Master's thesis. University of Nevada, 1997. DAI 36-01: 8).
3. Xorbitance: Methodology

3.1. Totally Cool Websites

Since so many people, including literary scholars and presidents, credit "the media" with being responsible for all the talk about a "Generation X," they must have read, seen, and heard a lot about it in "the media." Yet only few refer explicitly to specific articles, TV shows, films, or any other items in the media that introduced the idea of this "Generation X" to them. While it is impossible to map and outline the whole discourse, there are at least some starting points for a look at what the media had to say about "Generation X" and Douglas Coupland.

Vol. 85 (1995) of Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC) reviews critical reactions to Coupland's work until 1994, including Generation X, Shampoo Planet (1992), and Life After God (1994). None of the 24 selected articles were intended as academic literary criticism, but they offer an impression of the "serious" attention Coupland's work has received in the media, and they clearly outnumber the contributions by academia surveyed above. Yet the boundaries between "serious" academic criticism and book reviews in "popular" magazines and newspapers begin to blur as some of the essays are detailed and often insightful critiques of the books, albeit from personal, non-academic points of view.

Contemporary Authors (CA) gives a brief profile of Coupland's biography and career, as well as a list of biographical and critical sources. "Douglas Coupland has become known as the voice of a generation," the profile starts, and he "earned his reputation with his first novel, Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture, which originated the term 'Generation X' to refer to those Americans in their twenties and early thirties during the 1990s, defining their aggregate interests, concerns, and problems."

When looking for material about "Generation X" that is not recorded in the familiar and traditional academic research tools, the many sources of information in the media about Coupland and his work are difficult to locate. The Internet makes this task much easier, but a search for the term "Generation X" in the World Wide Web (WWW) part of the Internet can result in literally hundreds of matches. Due to the fast-changing nature of the WWW and the improving sophistication of the various search engines and catalogues, these results may change weekly, or even daily, so it can still be difficult to verify information accessed through the Internet—or to even find it again. There are, however, a few websites devoted to Coupland that have remained stable over the last few years and are updated on a more or less regular basis. Most of them feature lists of similar websites, so they can be considered as good places to start research in the Internet.

50 The CD-ROM version 9/1998 of Contemporary Authors was used. Of the 24 listed sources in CA, 15 are identical with those in CLC 85.
The "official" Douglas Coupland homepage (http://www.coupland.com) offers texts, pictures, sound clips, and short movies by and about Coupland, as well as "Collages" by the author and one review of Girlfriend in a Coma. Although this homepage is not maintained by Douglas Coupland personally, it consists almost entirely of original material by him, including an unpublished chapter from Generation X.

"The Bogus Tribute to Douglas Coupland" (http://www.imv.aau.dk/~bogus) is maintained by Erik Mortensen, who is also responsible for a Coupland email discussion list. Mortensen's website features multimedial material, as well as bibliographies and links to other Coupland webpages and related topics.

"The Coupland File" by S. Chung (http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Gallery/5560) is an opulent source of articles by Coupland, criticism of his work, interviews, and other material. Chung has also linked his pages to other Coupland websites and offers a forum for Internet chatting about Coupland.

Both Mortensen's and Chung's websites include many personal responses to Coupland's work. As visitors sign virtual guest books, take part in email-discussions, and contribute "Coupland Moments," they make reader reactions from around the world available that formerly would have required elaborate interviews and surveys. The Internet facilitates new forms of text/reader and even reader/author interactions, as Coupland himself occasionally posted comments to websites. Using the Internet as a research tool makes it easy to review a great quantity of material that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain at all.

Still, if this research is carried out for academic purposes, particularly for writing a thesis, the abundance of information on Douglas Coupland, his novel Generation X, and the discourse on "Generation X," can present a methodological challenge: is it really necessary to take any of this contextual information into consideration? Should all this possibly equivocating context be heeded, or is it necessary to follow the supposition that "the study of literature should, first and foremost, concentrate on the actual works of art themselves?"
3.2. "Il y a Beaucoup Dehors X"

Despite the fundamental differences between New Critics and Post-Structuralists, they have something in common. Both The New Critics’ pronounced disregard for everything but the text itself and Jacques Derrida’s resolute declaration "Il n’y a pas de hors-texte" ("There is nothing outside of the text") represent approaches to literary criticism that regard texts as self-contained, autonomous structures. Attempts to refer anything that is in the text to anything outside of it, be it historical, biographical, psychological, or any other contextual information, are deemed improper. Moving away from critical practices that tried to establish causal relationships in which texts simply "mirror" contextual circumstances and thus can be explained by them, this restrictive focus on the text certainly had some merit. However, other approaches and theories soon called these restrictions into question, as Siegfried J. Schmidt recapitulates:

Since the late sixties literary scholars have increasingly realized that traditional as well as poststructuralist restrictions of literary analysis to literary texts miss the point. Reception aesthetics taught the lesson that literary texts do not simply bear their meanings in themselves and convey it to (all) readers. Instead meaning arises in a continual interplay between text-materiality and receptional efforts which are necessarily embedded in social, cultural, political and economic contexts as well as in complex biographical situations of all those dealing with literary phenomena in whatever respect.

While Schmidt’s demand that “literary studies have to be transformed into media studies” (19) does not oblige literary critics to pay less detailed attention to the texts themselves, it clearly calls for changes in methods and theoretical approaches employed in the analysis of “literary phenomena.” Furthermore, even if literary texts are understood as “just one type of media-events competing with a number of others in the literary system and outside” (Schmidt 19), this does not impose a limit on the scope of literary criticism. On the contrary, it broadens the perspective on what critics perceive as literature and on its role in the context of contemporary mass media and popular culture. However, this broadened perspective makes it impossible to use the terms “mass media” and “popular culture” derogatorily. The qualifier “popular” for culture seems to be completely unnecessary and inappropriate as it seems to imply an opposition between “low” and “high” (“popular” and “unpopular?”) culture. Distinctions between “popular” and "serious"

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58 John Docker, in Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), links Derrida’s “famous pronouncement” to other schools of literary criticism: “This is a move we can recognize as familiar in twentieth-century criticism, from the Russian Formalists to the New Critics’ Intentional Fallacy to Barthes’ declaration of the Death of the Author.” (137)


60 For a more detailed discussion of these perspectives and Schmidt’s theories, cf. Canadian Review of Comparative Literature 24.1 (March 1997), which is devoted to a discussion of The Study of Literature and Culture: Systems and Fields (eds. Hendrik van Gorp, Anneleen Masschelein, Dirk de Geest, and Koenraad Geldorf). It includes an essay by Schmidt, "A Systems Oriented Approach to Literary Studies" (119-136), and a "Selected and Basic Bibliography of Works in the Systemic and Field Approaches to Literature" (187-189).
literature do not appear to be valid anymore, and the interest of literary studies shifts to “discourse,” as Vincent Leitch points out:

Literary works are increasingly regarded as communal documents or as events with social, historical, and political dimensions rather than as autonomous artifacts within an aesthetic domain. The widespread interest in “discourse” as opposed to belletristic “literature” testifies, no doubt, to the expanding social importance of popular culture and mass media and the decreasing status of canonical literature. Significantly, changes have occurred not only in the objects of study but in the methods of analysis. Literary critics frequently call into service sociological, historical, political, and institutional modes of inquiry—without giving up close reading and explication. The turn toward “discourse” as the object of scrutiny and ideological analysis as a main method of investigation bears witness to a resurgence of cultural criticism.61

"Cultural Criticism" is a very general frame for the analysis of Coupland's *Generation X* and the discourse on "Generation X" in late 20th century America. Schmidt's call for transforming literary studies into media studies and an "empirically working enterprise" (20) further narrows down the methodological approach employed in this thesis. In the following, some more specific concepts and theories that illustrate and explicate the ideas put forward in this study will be presented briefly.62 As the "New Historicism" is one of them, outlining these theories seems to be obligatory, because "methodological self-consciousness is one of the distinguishing marks of the new historicism in cultural studies."63

3.3. Studying Contradictions

Acknowledging the complexity of the "interplays" between text, context, and "all those dealing with literary phenomena”—most basically *readers* and *writers*—makes one suspicious of attempts to simply blame "the media" with the "creation" of the "Generation X." Also, Coupland's self-interpretative affirmations that he did not mean his fictional characters to represent an entire generation64 have to be questioned. Stephen Greenblatt claims that works of art are "the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society" (Greenblatt, *Curse* 158).65 Accordingly, when Coupland makes statements about the intended meaning of *Generation X*, he can also only speak for himself. He may voice *his* interpretation of his own novel, but other people involved in other kinds of "negotiations" may read it differently. Ranking Coupland’s opinion higher

62 Since these theories and approaches cannot be summarized in their totality and complexity in the context of this thesis, I will instead point out books and studies that I deem helpful introductions to these topics. As far as "Cultural Criticism" is concerned, John Docker’s *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* and Vincent Leitch’s *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism* present comprehensive histories and critiques of 20th century cultural and literary criticism.
63 Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Learning To Curse* 158. — Greenblatt writes the term "new historicism" in lower case; I follow Aram Veeser who capitalizes it, thus marking New Historicism as a distinct school in literary criticism.
64 Cf. "Generation X'd," where Coupland complains about the "misrepresentation" of the characters in *Generation X*: "The problems started when trendmeisters everywhere began isolating small elements of my characters' lives—their offhand way of handling problems or their questioning of the status quo—and blew them up to represent an entire generation."
as anyone else's, or even considering it the only one that is important because he has written the book, would be as unjustifiable as calling him the spokesman of an entire "Generation" just because he wrote a novel called *Generation X*.

Studying literature in its context\(^66\) entails the consideration of all elements that contribute to the generation of meaning\(^67\)—or meanings—for a text. These elements may appear to be contradictory, due to the different contexts and "complex biographical situations" those who read the text are embedded in. Moreover, different readers read differently. If Bill Clinton simply claims Coupland's novel is full of "cynics and slackers," the President—or, more likely, his speech writer—expresses an unsupported opinion. A reader who is more critical can come to more sophisticated conclusions, but Coupland's intentions are irrelevant for such readings, as G. P. Lainsbury's position illustrates:

> I certainly do not mean to give the impression that I believe Coupland meant to outline a codification of Gen X life-style choices. Although many readers have interpreted the book as prescriptions for healthy living in the posthistorical era, this is obviously a failure to read critically, a failure that lies with the reader rather than the writer. Neither do I mean to suggest that Coupland consciously set out to construct the kind of critique of posthistorical society that my reading of the novel entails. But intentionality is irrelevant here. As a good *bricoleur*, Coupland has assembled from the fragmented experiences offered Gen X human beings a fictional construct that is all of these things and more. One must not forget that this is a work created in the spirit of play—irony is the dominant mode. ("*Generation X* and the End of History" 237)

The interplay between text and context does not start only after the text is published, but rather while it is being written—or constructed, as Lainsbury suggests. However, this does not imply that Coupland's statements about his own work are insignificant or even wrong.\(^68\) As the writer of the text, he can offer interpretations of it just as the literary critic G. P. Lainsbury, and even Karen Ritchie, author of *Marketing to Generation X*, may offer her reading of the book: "I read Douglas Coupland's book *Generation X*. I didn't get it, but I liked the name" (6). Even if Ritchie has failed to read critically, this did not prevent her from using the name of the book she "didn't get," a book that includes a chapter titled "I Am Not A Target Market" (ch. 3) to present her marketing strategies for a new "Generation" of American consumers. So the links between the novel *Generation X* and the discourse "Generation X" may appear insubstantial in some cases, making the analysis of the novel and its context look like a study in contradictions at times. However, this seem to be an inherent characteristic of "Generation X," as even Ritchie has noticed: "Generation X, like every large body of consumers, is a study in contradictions" (135).

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\(^{66}\) In his systems theoretical approach, Schmidt also uses the term "environment," so "literature as a social system is one necessary component in the environment of all other media systems and vice versa" (12).

\(^{67}\) No pun intended, and certainly no proclamation of a "Generation."

\(^{68}\) As for the controversy over the institution of the "author," its "functions," or even the "Death of the Author" in 20th century literary criticism, I refer to Vincent Leitch's summary in ch. 2, "(De)Authorizing Literary Discourse," in *Cultural Criticism*, where he develops "the argument that the 'author' is best construed as both a public and private figure, who functions as a relay in regimes of reason, joining literary discourse with social text. As a sociohistoric locus and as a pluralized spokesperson for certain conscious and unconscious interests and values, the 'author,' in my formulation, opens literary discourse to cultural analysis and critique" (19).
3.4. Multimedia: Two's Nothing, Three's a Trend

As there is a novel titled *Generation X* as well as a discourse in "the media" on a "Generation X," the crucial and fundamental basis of any discussion of these phenomena is not deciding how to distinguish one from the other, but to distinguish them at all. If literary critics—and authors—draw a line between their domain and the mass media, they try to disjoin and isolate spheres in society that are intrinsically related, because, in Schmidt’s words, "literary socialization is embedded in the more complex process of media socialization and cannot be separated from it without distortion" (Schmidt 11).

Considering that one of the first reviews of *Generation X* refers it to "all this talk about the new lost generation" (Jedeikin and Love 13), even before "Generation X" became its defining label, the discourse on a distinctly new "Generation" obviously predated the novel that gave it its label. Consequently, a certain context was already established when Coupland’s text was published. So *Generation X*, after all, appears to be a part of a discourse that included a multitude of voices talking about a new generation of young Americans. Coupland himself concedes that his first novel’s success was largely due to certain multimedial coincidences:

*Generation X’s* tiny, March 1991 printing had no publicity, and received almost no reviews. But that summer a Texan my age named Richard Linklater released the movie "Slacker," which was filled with overeducated and underoccupied oddballs who loosely paralleled the characters in my book. And in Seattle, a new form of music was exploding. It's attitude had everything to do with withdrawal, contemplation, and seeking the margins—albeit with the volume knob cranked to eleven. As the media goes, two's nothing, but three's a trend. Thus were born the most abused buzzwords of the early 90s: "generation X," "slacker," and "grunge." ("Generation X’d")

Still, Coupland’s *Generation X* seems to be not just one part of the discourse on "Generation X." Coupland, not Linklater, was hailed as the "spokesman" and "voice" of this generation because of his work,69 and its title indeed became the "abused buzzword" he so much dislikes. Thus, at least in this case, fictional literature seems to hold a prominent position among its multimedial competitors. Furthermore, since the references to the "Lost Generation" evoke earlier instances of literary "Generations," this function of literature does not seem to be unprecedented. Apparently, *Generation X* not only can be placed in the context of the discourse on a new "Generation" of young Americans in the 1990s, but also in the broader context of 20th century American literature.

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69 When the book version of *Slacker* was released by St. Martin’s Press (*Generation X’s* publisher) in 1992, the "Foreword by Douglas Coupland" was announced on its cover above the title and Linklater’s name.
3.5. Bri Col Age & Construction

3.5.1. X My Heart and Hope It Dies

"This Generation X thing is entirely constructed by people in their forties who became addicted to the idea of a generation, [...] I hope it dies with them."\textsuperscript{70} Andrew Sullivan,\textit{ The New Republic} editor,\textsuperscript{71} offers a mode of interpretation for the notorious "Generation X thing" by claiming that it is a \textit{construction}. Roxanne Roberts, who concludes her article "Veneration X" with this quote from Sullivan, mentions that he "just turned 30"—the crucial age that meant crossing the dividing line between young and old for many of Sullivan's forebears. Sullivan, however, wants the very "idea" that there is a new "Generation" to die.

It has been pointed out that it was not a novel alone, but rather a combination of many different mediadual aspects that resulted in the popular notion of a "Generation X." The process and result of combining separate items, be they bricks, texts, or ideas, to form a new structure is called \textit{construction}. As far as "Generation X" is concerned, the term \textit{creation} is not deemed appropriate in the context of this study, as it implies an imaginative act. The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}'s definition of \textit{creation} is: "An original production of human intelligence, esp. of imagination or imaginative art." \textit{Construction}, on the other hand, is defined as the "action of framing, devising, or forming, by the putting together of parts; erection, building."

\textit{The putting together of parts}—a brief and fitting definition of \textit{bricolage}, a term introduced by the French anthropologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss.\textsuperscript{72} Lainsbury has called Coupland "a good \textit{bricoleur}" (237), so he obviously sees a connection between Coupland's work as a writer and \textit{bricolage}. According to Lévi-Strauss,\textsuperscript{73} who analyzes the structures and origins of mythological thought, the \textit{bricoleur} is a skillful and playful craftsman who uses whatever means are at hand, regardless if they had been originally conceived for the present purpose or not. Using only the limited selection of tools and material available at the given moment to fulfill a certain task, the \textit{bricoleur} produces a new "whole" out of them, constructing \textit{myths} for society. Due to the individual process of selection, the personality of the \textit{bricoleur} is also part of this construction.\textsuperscript{74}

The concept of \textit{bricolage} can be transferred and applied to language\textsuperscript{75} and the process of writing fictional literature, as Lainsbury did by calling Coupland a...

\textsuperscript{71} Coupland has written various articles for \textit{The New Republic}. Some of them are collected in Coupland's \textit{Polaroids from the Dead} (New York: Regan Books/HarperCollins, 1996).
\textsuperscript{73} Cf. pages 29-48 in \textit{Das wilde Denken} for the following summary.
\textsuperscript{74} Cf. 34-35: "[Das] Poetische der Bastelei kommt auch und besonders daher, daß sie sich nicht darauf beschränkt, etwas zu vollenden oder auszuführen; sie 'spricht' nicht nur mit den Dingen, wie wir schon gezeigt haben, sondern auch mittels der Dinge: indem sie durch die Auswahl, die sie zwischen begrenzten Möglichkeiten trifft, über den Charakter und das Leben ihres Urhebers Aussagen macht. Der Bastler legt, ohne sein Projekt jemals auszufüllen, immer etwas von sich hinein."
bricoleur who has "assembled from the fragmented experiences offered Gen X human beings a fictional construct" (237). The chapter "Re Con Struct" (Generation X 47-51) will be analyzed later to illustrate this point. However, the aim of this study is to present Coupland's "fictional construct" as part of another construction—the construction of the "Generation" named after the novel. This requires a broader frame of reference for the concept of construction in culture and society.

3.5.2. X Counts as Y in C

What is special about culture is the manifestation of collective intentionality and, in particular, the collective assignment of functions to phenomena where the function cannot be performed solely in virtue of the sheer physical features of the phenomena. From dollar bills to cathedrals, and from football games to nation-states, we are constantly encountering new social facts where the facts exceed the physical features of the underlying physical reality.\(^{76}\)

John Searle, analyzing The Construction of Social Reality, uses the formula "X counts as Y in context C" (cf. 28 and 46) to illustrate how "the construction of institutional reality" (29) is accomplished in a society. The variables "X" and "Y" are "parts of a system where the system is in part defined by purposes, goals, and values generally" (19, Searle's italics). The formula expresses that the "Y term has to assign a new status that the object does not already have just in virtue of satisfying the X term," but "there has to be collective agreement, or at least acceptance, both in the imposition of that status on the stuff referred to by the X term and about the function that goes with that status" (44). So the new status "exists only if people believe it exists," i.e., "by convention" (69). Its "functions" are "never intrinsic to the physics of any phenomenon but are assigned from outside by conscious observers and users" (14). Furthermore, Searle points out that to define a new status for "X," "we need words" as a "vehicle," and the "move from X to Y is already linguistic in nature because once the function is imposed on the X element, it now symbolizes something else, the Y function" (74-5).

It is not necessary to proceed further into the complexities of systems theory and Searle's assumptions to understand why his formula is useful for the analysis of the construction of a "Generation." Also, the general concept the formula expresses has already been introduced: texts (X) obtain their meaning(s) (Y) only in relation to (or interplay with) contextual circumstances (C), as Schmidt pointed out. Accordingly, the formula's application to the "Generation X" phenomenon could look like this: "Generation X" (X), the phrase popularized by the novel of the same title, came to function as the conveyor of a certain image (Y) of young people ("apathetic, materialistic, irresponsible, lacking purpose etc.," as defined in Webster's) due to "collective agreement" (C)\(^{77}\)—there are people who believe that this status of the "X term" exists, as at least the editors of Webster's apparently do.


\(^{77}\) A puzzling implication arises out of the application of Searle's formula. The variable "X" of the formula is actually part of the term "Generation X"—and if the qualifier for "Generation" is in this case neither "Lost" nor "Beat," but itself an undefined variable, how can this undefined "X" now count as a defined "Y" function?
Searle's terms "collective intentionality" and "collective agreement" in connection with his concept of how social reality is constructed again illustrate that creation, involving imagination, is not an appropriate term. While one may question whether "Generation X" really can define millions of young Americans and group them together under just one simplifying label, it would be just as simple to declare that the "Generation X" phenomenon was created by an act of collective imagination—by "the media" or whoever is talking about it. This leads to the question of what is fact and what is fiction in the discourse on "Generation X," and how facts and fictions were used—or perhaps confused—in its construction.

However, there is a fictional text involved, and if Generation X is considered one of the cornerstones in the collective construction of a "Generation X," the question concerning the novel's function and place in it still remains open. As has become obvious, literary criticism did not contribute much to answer it. If, as Lainsbury suggests, Coupland's "fictional construct" (237) can be read as a text against simplifying generalizations, how did its title become such a generalizing and notorious label? Furthermore, does this label have a function that might be of advantage for those who collectively agreed (or disagreed) on using it? Is it a tool used to enforce certain ideological interests and power relations? Questions of ideology and power structures evoke Marxist Criticism—which, as it is often assumed, a precursor of the "New Historicism."

### 3.6. The New Historicism

Wem nützt denn das ganze Gerede von einer Generation, gar von dieser "Generation X"?

Das ist jetzt aber eine sehr marxistische Fragestellung.79

#### 3.6.1. Culture in Action

The New Historicism is a relatively new development in literary criticism.80 While "circulation" (of money, knowledge, or any other currency), "negotiation" and "exchange" (between culture and power), and "ideology" are some of the key terms associated with it,81 to call this approach "Marxist" does not do it justice. Rather, it can be described as a critical reaction to and continuation of various theories and practices, among them Marxist Criticism, Deconstruction, and New Criticism:

The New Historicists, critics largely of Elizabethan culture, challenged the way the Yale deconstructionists appropriated Derrida to privilege high literary texts, seen as maximizing indeterminacy of meaning. The New Historicists situated literary texts within broad textual fields, at the same time rejecting an older Marxist model where texts reflected or expressed a set, known historical context: context as stable, unified background. Contexts became another series of texts, texts that are ever ambivalent and finally undecidable. (Dockor 131)

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78 Or, in McKelly's words, an "eponymous touchstone" ("Generation X and the Future of English Studies" 1).
81 Cf. Veeser's introduction in The New Historicism: "Circulation, negotiation, exchange—these and other marketplace metaphors characterize New Historicists' working vocabulary, as if to suggest the ways capitalism envelops not just the text but also the critic" (xiv).
The "Historicism" part of the term indicates that the chief interest is this *historical* contextualization of literary texts, gaining "New" insights about the interactive processes at work when "culture" is produced. This involves a turn away from the theoretical assumptions underlying the New Criticism:

Whereas the new critic believed that the best interests of the work were served by treating it as autotelic, by isolating its analysis from extraneous considerations of time, place and function, and focusing on its intrinsic properties as a verbal icon, the new historicist insists on situating the text, on stitching it back into the intertextual quilt of its initial context. The aim is to dethrone and demystify the privileged literary work: to destroy its immunity to infection by circumstance and other kinds of text, and to rob it of political innocence by exposing its discreet commitments, its subtle collusions in the cultural struggle for power. (Ryan, Introduction xiii-xiv)

However, New Historicism retains "those methods and materials that gave old fashioned literary study its immense interpretive authority" (Veezer, Introduction xii). Close reading and detailed attention to the properties of the text are not neglected.

As for the origin of the name "New Historicism" itself, Stephen Greenblatt usually "gets the credit for slipping the term into circulation in its current sense" (Ryan, Introduction xiii). He originally used it "intending to signal a turn away from the formal, decontextualized analysis that dominates new criticism," and soon the term "achieved a certain currency" (*Curse* 163-4), although "like most labels, this one is misleading" (164). For him, it denotes "a practice rather than a doctrine" (146), and he favors the term "cultural poetics." His account of how the term was coined bears a certain resemblance to the story of "Generation X:"

A few years ago I was asked by *Genre* to edit a selection of Renaissance essays, and I said OK. I collected a bunch of essays and then, out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done, I wrote that the essays represented something I called a "new historicism." I've never been very good at making up advertising phrases of this kind; for reasons that I would be quite interested in exploring at some point, the name stuck more than other names I'd very carefully tried to invent over the years. In fact I have heard—in the last year or so—quite a lot of talk about the "new historicism" [...] there are articles about it, attacks on it, references to it in dissertations: the whole thing makes me quite giddy with amazement. (Greenblatt, *Curse* 146)

Indeed, the label "New Historicism" seems to be a very general term for a variety of critical approaches: "It is impossible to discern beneath the diversity of new historicist or cultural materialist practice a single, unifying theory or consistent critical method" (Ryan, Introduction x), and to "group and define these wildly individual efforts would demand an even crazier yearning" (Veezer, "The New Historicism" 1). Consequently, "the New Historicism' remains a phrase without an adequate referent" according to Veezer (Introduction x).

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82 Cf. *Negotiations*: "I have termed this general enterprise—study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices—a poetics of culture." (5)

83 Since "New Historicists eschew overarching hypothetical constructs in favor of surprising coincidences" (Veezer, Introduction xi-xii), this anecdotal parallel between method and topic is quite welcome, and Veezer points out that "the anecdote—that signature NH move—is accidentally contingent and therefore shows that writing history is an arbitrary, illogical business. But it also expresses conditional contingency, the making of explanatory connections, and so it reveals that everything is logically connected to everything else." ("The New Historicism," *The New Historicism Reader* 4) — Veezer uses the following abbreviations (cf. In): "NH signifies *New Historicism*, NHs signifies *New Historicists*, and NHT signifies *New Historicist*."

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Still, some similarities between all the "wildly individual efforts" as well as some of their common characteristics can be pointed out. The broadest assumption might be Veeser's claim that "New Historicists have evolved a method of describing culture in action" (Introduction xi). However, a more detailed look at the characteristics that suggest New Historicism for this study is necessary.

3.6.2. Open Questions

Far from a single projectile hurled against Western civilization, New Historicism has a portmanteau quality. It brackets together literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences, hard and soft. It scrutinizes the barbaric acts that sometimes underwrite high cultural purposes and asks that we not blink away our complicity. At the same time, it encourages us to admire the sheer intricacy and unavoidability of exchanges between culture and power. Its politics, its novelty, its historicality, its relationship to other prevailing ideologies all remain open questions. (Veeser, Introduction xi)

To outline and summarize a critical approach that brackets together so many disciplines and leaves so many questions open is difficult, if not impossible. "In the absence of a doctrine, manifesto, and strong common practice, the only sure recourse is to the NH texts themselves," as Aram Veeser points out ("The New Historicism" 2). Apparently, a New Historicist approach becomes visible in practice rather than theory—or even doctrine.

In his introductory essays to The New Historicism and The New Historicism Reader Veeser presents a five-point definition of what the basic assumptions of New Historicist criticism are. While Veeser concedes that this list is "tentative" and reduces "NH's wondrous complexity" ("The New Historicism" 2), his definitions appear to be useful and adequate for an introduction to "NH:"

NH really does assume: 1) that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; 2) that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; 3) that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably; 4) that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature; and 5) that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. ("The New Historicism" 2)84

The origin of New Historicist literary criticism is the study of Renaissance texts. Greenblatt, the "most recognizable" New Historicist (Veeser, "The New Historicism" 1), acknowledges that his personal interests in literature are somewhat conventional and focused on Shakespeare.85 Consequently, the literature scrutinized consists of a rather conservative selection of "classic" texts, their canonical "value" remaining undisputed: "NH reads these classics in terms of extra-literary analogues, and instead of creating a new canon reaffirms the old one" (Veeser, "The New Historicism" 14). What is more important, though, is the how of literary analysis. Here the New Historicism has opened doors formerly closed; it "has

84 Veeser further explains, illustrates, and discusses each of these five points in "The New Historicism."
85 “Conventional in my tastes, I found the most satisfying intensity of all in Shakespeare” (Greenblatt, Negotiations 1).
given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people’s practical lives” (Veeser, Introduction ix). This enlarged the scope of criticism, not only by integrating "extra-literary" material, but also because "it has touched other disciplines and inspired non-academics. Avid readers of the NH often contend that NHt analysis has given them ways to reconnect their personal lives with large societal shifts. Disappointingly, deconstruction had ignored the shifts, while Marxism had ignored the personal lives” (Veeser, The New Historicism" 11).

While literary texts still are in the center of interest, they are seen as cultural artifacts, and the "work of art is not itself a pure flame that lies at the source of our speculations. Rather the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own […], many others undertaken in the construction of the original work” (Greenblatt, Curse 158). Cultural artifacts are elements of "cultural production," which is a "complex symbolic construction;" they "do not stay still, […] they exist in time, and […] they are bound up with personal and institutional conflicts, negotiations, and approbations" (Curse 161). "Textual relics" is another term Greenblatt uses:

They were made by moving certain things […] from one culturally demarcated zone to another. We need to understand not only the construction of these zones but also the process of movement across the shifting boundaries between them. Who decides which materials can be moved and which must remain in place? How are cultural materials prepared for exchange? What happens to them when they are moved? (Negotiations 7)

The embedding of (literary) text into (historical) context, or rather the functional exchangeability of text and context, can occasionally turn the focus of attention away from the work of art itself, as Greenblatt notes:

The new historicist critics are interested in […] complex symbolic and material articulations of the imaginative and ideological structures of the society that produced them. Consequently, there is a tendency in at least some new historicist writings (certainly in my own) for the focus to be partially displaced from the work of art that is their formal occasion onto the related practices that had been adduced ostensibly in order to illuminate that work. It is difficult to keep those practices in the background if the very concept of historical background has been called into question. (Curse 169)

Considering all these characteristics, the New Historicism presents an adequate theoretical and methodological frame for the analysis of how Coupland’s novel Generation X as a work of art, cultural artifact, or textual relic, contributed to the "circulation" of ideas about a new "Generation" of Americans—or, for that matter, its construction. Greenblatt’s interest in cultural negotiation and exchange is compatible with the "Generation X" phenomenon, as it involves "examining the points at which one cultural practice intersects with another, borrowing its form and intensities or attempting to ward off unwelcome appropriations or moving texts from one place to another" (Curse 169). Moreover, it is possible to integrate the discourse on "Generation X" into what he calls the large and durable "American struc-
ture," which is "not only a structure of power, ideological extremism and militarism, but of pleasure, recreation, and interest, a structure that shapes the spaces we construct for ourselves, the way we present 'the news,' the fantasies we daily consume on television or in the movies, the entertainments we characteristically make and take" (Curse 154). It is precisely this structural connection between fact ("the news") and fiction ("fantasies") in society that New Historicists are interested in. Their "belief in the text's active role in constructing what qualifies as reality" (Ryan, Introduction xiii) highlights the importance of fictional constructs for the way we perceive the world and ourselves in it, and thus, to use another key term, our cultural identity.

This explains the "will to tell stories, critical stories or stories told as a form of criticism" New Historicists like Greenblatt express (Curse 157), stories that mostly come in form of anecdotes. History, either literary, social,政治, or personal, becomes a narrative, thus narration is seen as constituting history. Any act of critical interpretation has to be aware of that. This is probably the governing concern of New Historicism as a critical practice: notwithstanding all the open questions, it "pulls away from a stable mimetic theory of art and attempts to construct in its stead an interpretative model that will more adequately account for the unsettling circulation of materials and discourses that is [...] the heart of modern aesthetic practice" (Greenblatt, Curse 157).

Finally, the briefest summary of the New Historicism's underlying theoretical assumption could be this: "The literature of any time is inevitably bound up with that time, simultaneously shaped by world events and shaping how we understand them." This is a quote from the introduction to the anthology Postmodern American Fiction, which includes an excerpt from Generation X—revealing how everything is connected to everything else in a New Historicist perspective.

3.7. Postmodernism and America

3.7.1. More Open Questions

"A few years ago, David Byrne was on the cover of Time magazine, and a few weeks later your grandmother was post-modernism. It's like oxygen, post-modernism; it's everywhere, it's just the way things are."

—Douglas Coupland (1992)

While the key characteristics of New Historicism as a method of literary analysis were briefly summarized, though somewhat hesitantly, in the preceding chapter, any attempt to try the same with "Postmodernism" is doomed to failure—and, as many would argue, against its very concept. As long as whole books about Post-

86 It is not hard to find examples for these connections in contemporary mass media culture. As the span of time between an event that particularly attracts attention, e.g. the tragic death of Lady Diana, and its narrative reenactment in TV movies becomes shorter, distinguishing the facts from the fictional images in which they are recounted becomes increasingly difficult. Moreover, many—if not all—presentations of "facts" are already influenced by narrative concepts, as the use of the term tragic in connection with Lady Diana's death shows. Or, in Greenblatt's terms, "the social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies." (Curse 157)
87 Cf. esp. the sections "Story-telling" (5-9) and "Fiction and Reality" (11-15) in Greenblatt's Learning To Curse.
modernism are introduced with statements like "I am not sure what postmodern is, although I do know a good deal about the arguments surrounding that term," or, "So many books have been written about postmodern culture that it may seem imprudent to add to their number," and as long as scholarly journals, like a recent edition of Merkur, devote whole issues to debates about it, one may say that trying to define Postmodernism is, much like naming "Generations," trying to read the song title on a spinning record.

Consequently, theses like this one have to find a pragmatic approach to the topic of Postmodernism, without neglecting to point out what aspects of it are considered important for their purposes. Unfortunately, the term that "carries wildly divergent meanings and connotations for different people" (Geyh et al., Introduction x) already has a certain history: "An industry of definition and sub-definition has grown up around the question of the postmodern, so that there is already a need for a history of usages," as David Simpson laments, but "fortunately, at least one such history is available" (1). Facing the quantity of publications about Postmodernism, "at least one" is a broad understatement.

The pragmatic approach employed in this study is to refer primarily to the specific context of Postmodernism that Coupland's Generation X was anthologized in, the Norton anthology Postmodern American Fiction. It includes a brief introduction to the topic (ix-xxx), as well a "A Casebook of Postmodern Theory" (581-663). Whenever necessary, other sources will also be perused and referred to. While it is neither satisfactory to claim that Postmodernism is "everywhere" and "just the way things are," nor to endeavor a summary of the whole discourse on a few pages, this pragmatism presents a helpful compromise.

In order to provide a minimum of background for the usage of the term postmodern in this study, the characteristics, keywords, and concepts that are deemed important for an analysis of Coupland's Generation X and the discourse on "Generation X" are presented in the following section. They are all taken from the editors' introduction to Postmodern American Fiction:

3.7.2. Postmodern/ism/ist/ity/ American Fiction: A Collage93

"a new cultural sensibility as a response to an altered world" (xi)—"a plurality of worlds and multiple, often mutually incompatible discourses through which to understand them" (xx)—"growing consciousness that television and technology had altered the cultural terrain" (xviii)—"erasing the gap between high and low culture" (xvii)—"unprecedented relationship between literature and popular culture" (xi)—"collapse of many of the traditional distinctions between literature and

93 I have chosen to present these fragments arranged in thematic sections, thus imposing order on them, but not hierarchy. The sections are marked by keywords in bold print.
other kinds of discourse" (xxiv)—"calling attention to the margins of literature" (xiii)—"literary strategies that undermine the dominance of the established canon" (xxix-xxx)—"pastiche, the incorporation of different textual genres and contradictory 'voices' within a single work; fragmented or 'open' forms that give the audience the power to assemble the work and determine its meaning; and the adoption of playful irony as a stance that seem to prove itself endlessly useful" (x)—"assault upon traditional definitions of narrative," "complicating the rules by which the reader can expect a story to unfold" (xii)—"breakdown of the 'official story'" (xiii)—"intertextuality" (xxii)—"receding of the author" (xxiii)—"resistance to standard genre boundaries" (xxix)—"Apocalyptic visions" (xiv)—"the gap between word and world never closes" (xx)—"thoroughgoing skepticism toward the foundations and structures of knowledge," "skepticism to the word 'postmodern' itself" (x)—"skepticism toward the 'grand narrative' of modernity" (xx)—"questioning of any belief system that claims universality or transcendence" (xx)—"subcultures obsessed with conspiracy theories" (xii)—"mainstream frustration and cynicism regarding the American Dream" (xiv)—"profound and ongoing questioning of the idea of historical 'progress'" (xi)—"fragmentary, disjunctive, and often contradictory nature of historical evidence and hence of history itself" (xxiv)—"problematic relationship between the real and the unreal; the constructedness of meaning, truth, and history; and the complexities of subjectivity and identity" (x)—"questions of ontology or being: what constitutes identity? how is the self constructed in and through culture?" (xviii)—"exploration of how power relations are encoded in language, and how identity is culturally constructed" (xxviii)—"acts of thinking and speaking have become detached from our physical selves in ways that evoke both wonder and nostalgia" (xvi).

3.7.3. The Name of the Game: "America"

As I come from the Velveeta generation
Keep it simple, 'cause I can't deal with complication
(Wow!) Growing up American
(Yeah!) Growing up American

—Mucky Pup, "Short Attention Span" (1995)

the name of the game **1 n phr** What matters most; the essence: In business, the name of the game is the bottom line—Philadelphia **2 n phr** The inevitable; the way things are: Lying in politics? Hell, that’s just the name of the game

"Generation X," "New Historicism," "Postmodernism"—these terms have emerged as problematic epithets so far, generally accused of being simplifying, broad and inappropriate labels for phenomena that seem to resist and contradict such fixing definitions. It is hardly a surprise, then, to learn that there is "no concrete referent to which the sign 'America' should be supposed to refer." In most cases, the im-

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plied referent is the political entity "The United States of America," and not the two geographical entities North and South America.6

Martin Waldseemüller's map of the "New World" from 1507 introduced the name "America" in the form of Americi terra, thus bestowing the honor of naming this world upon Amerigo Vespucci, who supposedly discovered it (cf. Mason 18). Moreover, Vespucci, Columbus, and all the other explorers of the New World were engaged in "naming activities," as Peter Mason explains in Deconstructing America, with the "Old World" remaining their "frame of reference:"

In using the elements familiar to them, they were in fact engaged in a double process of reduction and construction. In constructing the New World, resemblance was linked with imagination to avoid the endless monotony of the same. The result is a continuing process of construction and reconstruction of a world which we may therefore call an imaginary world. (Mason 24)

What is worth noting here is that Mason speaks of a continuing process, so the (re-)construction of the imaginary world America extends to the present day. Also, the naming activity is closely connected to certain texts that conveyed ideas about what could be encountered in a New World, pre-structuring its "reality:"

The names which Columbus gives to the places that he discovers, applied to the reality he sees before him, are at the same time a commentary on a text, namely, the text of the various authorities (the Bible, Ptolemy, d'Ailly, 'Sir John Mandeville', Marco Polo, Plinius, Piccolomini, etc.) who had told Columbus what he would find long before he witnessed it with his own eyes. We here witness a reversal of the Aristotelian scheme of things: instead of mimesis being a correspondence of an image to reality, reality is made to conform to its (pre-existing) image. (Mason 27)

Considering this, the term America already connotes its own constructedness, or the constructedness of the image of the "world" it is employed to denote. So using it in the title of this thesis—instead of, e.g., U.S.A.—stresses that "reality," texts, and naming activities are intrinsically intertwined. The qualifier Postmodern signals the heightened awareness of these processes of continuous construction, reconstruction, and naming of socio-historic and cultural "reality" in contemporary America. So the "name of the game" in fact never is "inevitable" or even "the way things are." This also applies to the names for "Generations," and this is why this thesis deals with the Construction of a Generation for Postmodern America.

3.7.4. A Citizen of the West Coast

Douglas Coupland is Canadian by birth, but his novel is treated as American fiction by the editors of Postmodern American Fiction. For an author who was born on a NATO base in Germany (Baden-Söllingen) in 1961, grew up and was educated in Vancouver, Canada, lived and studied in Hawaii, Italy, Japan, Los Angeles, and Scotland, any simple geographical categorization of life and work is difficult.

96 Mason's study challenges "the claim that the European vision of America is a distorted view of some extra-European reality" and "the notion of an 'Enlightenment' in which scientific knowledge about the continent has been steadily accumulating and attaining increasingly higher stages of perfection to arrive at the present state of the art (anthropology). Instead, it stresses the textual construction of America as a figure of discourse. 'America' is discourse on 'America'; anthropology is seen as a singularly European product that is itself in need of deconstruction." (7)
Coupland identifies himself "more as a citizen of the West Coast than as anything else—the intellectual 'Chile' that spans from Anchorage right down to San Diego; Juneau, Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles."\(^{97}\)

*Generation X* was written and is set in Palm Springs, California, and the book and the "Generation X" discourse are treated as *American* phenomena in the context of this study. As the narrator of the novel points out after introducing his friends, "where you're from feels sort of irrelevant these days," since "everyone has the same stores in their mini-malls" (*Generation X* 4).

### 3.8. Talking about "Generations"

The *OED* provides a preliminary definition of the term "Generation:” "The whole body of individuals born about the same period; also, the time covered by the lives of these." Used historically, "the word is taken to mean the interval of time between the birth of the parents and that of their children, usually computed at thirty years, or three generations to a century." A more sophisticated attempt to define and apply the term to historiography and sociology appeared in 1991: *Generations*, by William Strauss and Neil Howe.\(^{98}\)

Since the 1920s [...] no 20-to-25-year cohort-group has come fully of age in America without encountering at least one determined attempt to name it. Nor do we any longer confuse such terms with family lineage. Four centuries ago, we would have thought that a young person "talkin' 'bout my generation" had a story to share about his grandfather or grandchildren. Today we know otherwise—that he has a story to share about his peers, about how they all came of age and have come to see life. Nowhere in recent years has the cohort generation gained such unprecedented legitimacy as in the polling and marketing industries. For thousands of professionals, the "Baby Boom Generation" has become synonymous with a cohort-group whose tastes marketers are willing to pay millions to understand. Gradually and almost by default, we have watched a precise and infant science (the study of cohorts) merge with popular idiom (the generation). (*Generations* 439)

Since Strauss and Howe's voluminous *Generations* was published in the same year as Coupland’s first novel and contributed to the debate about the new "Generation" of young Americans, suggesting the term "13ers," it belongs to the immediate context of *Generation X* and thus will be discussed later (in ch. 6.3.).

First, the various "Generations" in 20th century American *literary* history will be surveyed. Investigating how they received their labels and which novels and writers were involved might provide results that are helpful for the analysis of the "Generation X" discourse in the 1990s. The "Lost Generation" apparently provided a paradigm for the following "Generations" and thus must be studied more thoroughly than the others. The "Beat Generation" of the 1950s and the "Hippies" of the '60s will be discussed briefly, and then the 1980s "Blank Generation" writers and the debate about the "Twentysomething Generation" constitute the immediate context for a reading of Coupland’s *Generation X*.

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97 Qtd. in *Postmodern American Fiction* 568.
4. The Lost Generation

4.1. Something Else Besides

I was trying to write something broader in scope than a literary history. Ideas or purposes of this nature are always connected with a general situation that is social and economic before becoming literary. They react on the situation that produced them, they conflict with one another and they end by affecting the lives of many who never regarded themselves as literary or artistic [...]. So, the story of the lost generation and its return from exile would be something else besides; it would help to suggest the story of the American educated class, what some of them thought about in the boom days and how they reached the end of an era.  

When Malcolm Cowley wrote the "Prologue" to his revised edition of *Exile’s Return* in 1951, he realized that writing the "story of the lost generation" is not merely writing about an episode in literary history: it is "less a record of events than a narrative of ideas" (10, my italics), ideas that are "always connected" with other spheres in society besides art and literature. In other words, Cowley suggests that literature and literary history have to be written and read in context—the "general situation," as he calls it—and that "ideas and purposes" (as expressed in literature and literary history) interact ("react" and "conflict") with this context and thus become a part of it, "affecting" parts of society that are not strictly "literary or artistic." This position is remarkably close to, if not congruent with, the ideas and concepts underlying the New Historicism.

If the story of the "Lost Generation" can be regarded as being "something broader in scope than literary history" (Cowley 10), it is one of the aims of this study to investigate how this "story" served as "something else" and became more than just an episode in 20th century American literature: a paradigm, a historical precedent for the "Generations" that came after it, most notably the "Generation X." Two aspects of the "story" will be surveyed: the origin of the term "Lost Generation," and the debate about the "Younger Generation" in post-World War I America that created the right cultural climate for the successful introduction of a label like "Lost Generation" into the cultural and social context of the time.

4.2. The Hemingway Connection

4.2.1. Dirty, Easy Labels

"That line—you know, your little Hemingway quote—you’re saying it wrong. It’s not ‘The problem with you is that you’re all a lost generation,’ it’s just, ‘You’re a lost generation.’ I mean, where do you get ‘The problem with you is’ part?"

"Aha!" Sarita laughs and lunges again, stopping in mid-hurl for another burp that Randy does not find attractive. He zigzags out of her way and crosses the street. Sarita follows. "It’s not a Hemingway quote, you moron, it’s a Gertrude Stein quote that was only prefaced in a Hemingway novel! So there!"

"Yeah, yeah," Randy mumbles, thinking he should have received points for even making the Hemingway connection. 

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100Jeff Gomez, *Our Noise* (New York: Scribner, 1995) 170. — "Funny, realistic, perverse, Our Noise captures the lives, loves, and record collections of a thrift-store-clothed group of twentysomethings trying to make their way in a real world that is nothing like what they expected" (qtd. from back cover blurb).
Sarita and Randy, two characters in Jeff Gomez’ 1995 novel *Our Noise*, are literally *lost*—they are walking to an underground club called The Scene in their hometown and suddenly find themselves in a street "that doesn't look familiar" (172). Their conversation indicates that these two American "Twentysomethings" in the 1990s might also be, to some extent, *literarily* lost—they argue about the origin of the quote that gave the "Lost Generation" its name. Is it from a Hemingway novel or from Gertrude Stein? What is the correct wording of the quote? Is it taken from a fictional or non-fictional context? Or is it a fact that was used in a work of fiction? And does Randy really deserve points for even making the "Hemingway connection?" Maybe Ernest Hemingway himself can clarify the matter:

> "It was when we had come back from Canada and were living in the rue Notre-Dames-Champs and Miss Stein and I were still good friends that Miss Stein made the remark about the lost generation. She had some ignition trouble with the old Model T Ford she then drove and the young man who worked in the garage and had served in the last year of the war had not been adept, or perhaps had not broken the priority of other vehicles, in repairing Miss Stein’s Ford. Anyway he had not been *sérieux* and had been corrected severely by the *patron* of the garage after Miss Stein’s protest. The *patron* had said to him, ‘You are all a *génération perdue*.’\(^{101}\)

Hemingway’s autobiographical account of his time as an expatriate in Paris in the early 1920s, *A Moveable Feast* (1964), includes a whole chapter on Gertrude Stein’s car trouble and what became of this anecdote later (cf. ch. 3, "‘Une Génération Perdue’"). Hemingway, then in his early twenties, was trying to establish himself as a writer, trying to "write one true sentence" (*Feast* 16), and Stein, by more than twenty years his senior and an established figure in the literary world, offered help, criticism and instruction (cf. ch. 2, "Miss Stein Instructs").

However, the anecdote quoted above only refers to an assumed "*génération perdue*" among young Frenchmen. Translating the phrase and using it in conversation, Stein supposedly made the "remark" that transformed "*génération perdue*" into "lost generation," and this is how Hemingway recollects this event:

> ‘That’s what you are. That’s what you all are,’ Miss Stein said. ‘All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation.’
> ‘Really?’ I said.
> ‘You are,’ she insisted. ‘You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death …’
> ‘Was the young mechanic drunk?’ I asked.
> ‘Of course not.’
> ‘Have you ever seen me drunk?’
> ‘No. But your friends are drunk.’
> ‘I’ve been drunk,’ I said. ‘But I don’t come here drunk.’
> ‘Of course not. I didn’t say that.’
> ‘The boy’s *patron* was probably drunk by eleven o’clock in the morning,’ I said.
> ‘That’s why he makes such lovely phrases.’
> ‘Don’t argue with me, Hemingway,’ Miss Stein said. ‘It does no good at all. You’re a lost generation, exactly as the garage keeper said.’ (*Feast* 32)

It seems that Randy is right—the correct wording is in fact "You’re a lost generation." Still, Sarita points out that this is a "Gertrude Stein quote," and the "Hem-
ingway connection" is that it was "prefaced in a Hemingway novel" (Gomez 170), as Hemingway goes on to explain in A Moveable Feast: "Later when I wrote my first novel I tried to balance Miss Stein’s quotation from the garage keeper with one from Ecclesiastes" (32). The role literature, i.e. Hemingway’s first novel, played in establishing the "Hemingway connection" will be discussed later; what remains debatable judging from these quotations, however, is the target of Miss Stein’s remark—which group does she call a "Lost Generation?"

Obviously, she refers to all the "young people who served in the war," which could include virtually all young people from all nations who fought in World War I, but she also explicitly directs her remark to Hemingway’s friends. She claims that this application of the phrase is true to its origin; it is "exactly as the garage keeper said," though he was not talking about Hemingway and his friends in the original context of the quote. Hemingway stresses that he was not fond of "such lovely phrases" (32) about his generation. When he walks home after Stein made the remark, his thoughts reveal his anger and disapproval:

I thought of Miss Stein and Sherwood Anderson and egotism and mental laziness versus discipline and I thought who is calling who a lost generation? [...] I thought that all generations were lost by something and always had been and always would be. [...] I thought of what a warm and affectionate friend Miss Stein had been [...]. But the hell with her lost-generation talk and all the dirty, easy labels. (Feast 33)

Even if the exact identity of the "lost generation" remains somewhat vague after consulting Hemingway’s autobiographical recollections, it seems to be clear now that the origin of the "lost generation" quote can be traced back to both Hemingway and Stein, so Randy does deserve credit for making the "Hemingway connection." What still needs to be explained is the use of the Gertrude Stein quote in a work of fiction, Hemingway’s first novel The Sun Also Rises (1926). But did Hemingway’s autobiographical A Moveable Feast really help to discern fact from fiction? Did he write "one true sentence" (Feast 16) in it? In his "Preface" to the book, Hemingway leaves it up to his readers to decide: "If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always a chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact" (Feast 7).

4.2.2. A First Novel
If it had not been for Hemingway’s first novel, maybe the label "Lost Generation" would have remained in its original context—an anecdote from Gertrude Stein’s and Ernest Hemingway’s lives. However, by using the quotation as one of the two epigraphs for The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway indelibly inscribed the term into literary history. According to Hemingway’s biographer Carlos Baker, it even came close to being the very title of the novel. Hemingway had "toyed with the idea of calling it The Lost Generation," and he "wrote out a foreword to explain where it came from:"

That summer Gertrude Stein had stopped at a garage in a village in the Departement of Ain. One of the valves in her Ford was stuck and a very young mechanic fixed it quickly and efficiently. Gertrude asked the owner of the garage where he got such good workers. He said that he trained them himself: these young ones learned fast. It was those in the age group twenty-two to thirty who could not be taught. ‘C’est une génération perdue;’ the owner said. (Baker 195)

Baker's account of the "Lost Generation" anecdote surprises, because it significantly differs from Hemingway's. The young mechanic, who "had not been adept" according to Hemingway (Feast 31), is presented as being quick and efficient by Baker. There is no reference to service in the war in Baker's account, just to age groups, though a correlation between them can be determined: The "very young" mechanic must be younger than 22—he learns fast, in contrast to those between 22 and 30. In 1925, being younger than 22 implies a year of birth after 1903, which makes it unlikely that he has served in a war which took place between 1914 and 1918, while most of those born between 1895 and 1903 probably had to serve, if only in the last year of the war. So the war experience might still be the reason why those older ones "could not be taught" (Baker 195).

Baker makes no mention of any conversation in which Gertrude Stein translated and applied the term to Hemingway and his friends. Nevertheless, this is how the Stein quotation appears in The Sun Also Rises:

"You are all a lost generation."

—Gertrude Stein in conversation

Interestingly enough, the wording is not consistent with Hemingway's account of the conversation in A Moveable Feast (cf. 32). The patron had said, "You are all a génération perdue," and Hemingway quotes Gertrude Stein as saying, "That's what you are. That's what you all are [...] You are a lost generation." (Feast 32), so the phrase "You are all a lost generation" reads like a contraction of what Stein originally said—according to Hemingway's remembrance. It seems that an "original" version of the quote cannot be easily determined.

To "balance" the quotation from Stein, as Hemingway explains (cf. Feast 32), he used a second one, from Ecclesiastes 1, 4-7. The Sun Also Rises was a success, "at least for a first novel" (Baker 222), and it soon became known under the label the first quotation promoted, quite contrary to Hemingway's intention. He objected to the "widespread tendency to take the book as a prime exhibit of 'Lost Generationism" (Baker 222), and wrote to Max Perkins that he did not take "the Gertrude

Stein thing very seriously.” Instead, he wanted to emphasize the second epigraph and had “meant to play off against that splendid bombast (Gertrude’s assumption of prophetic roles). Nobody knows about the generation that follows them and certainly has no right to judge” (Letters 229). For Hemingway, the "point" of The Sun Also Rises was that "the earth abideth forever—having a great deal of fondness and admiration for the earth and not a hell of a lot for my generation and caring little about Vanities. [...] I didn’t mean the book to be a hollow or bitter satire but a damn tragedy with the earth abiding for ever as the hero" (Letters 229).

Which of the two quotes Hemingway wanted to emphasize or what he had meant to write did not matter much; it was the first quote and the label "Lost Generation" it offered that mattered. Hemingway soon even denied his responsibility for the coinage of the term. In 1932, Paul Romaine, a Midwestern bookseller, "urged him to stop writing about Lost Generations and bulls" (Baker 277), and Hemingway answered in a letter: "I wrote, in six weeks, one book about a few drunks and to show the superiority of the earlier Hebrew writers over the later quoted Ecclesiastes versus G. Stein. This was some seven years ago. Since then have not been occupied with this so-called (but not by me) lost generation" (Letters 365-6). He added, "I have to live sometime and I have quite a few things to write and my mind is not occupied with lost generations and bulls" (366).

4.2.3. Remarks are not Literature
If Hemingway denied having called anyone a "lost generation," the responsibility for the "dirty, easy" label must surely be Gertrude Stein’s. According to John Malcolm Brinnin’s Stein biography, she denied it: "Gertrude claimed no personal part in the coining of the immensely durable epithet and, in fact, doubted she had uttered it. If, as people said, the phrase was her invention, the idea must have been the result of a talk she once had with M. Pernollet, the hotelkeeper in Belley,” where Stein spent her summers. A hotelier seems to be the original source the "Hemingway connection" is leading to now, so the next places to look for information should be the autobiographies written by Stein—which leads to further confusion about the relation of fact and fiction.

The first autobiography Stein wrote is not even her own, as one should expect from the term autobiography; it is The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. In the book, Stein devotes several pages (212-220) to Ernest Hemingway and his time in Paris. There is no mention of any "Lost Generation" on these pages, though she writes that Hemingway and Stein "used to walk together and talk together a great deal" (213), that Stein had "a weakness for Hemingway" (215), and that Hemingway "used to recount to Gertrude Stein the conversations that he afterwards used in The Sun Also Rises"(219). While no remark about the "Lost Generation" is re-

107 Stein does not italicize book titles and uses rather idiosyncratic grammar and punctuation.
counted, there is a remark about remarks she made to Hemingway, who was preparing a "volume of short stories to submit to publishers in America" (In Our Time, 1925) and later handed the manuscript to Stein: "He had added to his stories a little story of meditations and in these he said that The Enormous Room [by e. e. cummings] was the greatest book he had ever read. It was then that Gertrude said, Hemingway, remarks are not literature" (219).

Although Stein's next "autobiography" was called Everybody's Autobiography,108 it was clearly her own this time, written in first person. Still, it was also a sequel to The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, and its first chapter is titled "What happened after The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas." This is what happened in the Hotel Pernollet in Belley, according to Stein:

> It was this hotel keeper who said what it is said I said that the war generation was a lost generation. And he said it in this way. He said that every man becomes civilized between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. If he does not go through a civilizing experience at that time of his life he will not be a civilized man. And the men who went to the war at eighteen missed the period of civilizing, and they could never be civilized. They were a lost generation. (Everybody’s Autobiography 52)

Brinnin also relates this origin of the term in The Third Rose (cf. 233). Compared to the story of the young mechanic and the patron, this anecdote offers a more detailed explanation of the reason why this generation is supposed to be lost: because of the war, its members have missed the "period of civilizing" the generations before them had, and could never make up for this loss—they were too old now. If one considers that going to a war surely must be a very intense experience between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five—or, for that matter, at any age—, the decisive point seems to be that the younger generation simply had a different "civilizing experience" from the point of view of M. Pernollet's generation. Furthermore, if one also considers which of these generations, younger and older, was sent off to war by the other, the question who actually lost this younger generation is easy to answer. Also, one has to consider that the definition only talks about men, and not the war experience women had, as if they were not affected by it. This biased focus can also be found in the way the group of writers that were counted as members of the "Lost Generation" was depicted.

Cowley differentiates between "the writers" and "the whole wartime generation" when he states that "young men," belonging to the latter group, "turned away from social aims and from any type of public service" (A Second Flowering 15). So the term "Lost Generation" delineates an exclusive group of male writers and intellectuals first, and only secondary, if at all, the whole generation of Americans belonging to the same age group. Furthermore, they were not only an exclusive group, but also rather privileged:

> It has to be said that the men of the Lost Generation were white, middle-class, mostly Protestant by upbringing, and mostly English and Scottish by descent, with Fitzgerald to stand for the Irish and [Thomas] Wolfe, through his father, for the Pennsylvania

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Germans [...]. In other words, these writers had what would come to be regarded as a privileged background, though the notion would have seemed preposterous to most of them when they were twenty. (A Second Flowering 240)

Significantly, those who wrote about the "Generation X" in the 1990s also showed a bias toward the male side of the story of the "Lost Generation." Both Bernd Herzogenrath and Michael Porsche begin their essays with accounts of how the term supposedly was coined, and they both only consider the remarks Hemingway and his biographer Baker made about it. Gertrude Stein's own remarks remain unheeded. Still, if remarks are not literature, this certainly is also true for labels, catch-phrases and headlines. However, they may not be literature, but they obviously make literary history, as the example of The Sun Also Rises, a novel that begins with remarks about "Generations," shows.

4.2.4. Making History
So far, after consulting information from several autobiographies, biographies, and the epigraphs in Hemingway's first novel, the label "Lost Generation" appears to stem from an obscure combination of fact and fiction that makes it hard to tell one from the other. As already indicated, without the success of the novel that made it known to a large audience, as well as the prominent position of Hemingway in 20th century American literature, it would have been just an anecdote. However, as literary scholars began using the term, it became part of literary history.

In 1951, Malcolm Cowley published his account of post-World War I, pre-depression literary life in America and among the "Lost Generation" expatriates in Paris, Exile's Return. According to John Malcolm Brinnin, Cowley "grew up with the generation, then away from it and became with the publication of Exile's Return its most authentic and perhaps most sympathetic historian" (Brinnin 232). The title of the "Prologue" in Exile's Return is simply "The Lost Generation" (3-12); this is how it begins: "This book is the story to 1930 of what used to be called the lost generation of American writers. It was Gertrude Stein who first applied the phrase to them. 'You are all a lost generation,' she said to Ernest Hemingway, and Hemingway used the remark as an inscription for his first novel" (3). According to Cowley, it is easy to trace back the origin of the term: from Stein to Hemingway and then into Hemingway's first novel. There is no mention of any French patron, mechanic, or hotel keeper, no further context for the quote, and no mention of a second inscription in the novel.

Still, Cowley offers an explanation for how the "name was fixed," as he goes on: "It was a good novel and became a craze—young men tried to get as imper turbably drunk as the hero, young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heartbroken fashion as the heroine, they all talked like Hemingway characters and the name was fixed" (3). Apparently, it was its laudatory reception and the "craze" the novel created among young readers which helped to

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109 Herzogenrath only quotes from A Moveable Feast; Porsche only uses Baker's Ernest Hemingway.
fix "Lost Generation" as a label. Moreover, the characters in the novel evidently served as role-models, and it seems that the fictional contents of the novel were recreated and transferred into a "real life" context—life imitating art.

Later, in another book about the "Works and Days of the Lost Generation," Cowley again highlights the crucial influence of Hemingway’s first novel:

*The Sun Also Rises* did not rock the country, but it received a number of hat-in-the-air reviews and it soon became a handbook of conduct for the new generation. That winter, an observer in Greenwich Village noted that many of the younger writers had already begun to talk, walk, and shadowbox like Hemingway, when they weren’t flourishing capes in front of an imaginary bull.\(^{110}\)

Now the emphasis lies on another aspect of the book’s reception. Its influence seems to have gone beyond being a “handbook of conduct” for young people, as the "craze" about it showed. Cowley points out that many "younger writers" were trying to be *like* Hemingway, not like his characters—artists imitating an artist’s life.

### 4.2.5. Shifting Contexts
From all the information gathered, it seems that the coinage of the term "Lost Generation" and its inscription into literary history was largely due to a process of continuous de- and re-contextualization: from French hotel keeper or garage keeper and mechanic to Gertrude Stein, from Stein to Ernest Hemingway and his friends, from Hemingway into a novel, from the novel to its readers who made it a success, from the novel’s success into literary history—and, from then on, into a discourse on "Generations" in 20th American history.

Tracing back the origin of the label, it has become obvious how easy it is to get lost, even in territory that is as familiar and circumscribed as early 20th century American literature. However, in the process of retracing origins, tracks, facts and fiction, new directions might become visible, directions leading to new perspectives, new insights, new ways of thinking about what was considered familiar. Thus, by making the "Hemingway connection," the example of Sarita’s and Randy’s argument offered a valuable clue in the search for a "Lost Generation," pointing out a direction through literary history—although these two twentysomethings themselves seem to be lost in literary history as well as in geography, unsure of their footing:

Sarita stumbles on a crack in the streets, regains her proper footing, and sprints a few feet to catch up before saying it again. "You know what your problem is? You’re all a lost generation. You’re... you’re..." She can’t remember the next line even though she has been repeating it all night. "You’re just damn lost, that’s what you are."

Randy stops in his tracks, surveys the street that doesn't look familiar. He retraces their steps from the Capitol Cinema, trying to lead them to The Scene. "You know, you may be right?" (Gomez 171-2)

4. The Lost Generation

4.3. The Spokesman

4.3.1. The Phrase and the Legend

It has already been pointed out that Hemingway was not in favor of "lost-generation talk and all the dirty, easy labels" (Feast 33), and, as Cowley notes, "neither [Hart] Crane nor Fitzgerald talked about being part of a lost generation. Most of those who used the phrase about themselves were a little younger and knew they were boasting" (Exile's Return 3). It did not take long before the phrase connoted not a boast, but an apology, and then, a trademark:

Later they learned to speak the phrase apologetically, as if in quotation marks, and still later it was applied to other age groups, each of which was described in turn as being the real lost generation; none genuine without the trademark. In the beginning, however, when the phrase was applied to young writers born in the years around 1900, it was as useful as any half-accurate tag could be. (Cowley, Exile's Return 3)

According to Cowley, the tag was "useful" to two conflicting groups: First, "to older persons because they had been looking for words to express their uneasy feeling that postwar youth—'flaming youth'—had an outlook on life that was different from their own" (Exile's Return 4). Now "they could read about the latest affront to social standards or to literary conventions and merely say, 'That's the lost generation'" (4). It was also useful to "the youngsters" who had "grown up and gone to college during a period of rapid change [...]. Now at least they had a slogan that proclaimed their feeling of separation from older writers and of kinship with one another" (4).

It seems that "Lost Generation" became in fact a common denominator, a "slogan," in a conflict between two successive generations that had "uneasy feelings" for each other. Used in this context, what the slogan primarily marked was not so much a certain quality of a generation, but rather a sense of difference, "separation," which created a feeling of "kinship" among the younger generation as well as among the older: "In the slogan the noun was more important than the adjective. They might or might not be lost, the future would decide that point; but they had already had the common adventures and formed the common attitude that made it possible to describe them as a generation" (Cowley, Exile's Return 4).

The "half-accurate tag," though rejected by those who were grouped under it, was there to stay. Furthermore, in the process of being shifted through various contexts, as shown previously, and after becoming a "trademark" freely applied to other groups, the label "Lost Generation" left behind all questions of fact, fiction, and origin—and, finally, came to denote a legend. Cowley claims that the writers of the period between the two world wars had "a gift [...] in common: they were almost all great spinners and weavers of legend," which was a "reason for its appeal to younger people" (A Second Flowering 254). Later, in A Many-Windowed House (1970), Cowley listed some of these literary legends of the 1920s: "T. S. Eliot's legend of the spiritual wasteland, Scott Fitzgerald's legend of the jazz age, the

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Hemingway legend of the lost generation” (240). Cowley does not point out that historians like himself also contribute to the circulation of such "legends."

However, as far as Fitzgerald is concerned, Alfred Kazin observes a difference between his legend and Hemingway’s. As "the historian of his generation," Fitzgerald "never had to create a lost-generation legend or apply it to literature—the exile, the pilgrimage to Gertrude Stein, the bullfighters at the extremity of the world, the careful molded disgust. The legend actually was his life" (On Native Grounds 316). Fitzgerald, "the younger generation’s most brilliant and articulate spokesman" according to Frederick J. Hoffman,112 was a key figure in the conflict between "the very young" (Hoffman 91), as the "new generation" was called at first, and their older critics. This conflict provided the right cultural climate and background for success of the label "Lost Generation" that was to appear later. The label perfectly suited both parties in the conflict, as indicated above, and the legend of the "Lost Generation" was transposed yet again into a new context: from Hemingway’s first novel in 1926 backwards in time to Fitzgerald’s first novel in 1920, as Kazin declares that it was Fitzgerald who "announced the lost generation with This Side of Paradise in 1920" (316).

4.3.2. Another First Novel

As an endless dream it went on: the spirit of the past brooding over a new generation, the chosen youth from the muddled, unchastened world, still fed romantically on the mistakes and half-forgotten dreams of dead statesmen and half-forgotten poets. Here was a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds, through a reverie of long days and nights; destined finally to go out into that dirty grey turmoil to follow love and pride; a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.... 113

The feeling of being a unique new generation in the history of America, of being different than the one before, pervaded among the "very young" in the twenties. As Fitzgerald wrote in an essay called "My Generation," first published in Esquire as another "Generation" arrived in 1968, this "uniqueness" was largely due to his generation being "at once prewar and postwar."114 This young generation was not yet labeled "lost" in the early twenties, and although Fitzgerald "found the youth younger than ourselves, the sheiks and the flappers, rather disturbing" ("My Generation" 121), his first novel was later said to have "announced the lost generation […], or at least the home guard of the international rebellion of postwar youth, and the restiveness of youth at home found an apostle in him, since he was the younger generation’s first authentic novelist." (Kazin 316)

Another fictional text, another first novel announcing a new generation, six years before Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises. However, This Side of Paradise did

not only announce this new generation, it helped create it for the public, as Gertrude Stein puts it: "Gertrude Stein had been very much impressed by This Side of Paradise. She read it when it came out and before she knew any of the young American writers. She said of it that it was this book that really created for the public the new generation" (The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 218).

The public's attention was already drawn to the younger generation, and This Side of Paradise gave the "Generation" a literary voice: "With energy, candor, and a sort of innocence, Fitzgerald (or the hero) was speaking for his contemporaries. They recognized the voice as their own, and his elders listened," as Cowley notes (A Second Flowering 23), and Hoffman states that the novel was "more striking than other novels of its kind because of its literal attention to the particulars of its youth" (102). Fitzgerald's semi-autobiographical story of young Amory Blaine was accepted by Scribner only after its third submission (cf. Cowley, A Second Flowering 22), but it received good reviews and brought its author sudden fame and "cata-pulted" him into the role of a spokesman for the younger generation.

Fitzgerald felt himself being "pushed into the position not only of a spokesman for the time, but of a typical product of that same moment," the moment in which "the 'younger generation' idea became a fusion of many elements in New York life"—though later he realized "that behind much of the entertainment that the city poured forth into the nation there were only a lot of lost and lonely people." Still, "the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the war," enjoyed its "peak" in 1922—before it became lost and lonely. The debate about "the younger generation" had already been going on for some time before Hemingway's first novel popularized a new label for it.

4.3.3. Wild Young People

For some months past the pages of our more conservative magazines have been crowded with pessimistic descriptions of the younger generation, as seen by their elders, and, no doubt, their betters. Hardly a week goes by that I do not read some indignant treatise depicting our extravagance, the corruption of our manners, the futility of our existence, poured out in stiff, scared, shocked sentences before a sympathetic and horrified audience of fathers, mothers, and maiden aunts—but particularly maiden aunts.

At first sight, it is not easy to place this quotation—it reads like it could have been written by almost any American youth at any time in the twentieth century. Is it a young "Slacker" in the nineties, fed up with the mass media's "dissing" him with all that "bad rap?" Is it an eloquent yuppie writing flashy editorials for a hip, high-gloss New York magazine in the eighties, listening to Madonna blaring out of a ghettoblaster? Or a long-haired political activist reading her pamphlets at a gather-

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115 The back cover blurb of the 1998 edition of This Side of Paradise praises the book that "catapulted Fitzgerald to instant fame" as an "early classic of the Jazz Age" which "offers a poignant portrait of the 'Lost Generation.'"
ing on a college campus in the sixties, flowers in her hair? A black-clad, four-eyed fifties’ Beatnik rambling away on his typewriter in his subterranean apartment, Charlie Parker’s "Now’s the Time" on his turntable? A young journalist in 1920, just graduated from Yale, complaining about the ruined world he and his peers inherited from their elders after World War I?

It is, of course, this last young person who "would like to say a few things" about his "generation" in an essay titled "These Wild Young People,' by One of Them" in the Sept. 1920 issue of The Atlantic Monthly. John F. Carter observed that while "the older generation had certainly pretty well ruined this world before passing it on to us" (270), it still expected gratitude from the younger generation: "They give us this Thing, knocked to pieces, leaky, red-hot, threatening to blow up; and then they are surprised that we don’t accept it with the same attitude of pretty, decorous enthusiasm with which they received it, 'way back in the eighteen-nineties, nicely painted, smoothly running, practically fool-proof" (270).119 Carter also calls his generation "disillusionized" (271) and complains about the speeding up of life in general: "The acceleration of life for us has been so great that into the last few years have been crowded the experiences and the ideas of a normal lifetime. We have in our unregenerate youth learned the practicality and the cynicism that is safe only in unregenerate old age" (271). What has pushed his generation to old age so quickly was the war, as Carter sums up: "In short, we have seen the inherent beastliness of the human race revealed in an infernal apocalypse" (271).120

"Lamenting the supposed degeneration of the young became a favorite indoor sport in the Twenties," Loren Baritz writes in his introductory comments to his reprint of Carter’s essay in The Culture of The Twenties (1970),121 and Hoffman points out that "No aspect of the decade was more thoroughly burlesqued or more seriously considered than the behavior and affectations of the younger generation" (88). In May 1921, The Literary Digest conducted a survey of the morality of the nation’s youth, quoting mainly college papers to answer the question, "Is the Younger Generation in Peril?"122 While most of these answers deal with controversies about the length of skirts, the new styles of dance, declining morality, and other shocking aspects of the young generation, there are some voices that draw attention to the normalcy of the generational conflict: "So long as the older generation 'views with alarm,' so long will the younger generation glory in its naughtiness and invent prodigious reasons," as an editorial in The Smith College’s Monthly maintains (262). Still, the circumstances of "modern life," such as the booming mass-media culture, do make a decisive difference: "The real reason is […] simply

119 Almost seventy years later, at the end of the chapter "Eat Your Parents" in Coupland’s Generation X, Dag has very similar feelings for his parents: "I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear" (86).
120 Evidently, Carter deems his time as being post-apocalyptic—just like Douglas Coupland some seventy years later, as will be discussed later (cf. part 7.4.2).
121 Loren Baritz (ed.), The Culture of The Twenties (Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) 266.
122 "Is the Younger Generation in Peril?" The Literary Digest May 1921. Parts of the article(s) are reprinted in Baritz (ed.), ch. 19: "A Debate About Morality" (251-267), from which the quotations are taken.
this: young people are forced by the exigencies, customs, and inventions of modern life—such as newspapers, magazines, ‘movies,’ telephones, and facilitated modes of travel—to be cognizant at an early age of the world about them” (263).

Carter, too, acknowledges that the conflict can hardly be called a new phenomenon when he mockingly declares, "Oh! I know that we are a pretty bad lot, but has not that been true of every preceding generation?” (273). Baritz upholds that the younger generation’s sense of having "wearily climbed beyond earlier ones, that the present must suffer because of the stupidities of the past, that the son must break free from the father or lose his own authenticity, has characterized perhaps every single decade of the American story from the Puritans forward” (Introduction xvii), and President Sills of Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, goes even farther back in history: "Ever since the time of Horace at least each generation has thought the succeeding generation worse than anything that has gone before, in manners and morals, and in criticising the youth of the present day we ought, I think, to keep this in mind” (263-4).

The phenomenon of conflicting generations seems to be as old as history; there have always been "wild young people" upsetting their elders. Accepting that the "familiar disassociation of the American generations" (Kazin 313) has been a part of "the American story" since the Puritans, one might as well come to regard it as a positive aspect of history’s progress. It might even give occasion to hopefulness, as it does for the author of the following statement about the "younger people" in—the nineties? the eighties? the sixties? the fifties? the twenties…?

The most hopeful thing of intellectual promise in America to-day is the contempt of the younger people for their elders; they are restless, uneasy, disaffected. It is not a disciplined contempt; it is not yet kindled by any real love of intellectual values—how could it be? Yet it is a genuine and moving attempt to create a way of life free from the bondage of an authority that has lost all meaning, even to those who wield it.123

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While the brief literary odyssey in search for a "Lost Generation" did not arrive in any safe haven of indisputable facts, it nevertheless provided many impressions, stories and histories, enlightening anecdotes and quotations, all highlighting the various aspects involved in the construction of a "Generation." The debate about the "younger generation" in the twenties, the coining of the term "Lost Generation" for it, the "spokesmen" and their novels involved—using all these different aspects as building blocks, it might not be possible to write a definitive history of the "Lost Generation." However, investigating the coinage of the term and what it came to denote, it has become obvious how these aspects can form a story. Or, for that matter, many different stories, depending on who is doing the bricolage, who is constructing something out of these pieces—and the outcome might not depend so much on the building blocks as on the plan underlying the construction work. In other words:

All this might suggest that a generation, in historical terms, is no more a matter of dates than it is one of ideology. A new generation does not appear every thirty years, as Pío Baroja and other theorists have maintained, or "about three times in a century," to quote Fitzgerald; it appears when writers of the same age join in a common revolt against the fathers and when, in the process of adopting a new life style, they find their own models and spokesmen. (Cowley, A Second Flowering 238)

If the construction of a generation is a matter of ideology, the crucial role fictional literature and its authors play in this construction cannot be overly stressed. The "models and spokesmen" of the "Lost Generation" were creators and creations of fiction, and fiction was used as a point of reference throughout the discourse on this "Generation"—novels announcing it, stories and fictional characters serving as blueprints for the behavior of its supposed members. Also, the story of the "Lost Generation" served as a point of reference when new literary "Generations" were constructed in the course of the 20th century. Consequently, it must be acknowledged that history indeed can teach us something—if only the realization that the facts, the fictions, and the discourses involved in the construction of (not only) literary history can form certain patterns. These patterns do not represent any kind of historical "truth" or even unchanging laws of nature; they reveal more about the process of observation itself than about what is being observed. The second epigraph in The Sun Also Rises (cf. 7) points out that certain other patterns repeat themselves over and over again, and that from this perspective, nothing can ever be truly "lost"—it is a categorization that is merely human, and not natural.

"One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever . . . The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose . . . The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it wirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. . . . All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again."

—Ecclesiastes
5. From Hip to Hippies

Disaffected youth rebelling against establishment smugness isn't exactly a hot new literary idea, but it is one that needs updating every decade or so with a new label and new slang so that the alienated can feel part of a tribe. In the '50s there were the Beats, in the '60s the hippies and in the '90s, according to Coupland, there is Generation X.124

5.1. The Beat Generation
5.1.1. Demanding an Adjective

After World War II, another "Generation" and another label surfaced, and another young man, 26 years old, was talking about his generation: "Any attempt to label an entire generation is unrewarding, and yet the generation which went through the last war, or at least could get a drink easily once it was over, seems to possess a uniform, general quality which demands an adjective."125 The adjective chosen to describe this new young generation was beat. John Clellon Holmes, announcing "This is the Beat Generation" in 1952, ascribes the coining of the term to "John [sic!] Kerouac," who "one day" had said, "You know, this is really a beat generation" (Holmes 10).

The generational conflict observed by Holmes, who sees "people with tidy moralities shake their heads and wonder what is happening to the younger generation" (20) everywhere, seems to be similar to that after World War I. It is indeed that earlier "Generation" from the 1920s that Holmes compares his own to: "It is a post-war generation, and, in a world which seems to mark its cycles by its wars, it is already being compared to that other post-war generation, which dubbed itself 'lost.' The Roaring Twenties, and the generation that made them roar, are going through a sentimental revival, and the comparison is valuable" (10). The "Beat Generation," however, is assumed to be different: "But the wild boys of today are not lost. [...] For this generation conspicuously lacks that eloquent air of bereavement which made so many of the exploits of the Lost Generation symbolic actions" (19). Also, "the repeated inventory of shattered ideals, and the laments about the mud in moral currents, which so obsessed the Lost Generation, does not concern the young people today. They take it frighteningly for granted" (Holmes 19). Still, the "Lost Generation" not only served as a historical precedence for the "Beats," they also measured themselves against them. Even the incidental coining of the term "Beat Generation" can be directly linked to their precursors, as Allen Ginsberg recalls:

The phrase "Beat generation" arose out of a specific conversation between Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes in 1948. They were discussing the nature of generations, recollecting the glamour of the Lost Generation, and Kerouac said, "Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation." They talked about whether it was a "found generation" (as Kerouac sometimes called it), an "angelic generation," or some other epithet. But Kerouac waved away the question and said beat generation—not meaning to name the generation, but to unname it.126

Unnamed a generation by giving it an adjective seems to be a rather curious strategy. Interestingly enough, Holmes claims that there is ‘no single philosophy, no single party, no single attitude’ among ‘today’s young people,’ and this is ‘responsible for this generation’s reluctance to name itself, its reluctance to discuss itself as a group, sometimes its reluctance to be itself’ (22)—although he himself is far from being reluctant to declare ‘This is the Beat Generation.’ However, it again took a novel to make the public aware of the new "Generation" and to fix its name.

5.1.2. The Necessary Fuse

The text of Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road had a long history before it was finally published by the Viking Press in 1957, and it was Malcolm Cowley, the historian of the "Lost Generation," who was instrumental in helping Kerouac getting it published.\footnote{In her introduction to the 1991 Penguin edition of On the Road, Ann Charters gives an account of the "genesis" of the text and the parts and versions of it published before 1957.} He even ‘advised Kerouac to re-title his novel On the Road—Jack had changed the title to The Beat Generation.’\footnote{Ann Charters, Introduction (On The Road. By Jack Kerouac. London: Penguin 1991) xxvii.} According to Ann Charters, he "championed On the Road because he felt a sympathy for Kerouac as a spokesman for a new but similarly disaffiliated group of Americans" (xxvi).

It was a review by Gilbert Millstein in The New York Times that made the novel, its author and the "Beat Generation" known to a wide audience and instantly famous.\footnote{Gilbert Millstein, “Books of the Times.” The New York Times Sept. 4, 1957. The original article was not available to me, but Charters quotes from it at length in her introduction to On the Road.} "Just as, more than any other novel of the Twenties, The Sun Also Rises came to be regarded as the testament of the Lost Generation, so it seems certain that On the Road will come to be known as that of the Beat Generation,” Millstein wrote,\footnote{This quote is also printed on the back cover of the 1991 Penguin edition of the novel.} and called Kerouac the "principle avatar" of this generation (qtd. in Charters viii). Millstein’s review, as Bruce Cook recalls in his account of The Beat Generation, "assured that every other reviewer who wrote about it would at least have to take it seriously."\footnote{Bruce Cook, The Beat Generation (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971) 72.} Notwithstanding, "popular response was so overwhelming and instantaneous that it hardly mattered what the critics thought of it" (Cook 72). On the Road seems to have been the right book at the right time:

> What caused all the excitement? [...] Perhaps it was only that the time had come at last for such an explosion of interest and On the Road supplied the necessary fuse. Or maybe this was the kind of book that spoke so directly and eloquently to the generation that was waiting for it that it needed only to be announced to be recognized. However we account for it, there can be no doubt that it was through Jack Kerouac and his book that the general public became instantly aware of the Beat Generation. (Cook 72)

After Millstein’s review appeared, Kerouac found himself pushed into the position of the spokesman for the new "Generation." According to Charters, the "unrelenting" media response even urged him to complain, "Wasn't there a time when American writers were let alone by personality mongers and publicity monsters?"
However, in the 1950s, the "Beat Generation" was news, and the reporters wanted to know all about it: "In On the Road Kerouac had supposedly defined a new generation, and he was besieged with questions about the life-style he had described in his novel. The reporters didn't care who he was, or how long he'd been working on his book, or what he was trying to do as a writer" (Charters viii-ix). When Kerouac tried to explain his use of the term "Beat" to them, they "wanted a glib quote rather than a religious derivation of a hip slang term" (Charters ix).

Bruce Cook also notes that the Beats "received the full treatment from the media—coverage in the news magazines, special attention in Life, lots of time on the talk shows, and even a television documentary or two devoted to them" (5). Furthermore, this "first truly popular literary movement to take hold among the American young since the Lost Generation of the 1920s" (Cook 92) had an enormous impact on the popular culture of the time (cf. Cook 92). The interest in the Beat Generation had a great effect on consumer culture, as William Burroughs notes: "After 1957 On the Road sold a trillion levis and a million espresso coffee machines, and also sent countless kids on the road. This was of course due in part to the media, the arch-opportunists. They know a story when they see one, and the Beat movement was a story, and a big one" (qtd. in Charters xxviii).

As for the relation of "Lost" and "Beat" writers, Cook, from his point of vantage in 1971, notes that the latter "seemed to identify very closely with the Lost Generation of the 1920s," and that the "unspoken rationale here was that Hemingway, Dos Passos, Cummings, et al. went through the very nasty experience of World War I, and we went through the even nastier experience of World War II, so therefore the literature we produce is sure to exceed theirs in importance and depth" (48).Commenting on such "simple comparisons," he adds, "If only equations were so reliable in literature and cycles so easy to chart!" (Cook 48)

### 5.2. The Sixties
#### 5.2.1. Age or Acid?
"Of course the hippies followed us in certain ways, so yeah, I guess you could say they are the descendants of the Beat Generation. Maybe what separates us from them is not so much age as acid," Kerouac said when Bruce Cook visited him in early 1968 (qtd. in Cook 89). In many respects, the "Beat Generation" writers were seen as the role models for the new "Generation" of young Americans that was to appear in the 1960s, the so-called "Hippies." Cowley even argues that the "Beat Generation" was just "a small rebel band," but some of the "Beats," like Kerouac and Ginsberg, "were among the 'madmen and outlaws' who served as models for the real generation that was later to appear" (A Second Flowering 238n1). According to Cook, this "real" generation again was different from the one before:

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132 Kerouac's further career as a writer remained overshadowed by On the Road's success, as Charters writes: "Kerouac was thirty-five years old when On the Road was published, and later it would seem he had spent the first part of his career trying to write the book and get it published, and the rest of his life trying to live it down" (Charters, Introduction ix).
The single most conspicuous fact of the present time is the great alteration that has come about in the character and attitudes of the under-thirty generation. They are different. Who could deny it? No longer docile, as we were, they present their demands where we submitted our requests in triplicate. Or more impressive still, they drop out in disgust from a culture we slavered to serve. (Cook 4-5)

The term "hippie" itself was derived from "Beat" language, according to the OED: a "hippie" or "hippy" is a "hipster; a person, usually exotically dressed, who is, or is taken to be, given to the use of hallucinogenic drugs; a beatnik." One of the quotations the OED gives is from a Times article from 5 Dec. 1969: "religion, in one form or another, is frequently a straw to which the lost generation of hippies clings." While in the context of this quote the use of the term "lost generation" does not clearly refer to the 1920s, Loren Baritz does link the cultural upheaval of the 1960s to this earlier one in her introduction to The Culture of The Twenties. She claims that the group of young Americans that "began seriously to repudiate conventional attitudes and reflexes" in the 1960s, "unlike their predecessors of the 1920's, [...] added a vital political dimension to their cultural awakening. This search for liberation from history did not begin in the Twenties and it will not end in the Sixties. But, at least in America, these two cultural moments are important steps in the endless funeral of the social fathers" (lv).

Cowley remarks that "[i]f more of its members had survived, the Lost Generation might have felt lonely and puzzled in the new atmosphere" of the 1960s (A Second Flowering 240). What is indeed puzzling about the 1960s is that it did not produce a single catch-phrase and label for the new "Generation" of Americans, but an array of names for groups and sub-groups:

Their mythic identifications proliferated as fast as popular phrasemaking could spin them out. They were the generation of hope, the generation of love, the generation of peace. They were the Revolution, the counterculture. They were the Generation of Youth. Particular epithets seemed to come and go as quickly as their gurus or their gaudy fashions. Beats, Hippies, Yippies, Freaks. Flower Children and Street People. SDS and SNCC, Black Panthers, Weathermen, Winter Soldiers. Woodstock Nation and Women's International Conspiracy from Hell.133

Philip D. Beidler, in Scriptures for a Generation: What We Were Reading in the '60s, highlights the fragmentation of the youth culture in the '60s. "Hippie" is just one of many terms, and, unlike in the 1920s and '50s, it is impossible to link these terms to particular works of literature that introduced or promoted them. While there certainly are texts that influenced a large number of readers and helped shape their sensibility of the changes in society, like J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1950), the role of literature itself also went through a change in the 1960s.

5.2.2. The Last People of the Word

"We have always been, in America, a people of the word"—this is how Beidler begins the chapter about "'60s Readers and '60s Texts" in *Scriptures for a Generation* (14). He claims that "the invention of America took place largely through printed language" (17), and the '60s were the last time when reading had a predominant importance for American culture:

> For of all the genealogical propositions that may be advanced regarding the '60s generation of youth [...] one, at least, can be advanced with great certainty: it was the last great American reading culture to identify itself as such, the finest productions and, in a way, the culminating glory of the People of the Word. Ideologically, the '60s generation claimed in the printed word affirmation of its special status as the fulfillment of the promise of America, the old dream of the conquest of time; and materiality, in that same identification as "Youth," they sat waiting to devour it in endless prospects of ecstatic consumption. [...] In ways never dreamed, the word had become the last great American item. (Beidler 18-19)

Still, most of "the era's earliest literary idols—authors of the very books whereby '60s youth-culture first came to identify itself—were [...] members of the generation of World War II and the early '50s" (23) according to Beidler.\(^1\) This does not mean that the '60s did not produce enough writers of its own; on the contrary, they were "the last flowering of an idea of the word and the triumph of print literacy in unprecedentedly widespread forms of production, distribution, and consumption" (Beidler 17). This last flowering, however, marked a turning point:

> Yet in the same moment, precisely in the information revolution it helped to inspire, it also marked a rapid, radical, and irreversible turning away from printed language as the dominant medium of cultural communication. Henceforth, word of the world would be electronic, visual, aural, cybernetic. Its dominant imagings and figurations would increasingly be those of radio, television, computers, movies, records, audio cassettes, compact discs, and videos. News, entertainment, advertising, information: the world would now come mainly to exist in some vast nonprint continuum. (17)

Unlike the two previous "Generations," the young Americans of the 1960s experienced a significant shift in the way young people expressed themselves and distributed and exchanged ideas and attitudes. "More than anything else, the music carried the message," as Beidler notes (21), and literary historians cannot group together authors of the 1960s under one broad label like in the case of the '20s and '50s. Speaking of a "Sixties Generation" or a "Hippie Generation" does not seem to be justified in light of Beidler's observation that it was not "a separate or 'alternative' culture of any particularly identifiable sort, let alone the 'counterculture' monolith so frequently presumed" (23). The protesters and agitators constituted a group that was "a mirror of its conventional origins: it was dominantly male, almost exclusively white, largely college-oriented, and generally drawn from the great American middle class" (23). Also, similar to Cowley's description of the writers of the "Lost Generation" as great weavers of legend, Beidler points out that

\(^1\)Beidler names Kurt Vonnegut, J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Joseph Heller, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, and Sylvia Plath as examples. Again, women writers of the time are being largely ignored.
the '60s Generation of Youth became what it said it was through a capacity to believe in what it said it could be. What it was, to put this another way, resulted directly from its own immense capacity for self-mythologizing, its gift for creating itself in imaginative presence. Sixties youths created themselves precisely as facts of consciousness, and it was in that dimension that they were enabled to do the work of a kind of collective shamanism, cultural magic on a vast scale, a realized power of belief to achieve alterations in the very fabric of reality itself. (Beidler 25-26)

Beidler also notices a familiar motif from the 1960s in American culture of the 1990s: "How strange it is, yet somehow unsurprising, all these years after the '60s, to see the 'X' everywhere again" (136). It is not the "Generation X" he is talking about, though, as the "X" reminds him of "that old lost African name, before the slave name or the American name; to see him again all over the place" (136). This him is Malcolm Little, who chose to adopt "X" as his last name. This reminds us that an "X" has already been used to consciously unname oneself, pointing out that writing history and assigning names and labels is a matter of ideology.

5.2.3. A New Explanation?

As David Pichaske remarks in *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Schirmer/Macmillan, 1979), "the generation of the sixties quarreled with everyone and everything—including itself" (xvi). For him, "[t]he generation that grew to maturity during the sixties is a generation given to some of the noblest causes and some of the most indefensible nonsense in history. It is a generation of great faith and great folly" (xvi). Popular music, though, provides the "common history" for the 1960s and "offers the most accurate record of persons and places and spirits" (xx), contrary to literature: "The songs do not merely survive, they continue to speak, to vibrate. The movies are quaint, television-pathetic. Most of the books are dead, from *Soul on Ice* to The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test to *The Greening of America* to *Steal this Book*" (xxi). According to Pichaske, "[t]he music of the sixties was very much aware of its role, self-critically aware, making itself a news bulletin board, interpreting and arguing in song the way medieval scholastics debated in Latin, denouncing imposters and poseurs, commenting on itself as participant and reporter" (xx). As the back cover blurb of *A Generation in Motion* claims,

The songs were the new mythology. From the Beatles to Bob Dylan, from the Rolling Stones to The Mothers of Invention, from the Doors to The Kinks. From the recreational to the absurd, from the frenetic to the sublime, the music spoke to everyone. For the first time popular song lyrics were printed on record jackets like poems. The songs colored the perception of an impatient generation and became to the sixties what T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was to the twenties.
While the role of pop and rock music clearly gained importance in American society during the '60s, it has to be pointed out that this was an international phenomenon. There were youth "revolts" in many Western nations, and they all produced their own songwriters and anthems, which were not necessarily compatible. The Who's "My Generation" (1965) became the key song for the British Mod culture, but the band's appearance at Woodstock showed that political activists and rock stars often pursue very different interests: "Abbie Hoffman and Pete Townshend, mythic embodiments of the new American and British orders, quarreled bitterly and openly at the Woodstock Festival, that emblem of the new consciousness, that celebration of love and understanding" (Pichaske xvii).135

The pop culture of the 1960s, and Beidler's and Pichaske's attempts to identify the literary and musical works of art that represent its cultural sensibility, show that a multimedial approach is necessary for any investigation of "culture." It is never just the literature or just the songs, and also not only the social and political documents that provide a "common history" for those who felt they were part of a "Generation." Rather, it is the combined effect of various cultural phenomena that constructs the images of an "era." The "collective shamanism" (Beidler 26) that is involved in writing cultural history relies on the selection of material—bricolage.

As frequent references and comparisons to the "Lost" and "Beat Generation" and to the spirit of "The Sixties" accompanied the introduction of the term "Generation X" into the discourse on American youth of the 1990s, the constructedness of these references has to be considered. Not just one, but a variety of discourses collaborate in the construction of these historical accounts of decades and "Generations." These accounts often have a mythical character, as both Beidler and Pichaske point out, and do not necessarily represent historical truth. Searle's notion of "collective agreement" as an important factor in the construction of social reality appears to be a useful tool for describing the mechanics of these processes, which are also influenced by ideological interests.

Furthermore, the investigation of the previous "Generation" constructs also showed that single novels can indeed provide the "necessary fuse" that makes it easier to combine different notions and ideas about complex cultural phenomena. The 1920s and 1950s illustrated that this "fuse" often is a phrase or term that different groups agree on when they talk about a "Generation." Thus, the immediate historical context of the 1980s,136 the time before the novel Generation X supposedly defined a new "Generation" and Coupland was called its spokesman, must be reviewed. Then, a reading of the novel will try to discern what function the "X" as a qualifier for the "Generation" announced in the title may have.

135 Townshend later regretted the incident, as his comment in the booklet to the CD anthology The Who—Thirty Years of Maximum R&B (MCA 1994) shows: "What Abbie was saying was politically correct in many ways—the people at Woodstock really were a bunch of hypocrites claiming a cosmic revolution simply because they took over a field, broke down some fences, imbibed bad acid and then tried to run out without paying the bands. All while John Sinclair rotted in jail after a trumped up drug bust. My response was reflexive rather than considered. Later I realised his humiliation on that occasion was fatal to his political credibility" (n. pag.).

136 In the 1970s, the new youth "rebellion" emerged in England with the "Punks." Dick Hebdige analyzes British youth cultures in Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London and New York: Methuen & Co, 1979). The decade is left out in most accounts of American "Generations"—I assume no one wants to write about "Disco."
6. The Children of the Eighties

Maybe we're your conscience in disguise
We're well informed and we are wise
Please stop telling us lies.

—Joan Baez, "(For the) Children of the Eighties" (1983)

6.1. The Blank Generation

I belong to the ____ Generation
But I can take it or leave it each time

—The Voidoids, "Blank Generation" (1977)

6.1.1. "Brat-Packers" and their MTV Novels

On August 1st in 1981, a new 24 hour cable channel called "MTV: Music Television" aired for the first time in the United States. It not only captured "a considerable share of the advertising directed at the youth and young adult/yuppie market," but also supplied a new "Generation" with a new name: "MTV Generation."

This was not the only name tag for the young Americans that came of age during the 1980s, though. When in 1991 Coupland's Generation X was identified as "a succinct and groundbreaking portrait of that increasingly spotlighted, embittered group born between 1961 and 1971," this group had already received a variety of labels: "Sometimes it is called the lost generation; sometimes the baby busters. Whatever the nickname, it is a post '80s generation of young adults that has been handed not just an empty platter but a platter empty of possibilities" (Abcarian). This emptiness is reflected by another nickname that was given to a group of young writers emerging from the New York scene in the middle 1980s:

These writers did not constitute a very large group, however. Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, and Bret Easton Ellis were the core of what was 'identified as 'brat-pack' writers although this derisive term has little meaning beyond being a convenient media label," as Elizabeth Young claims, who together with Graham Caveney published a collection of Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction in 1992. In the introduction to their critical "in-depth reading" of these authors "who, despite much media attention, have never been closely examined," Young and Caveney speak of a "renaissance" of the arts in New York at that time:

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There is no doubt now that New York underwent a creative renaissance in all the arts during the 1980s. The punk ethos of getting out there and doing something affected not only musicians but also young writers. [...] These new Lower East Side or "Downtown" writers wrote a flat affectless prose which dealt with all aspects of contemporary urban life: crime, drugs, sexual excess, media overload, consumer madness, inner-city decay and fashion-crazed nightlife. It was an instantly recognizable style with an obvious appeal to a young metropolitan readership and the group soon widened to include writers from all over America. (Young and Caveney, Introduction)

Ellis' *Less Than Zero* (1985), written when he was just 20, was promoted as "The Shocking Novel of the New Lost Generation" (back cover blurb). It was successful—like McInerney's and Janowitz's novels—"for a very simple reason. It appealed straightforwardly to younger readers; it concerned a world they knew, one of drugs and clubs and MTV" (Young 3). Also, there was "an understandable urge to see in Ellis and his youthful confrères a new generation of scribes such as had not been seen since the emergence of the Beat writers. The fuss and froth was reminiscent of the music press's rapturous discovery of Punk in 1975" (Young 16). These links between literature and music are seen as a legacy of the 1960s:

During the post-war period, the music industry has assumed a virtual total hegemony over the lives of adolescents, providing all that they need in terms of stimulus, nourishment and romance. The disaffected young intellectual of earlier generations would be likely to turn to bohemianism, art, politics and literature, or a combination thereof. After the early 1960s when Bob Dylan demonstrated that a persuasive way with metaphor paid off, and with credibility, the same disaffected youth would almost certainly turn to the music business. (Young 3)

The "new" literature that the "Brat-Pack" writers of the "Blank Generation" produced had a significant appeal to young readers: "When *Less Than Zero* and *Bright Lights, Big City* [McInerney, 1984] were published, young people read them. Despite the high-handed tone of the critics and their sneering put-downs, they read these books. They were a relief. They described the known world" (10). As Young notes, the novels that many young people had read in the decades before did not appeal to the '80s audience anymore:

I happened to teach English to college students at this time. What did they read? They read of course, the music press, the style magazines, the listings magazines. They stowed away great quantities of genre and pulp fiction [...]. They had invariably been given *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, at school, just as I had been. Although they had no particular objection to these books they certainly found them very quaint. A deep Southern childhood where adults were addressed as "Ma'am"? Twitchy fifties New York preppies drinking highballs (highballs?). What was this shit? To multi-cultural urban students these books were worlds away. (Young 9-10)

Young explains this reluctance of young readers to accept the literary hand-me-downs that their elders deemed essential with the advent and widespread recognition of literary Postmodernism: "The postmodern form in literature has come to challenge truths about fiction and about reality in response to the flow of images from this capitalist spectacle and at the same time to self-reflexively examine the ways in which fiction itself is constructed" (Young 13). The conditions for literary production had undergone a decisive change:
Additionally it is impossible in fictional terms nowadays to unselfconsciously create "character" as it existed in the traditional novel or what Jean-François Lyotard called "Grand narrative". The world in which Dickens could "write" a Fagin is gone. We are in another country where the author is dead and "character" comes to us in wraiths, projections, pastiche, mutating entities, archetypes, comic cut-outs and intertextual refugees from history, film, fiction and myth. (Young 20)

6.1.2. "Facts All Come with Points of View"

As much as Young and Caveney call attention to these fundamental changes and the dubiousness of labels like "Blank Generation," they still read literary history in terms of parallels, forerunners, role models, generational "voices," and, ultimately, the familiar "myths" about prominent writers and their eras and "Generations." Young claims that the 1920s were, "like the eighties, a decade of extremely conspicuous consumption for moneyed, status-conscious pleasure-seekers and there was an enormous gulf between them and the underprivileged masses in American society" (18). Accordingly, she sees "unmistakable parallels with the 'brat-pack' writers' own experience of literary stardom in the 1980s, which helps to account for the very slight traces of Fitzgerald in their books" (18):

If Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney had a literary forerunner, it is surely F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald is a more complex, a more lyrical writer than either but he too was successful very young and became the literary pin-up for the Jazz Babies of his generation. His early work was also understood to have a quasi-autobiographical element and he too felt impelled to chart the behavior of the young people around him. (Young 17)

Despite the "significant differences between Ellis's success as a representative voice of the younger generation and the careers of previous youth chroniclers" (18) Young sees, she still yields to the tendency to group together different authors under one label, along with their youthful readers. This is a way of writing literary history that relies on equations, comparisons, and "literary recycling" as much as the chronicles of previous "Generations" did—a "critical shorthand" that makes it easier to talk about one's observations and interpretations. Consequently, a certain continuity of literary history is implied, because even if differences are noted, they are constituted only by comparisons and references to what had been written about literature before. The observations already are interpretations, as one cannot assume a position outside the observed cultural system—an effect Young herself notices when she comments on the use of irony in postmodern fiction:

When one exists completely within a culture, as do the young writers we are studying who have no memory of the certainties and judgments of the pre-sixties world, even though that culture may be a self-conscious and "ironic" one itself in many ways (look at advertising), it is impossible to sustain ironic comment about that culture as if one were writing from without it. (Young 15)

When Young calls Douglas Coupland and Mark Leyner "[y]ounger Blank Generation writers" (15), she simply extends the term to include authors who, as in Coupland’s case, published their work more than half a decade after those who were the "original" and "[i]n fact […] the only 'brat-pack' writers" (16). Here, Young
is arguing from within a system of classifying literature she herself helped sustain. The categorizations and periodizations that are used to write literary history never are indisputable facts; the "Facts all come with points of view / Facts don't do what I want them to," which is a quote from a Talking Heads song ("Cross-eyed and Painless," 1980) the narrator in Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* keeps on his desk.\(^\text{141}\) He is working in the Department of Factual Verification of a New York magazine, though "[i]n fact, you don't want to be in Fact. You'd much rather be in Fiction" (22).\(^\text{142}\) "Facts just twist the truth around," as The Talking Heads point out.

While Young and Caveney continue a tradition of writing literary history that does not openly acknowledge the twisted shape of "facts," "truth" and "reality" in their texts, they nevertheless stress the importance of fictional literature in these postmodern times: "Literature is for us all a still, small voice of calm and sanity in a clamorous ocean of hyperbole, frenzied advertisings and ecstatic misinformation. Ironically, fiction is now the closest we're likely to come to truth and as such it should be loved and cherished" (Introduction). The literature they examine seems to be very aware of this irony, and in the case of *Bright Lights, Big City*, it also comments on the mechanics of writing literary history and literature in terms of nostalgic references to "Generations."

The narrator of the novel wants to be a writer, but has a problem: "You were gathering experiences for a novel. You went to parties with writers, cultivated a writerly persona. You wanted to be Dylan Thomas without the paunch, F. Scott Fitzgerald without the crack-up. You wanted to skip over the dull experience of actual creation" (40). Alex Hardy, working in the Department of Fiction of the same magazine the narrator works for, is "a Fiction Editor Emeritus, a relic from the early days" (63) and an alcoholic. His "main function seems to be as the totem figure of Continuity and Tradition," and he sometimes comes to the Department of Factual Verification and "waxes nostalgic" (63). The young, aspiring narrator/writer has a fantasy: "Under his tutelage, you begin to write and publish. His exertion on your behalf renews his sense of purpose. You become a team, Fitzgerald and Perkins all over again. Soon he's promoting a new generation of talent—your disciples—and you're evolving from your Early to your Later Period" (63-4). Ironically, this fantasy is destroyed when the old "totem figure," representing the myth of some "golden age" in American literature, expresses his views on the future of fiction, asking, "Have you ever considered getting an MBA?" (64):

"I'm not saying necessarily go into business. But write about it. That's the subject now. The guys who understand business are going to write the new literature. Wally Stevens said money is a kind of poetry, but he didn't follow his own advice." He tells you there was the golden age of Papa and Fitzgerald and Faulkner, then a silver age in which he played a modest role. He thinks we're now in a bronze age, and that fiction has nowhere to go. It can run but it can't hide. The new writing will be about technology, the global economy, the electronic ebb and flow of wealth. "You're a smart boy," he says. "Don't be seduced by all that crap about garrets and art." (McInerney 65)

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142 The novel is narrated in the second person.
Fiction not only *is* a commodity that is produced, bought and sold within a system governed by economic interests—and where totem figures of "Continuity and Tradition" often hold the positions of power—, the new fiction will also be *about* economics and business. When a supposedly "new generation of talent" is promoted by this system, this might be less indication of characteristic and discernible changes within the literature than it is a marketing strategy. However, one has to bear in mind that this comment on the state of American fiction in McInerney's novel is fictional *itself*. A look at the *non-*literary "Generation" that was heralded from the late 1980s on, though, shows that its supposedly *factual* representations indicate a similar trend towards marketing, economic interests, and fiction.

**6.2. There's a Gap for Everyone**

*The Atlantic* predicted in a sixteen-page piece that a new generation gap would open as earnest baby boomers confront a youthful "carnival culture" devoted to "physical frenzy and spiritual numbness." [...] Even the proper name of this newly ascendant group is commonly debated. MTV suggested, of course, "The MTV Generation," and Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X* and Richard Linklater’s film *Slacker* each proposed different generational sobriquets. Behind these efforts at labeling lurks the increasingly received—and inherently dubious—idea that the generation that came of age in the age of Reagan has finally crafted a distinct identity of its own.143

**6.2.1. Twentysomethings**

In 1990, the July 16 issue of *Time* magazine had a photo showing five young persons on its cover, each looking in a different direction.144 With the epithet "twentysomething" hovering above their heads, the cover also featured the question whether they were "Laid back, late blooming or just lost? Overshadowed by the baby boomers, America's next generation has a hard act to follow." Like several times before in 20th century America, a fundamental *difference* between younger and older Americans was testified when the *Time* issue’s cover story announced "The Twentysomething Generation:"

This crowd is profoundly different from—even contrary to—the group that came of age in the 1960s and that celebrates itself each week on *The Wonder Years* and *thirtysomething*. By and large, the 18-to-29 group scornfully rejects the habits and values of the baby boomers, viewing that group as self-centered, fickle and impractical.145

David M. Gross and Sophfronia Scott characterize these "Twentysomethings" as the "group of 48 million young Americans ages 18 through 29" (57). They "have trouble making decisions," have "few heroes, no anthems, no style to call their own;" they "crave entertainment, but their attention span is as short as one zap of a TV dial;" they "hate yuppies, hippies and druggies," and they "possess only a hazy sense of their own identity but a monumental preoccupation with all the problems the preceding generation will leave for them to fix" (57). "As a whole they are[n’t] the people who are going to define America in the 21st century," the author of "Twentysomethings" magazine concluded in a December 1990 cover story. 146

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144 Unfortunately, I have not been able to reproduce a picture of this cover in a satisfying quality.
145 David M. Gross and Sophfronia Scott, "Proceeding with Caution. The Twentysomething Generation," *Time* (16 July 1990): 57.— Gross and Scott state that "baby boomers" are usually defined as the 72 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964,” a group "so huge that it tends to define every era it passes through, forcing society to accommodate its moods and dimensions" (57).
generation, 53% said the group is worried about the future" (58); they are "afraid of relationships in general" (59); they constitute "the best-educated generation in U.S. history" (60) and "crave grades, performance evaluations and reviews. They want a quantification of their achievement. After all, these were the children who prepped diligently for college-aptitude exams and learned how to master Rubik's Cube and Space Invaders. They are consummate game players and grade grubbers" (59). Twentysomethings pine "for a romanticized past when the issues were clear and the troops were committed" (61); while they "need role models and leaders" like all young adults, "the twentysomething generation has almost no one to look up to" (61), and "[m]arketers are confounded as they try to reach a generation so rootless and noncommittal" (61).

"Twentysomethings" also seem to have a new cultural sensibility. Gross and Scott quote one Devin Schaumburg, age 20, as saying, "We expect less, we want less, but we want less to be better […]. If we're just trying to pick up the pieces, put it all back together, is there a label for that?" (57). This sense of putting the fragments and pieces that were left to them back together induced critics to "dismiss the new generation as culture vultures. But there is another way of looking at them: as open-minded samplers of an increasingly diverse cultural buffet" (62). Still, "[e]ven many of the fiction writers who emerged in the late 1980s—Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, to name the usual subjects, seemed to be in it for the money and fame" (Gross and Scott 62). However, the rather dreary image of young Americans and their culture that is conveyed in the Time article seems to be constructed mainly out of a telling comparison to the usual subjects:

Down deep, what frustrated today's young people—and those who observe them—is their failure to create an original youth culture. The 1920s had jazz and the Lost Generation, the 1950s created the Beats, the 1960s brought everything embodied in the Summer of Love. But the twentysomething generation has yet to make a substantial cultural statement. (Gross and Scott 62)

The myth of these former "Generations" and their supposedly more substantial cultural statements is very much alive in the Time article. Those who observe "today's young people" uphold it without questioning, enforcing a version of what is probably their history upon them. It seems that the supposedly "new" generation gap makes sense only in reference to those that preceded it and because of a collective agreement on their mythical representations. The "gap" already lies in the eyes of the observers—a prefiguration of the demographical facts and figures which does not construct an indisputable account of the social conditions.

Alexander Star, deconstructing "The Twentysomething Myth" in 1993, writes that it "seems that the '60s fantasy of youth cohesion and control has returned less because young people believe in it themselves than because their elders believe
that they should" (23): He thinks that the "idea of generational culture is itself largely a byproduct of the considerable leisure and prosperity that young people enjoyed in the '50s and '60s, together with the existence of overarching causes like Vietnam" (25) So today, "a generic youth culture has been assembled from above precisely because it doesn't exist down below" (25). However, this assemblage—or construction—is not only guided by nostalgia and ideological interests; there is also a decidedly economic factor involved.

6.2.2. Buy, Baby Bust, Buy!
The "new" generation of "Twentysomethings" is also called "Baby Busters," as Gross and Scott explain, because they "were born during a period when the U.S. birthrate decreased to half the level of its postwar peak, in the wake of the great baby boom" (57). Still, by whatever name they go, "so far they are an unsung generation, hardly recognized as a social force or even noticed much at all" (57).

This is not entirely true, as marketers and demographers had already recognized this different group of young adults before Time introduced it to a mainstream audience. In April 1989, American Demographics declared that "[a]mong young adults, the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is widening,"146 and that it is "harder than ever for young people to get a good start in life" (32). Blayne Cutler identifies the "baby-bust generation" as being born between 1965 and 1976, making up "fewer than 20 percent of the population, a small share compared with the baby boomers, who are one-third of Americans" (34). Still, these "Baby Busters" are far from being a homogenous group. A sidebar titled "The Future of a New Generation" (cf. 35) juxtaposes quotes from representants of "The Haves" and "The Have Nots," expressing contrary opinions. Quite interestingly, Cutler uses a television sitcom as an indicator for their different views on the future: "For young Americans, there's a fork in the road to the American dream. To find out where it starts, ask college kids and soldiers how they feel about The Cosby Show" (35). "The Haves" claim that "The Cosby Show is a big lie" (college student, age 19), and, "I know what I like. I know what I want, and commercials don't influence me at all" (college student, age 20). "The Have Nots" express different notions: "Hopefully, I'll have a family as nice as the Cosby's" (soldier, age 20), and, "I believe in beer commercials. There's a lot of fame and glory in it" (soldier, age 23).

While Cutler quotes a market researcher as saying that "[c]ontrary to the myth of the TV generation, college students do read" (36), he also states that freshman interest "in English, philosophy, economics, history, political science, psychology, education, geography, anthropology, foreign languages, and the arts has declined. Students intending to study these subjects accounted for one-third of all freshmen in 1966, but only 28 percent in 1988" (35). Cutler's conclusion paints a gloomy picture of the economic future of young adults in the late 1980s:

146 Blayne Cutler, "Up the Down Staircase. The Fortunes of a New Generation are Split Down the Middle," American Demographics (April 1989): 34.
The baby boomers had it tough in the 1960s and 1970s as they competed with each other to get into college and to get jobs. But they did not have it as hard as most of today's young adults, who are more likely to come from single-parent households, and who face college costs that are rising faster than wages. Even the hardest-working young adults may not be able to afford to go to college. If they can find a way, they are likely to find the reward: they will join the ranks of the "haves" in the new generation. (Cutler 41)

In July 1991, *American Demographics* reiterated its interest in "What Young Adults Want." The authors of this study claim that young adults "pursue a more materialistic version of the American Dream," that they are "more likely than baby boomers to see money as the most important reason to work" (24), and "their greater emphasis on work stems from a desire to have more goods" (33). While "[e]very new generation of Americans enters adulthood with its own expectations for family, work, and material well-being," the "life experiences" and expectations of older and younger Americans are again identified as being "very different" (26): "In more tranquil times, these expectations might be easy for older adults to understand. But today's young adults were born in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They grew up watching adults redefine the rules of work, marriage, family, and material success" (26).

Also, the concluding remarks of the 1991 study clearly point out why certain groups have an interest in the "Baby Busters" and the difference they represent: "Today's young people start with many aspirations that are markedly different from those of baby boomers. Business cannot target young adults with the same messages that worked a decade ago" (33). Quite simply, young adults are viewed as an important target market—and marketers and business administrators want to know how to sell things to them. Consequently, the "reality" and "truth" of the media attention to young adults is governed and shaped by predominantly economical concerns. The "gap" has to be exploited and filled with messages about consumer goods—"What Young Adults Want" might actually be less important than what marketers, who use the data presented in these studies, want them to buy. Ironically, the exploitation of the "gap" can be taken quite literally, as the name and advertising campaign of one of the most successful clothing companies in the U.S. demonstrates: "The Gap has built a clothing empire by securing a teenage base and then launching a retail assault on babies and the middle-aged; its latest campaign puns that 'For Every Generation There's a Gap'" (Star 25).

6.3. Generations

Baby Boomers selling you rumors of their history
Forcing youth away from the truth of what’s real today

—Mike Watt, “Against the ’70s” (1995)

6.3.1. American History According to Boomers

Many have told us this book could only have been written by Boomers, which indeed your authors are […] Boomers remain the twentieth century’s most generation-conscious peer group, one that has overwhelmed all thinking about the subject over the past few decades. As Boomers come to dominate the media, the word "generation" is today being heard more often in news, entertainment, and advertising than at any time since the late 1960s. (Strauss and Howe, Generations 13)

William Strauss and Neil Howe openly admit that their interpretation of American history in terms of "Generations" is a typical "Boomer" approach. Their History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069 is an extensive and complex study, attempting to restore a sense of history in a time where "people of all ages feel a disconnection with history" and many have "difficulty placing their own thoughts and actions, even their own lives, in any larger story" (7). To their knowledge, they are "the first to define, locate, and name the entire sequence of American generations" (85). These generations are identified by marking differences between them, based on the assumption that "[a]s each of us grows older, we look at people of other ages and wonder whether we are changing or they are changing. The answer, quite often, is neither: We were both different to begin with. We were born at different times. We belong to different groups" (48). These generational groups all have discernible and individual characteristics:

A generation, like an individual, merges many different qualities, no one of which is definitive standing alone. But once all the evidence is assembled, we can build a persuasive case for identifying (by birthyear) eighteen generations over the course of American history. All Americans born over the past four centuries have belonged to one or another of these generations. (Generations 68)

Strauss and Howe are not satisfied with a mere categorization of different "Generations" of the past. They also want to present a history of the future by asserting "a recurring dynamic of generational behavior that seems to determine how and when we participate as individuals in social change—or social upheaval" (8). Claiming that "this dynamic repeats itself" (8), they argue that "if the future replays the past, so too must the past anticipate the future" (8). By proposing a model of a "Generational Cycle," Strauss and Howe want to show how a pattern runs through American history, a four-part "set of consecutive generations" (430).

For an understanding of this concept, some key terms have to be explained. The "Glossary" of Generations (429-431, all the following definitions are taken from these pages) defines "Generation" as a "cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality." "Cohort" means "All persons born in the same year;" a "Cohort-Group" is "All persons born in a limited span of consecutive years." "Phases of Life" are "Twenty-
two-year age brackets defined according to social role”—“Elderhood,” "Midlife," "Rising Adulthood," and "Youth." A "Peer Personality" is a "generational persona" that is determined, among other factors, by "common beliefs and behavior." Strauss and Howe distinguish four basic personality types, "Idealist," "Reactive," "Civic," and "Adaptive," constituting, in this order, the "Generational Cycle."

While this brief explanation of only some of the basic terms in *Generations* is already puzzling, the most interesting aspect of the book is its coincidental portrayal of a new "Generation" of Americans born between 1961 and 1981, the time span earlier allocated to the "Twentysomethings" and "Baby Busters," and later to "Generation X." Strauss and Howe, however, claim in 1991 that "[t]o date, this generation has no consensus name" (31). They do not hesitate to introduce a new name for it: "We label it the 13th Generation—partly for the gauntlet its members see in its 'bad' reputation, also in recognition that it is the thirteenth to know the American nation and flag" (31).

### 6.3.2. Rosemary’s Babies

The next generational train rolls into the coming-of-age station wearing shades, averting the critical glare of the adult world. We have seen this generation before. These were the first babies American women took pills not to have, *Rosemary’s Baby*, the children of sharply rising divorce and poverty rates, pupils in experimental classrooms without walls, latchkey kids, precocious Gary Coleman and Tatum O’Neal, pubescent of the sex-obsessed 1970s, Valley girls, college students criticized by one blue-ribbon commission after another, young singles of the post-AIDS social scene, inner-city drug entrepreneurs, "boomerang" children living at home after college, the best-qualified recruits in military history, the hard-nosed invaders of Panama, and the defenders of Persian Gulf oil. (*Generations* 30-31)

Strauss and Howe use Roman Polanski’s 1968 movie *Rosemary’s Baby* as a historical marker for what they call a "decade-long popularity of bad-children films" (318). Calling the "Generation" born in that period "13ers" retains the spooky quality many of these movies possessed, and the "Boomers" who chose that name admit that the tag is "a little Halloweenish, like the clothes they wear—and slippery, like their culture" (324). The term "Baby Busters" is deemed incorrect and insulting by Strauss and Howe, as they find that population is not the issue: "Thirteeners outnumber Boomers by ten million in 1990, a gap widening by the year, and their first-wave (1961-1964) cohorts are among the biggest ever" (324).

Nevertheless, "the worst aspect of this 'bust' normer, and why 13ers resent it, is how it plants today’s 25-year-olds squarely where they don't want to be: in the

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148 The examples they give are *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcist II*, *Damien*, *Omen*, *Omen II*, *Omen III*, *It’s Alive!, It Lives Again*, *Demon Seeds* (cf. 97). They also claim, "Never in the age of cinema have producers and audiences obsessed over such a thoroughly distressing image of childhood" (97). The English language "has no single word to describe what happened to the child’s world in the 1970s. The Germans do. They call it Kinderfeindlichkeit—a society-wide hostility toward children" (98).
shadow of the 'boom,' and negatively so" (324). One may question why the term "13ers" should be less shadowy and negative, but Strauss and Howe are quite aware that they may encounter decidedly critical reactions from younger readers:

If you are a 13er, we can imagine a cautious reception. Here we are, two writers from a generation you don't especially like, laying bare your generation's problems and affixing a label with an ominous ring. Back in the 1920s, Gertrude Stein, then in her mid-forties, did much the same to her thirtyish juniors, and the name she chose (The "Lost Generation") was just perverse enough to catch on with the rising cultural elite. (11-12)

Yet again, the familiar "Lost Generation" legend is used as the paradigm for a new "lost" American youth. "Analogues are familiar to anyone who has ever talked about generations" (108), but this habitually uncritical borrowing of the Gertrude Stein source and the information that 'Thirteeners are sometimes described as a 'Lost' (or 'New Lost') generation" (108) have a rather tiring effect. Also, the reference to Rosemary's Baby and to the "Lost Generation" legend are symptomatic for a general characteristic of Generations. While its authors have used a staggering amount of sources—the "Notes on Sources" section occupies 56 pages—they move freely from factual to fictional information without differentiation:

Much like River Phoenix in the film Running on Empty, first-wave 13ers have had to cope and survive in whatever territory the Boom has left behind, at each phase of life. Their early access to self-expression and independence stripped them of much of the pleasure of discovery and rebellion—leaving them, in Bret Easton Ellis' words, "looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun." By the time Ellis' peers came of age, the symbolic meanings—of sex, drugs, student rights, whatever—had all faded. What they found, instead, were the harsh realities of social pathology. (321)

This seemingly careless mixture of fact and fiction and the drawing of "real life" conclusions from fictional sources could be further illustrated by any number of quotations. Sometimes, there even is a clear preference for fiction. When Strauss and Howe quote from Thomas Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again—"You can't get away from it. You're a part of it whether you want to be or not" (qtd. in Generations 58), with "it" meaning the "Lost Generation"—they contrast it with the attempts by demographers to define "Baby Boomers" as having been born between 1946 and 1964: 'But this statistical definition fails Wolfe's 'you belong to it' test. [...] Clearly, Wolfe understood something that demographers didn't" (58).

The assertion that the book "presents the 'history of the future' by narrating a recurring dynamic of generational behavior" (8, my italics) and that "Boomers, 13ers, and Millennials are just now beginning to build a generational drama that will continue to unwind for decades to come" (298, my italics) make reading Generations as a historical and sociological study a rather ambiguous experience. While often fascinating and insightful, it as often seems contrived and artificial. The theory of the "Cohorts" in a "Generational Cycle," predicting the future in

149 Quite interestingly, one of Strauss' and Howe's sources for their "Thirteenth Generation" chapter reveals that the term "McJob" was known before Coupland used it in Generation X: McJobs are "the low-wage counter, delivery, and cleaning jobs Boomers have found demeaning—the 'McJobs' that Amitai Etzioni describes as 'more time-consuming, less character-building' [in "Teens Overemployed," Cleveland Plain Dealer 2 Nov. 1987] than what talented youths used to look forward to" (Generations 330).
terms of "Generational Constellations," "Constellational Eras" and "Constellational Moods" (cf. "Glossary"), is strongly connotative of astrology, which the authors themselves admit: "Small wonder that skeptics have regarded the cohort generation, like astrology, as a provocative idea searching blindly for a reason. Or that Bob Dylan might seem to have the last word on the subject" (440). Indeed, he has.

Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide, the chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon, for the wheel's still in spin
And there's no telling who that it's namin'
For the loser now will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin' —Bob Dylan, "The Times They are A-Changin'" (1963)

6.4. Telling Life Stories

The survey of "Generations" in 20th century America has shown that Coupland's Generation X was written and published at a time when the generational debate was in full bloom—if there ever was a time when it was not flowering exorbitantly. This undoubtedly also influenced the reception of the book, as Alexander Star notes: "Although Coupland satirizes the impulse, many readers have scanned his work, somewhat desperately, for instant summaries of the new generation" (22).

Moreover, the fictional quality of most accounts of literary and non-literary "Generations," up to the point of constituting myths, has become evident. Especially in the case of the "Lost Generation," used as a paradigm for its descendants, the blending of facts and fiction—if they can be discerned as such at all—appeared as instrumental in the construction of "social reality." As the mythologized accounts of "Generations" are referred to again and again by literary historians, literary critics, and sociologists, they are enforced until they attain the status of being facts. The idea that there is a "New Lost Generation" can be repeatedly recycled because the cyclic pattern emerging out of its "historical" accounts is itself a narrative construct—and not a historical fact: a pattern is visible because those who wrote the accounts collectively agreed on its existence and viability. This is neither a case of "art imitating life," nor of "life imitating art," it points out that the category "life" already implies narrative constructedness—a "life story"—a "tale."

Douglas Coupland chose to use a "Generation" title for his Tales for an Accelerated Culture in 1991, a decision that seems to invite comparisons and references to the stories of other "Generations." Telling stories, however, is an important theme in the novel itself, but how does the "X Generation" tell its tales? Strauss and Howe, concluding their introductory first chapter in Generations, claim that "today's small children lie not at the end, but near the beginning of a new generational cycle. And they will have many new tales to tell" (40). While no small child, Coupland also had many new tales to tell in Generation X. Thus, reading—not scanning—these tales should provide an answer.
7. Reading Generation X

7.1. A Book to Love and Hate

Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* [...] announced to North American readers that we could all stop making those lip-bitten Virgilian speeches about the disappearance of literature because, yes, indeed, there is going to be another generation of writers. *Generation X* also promised that literature in the near future might look different from the antiquated formalism currently published, and that Douglas Coupland is likely to be among our leading literary lights in coming years.  

*Generation X* is such a negligible book that one has to believe it's something like *A Brief History of Time* or Foucault's *Pendulum* for Ecch, a temporarily hip book to be glanced at but not actually read.  

To say that critical reaction to *Generation X* was mixed would be understatement—Coupland's first novel evoked both over-enthusiastic praise and bitter hatred, and these emotional responses from opposite ends of the scale do not mix well. Still, the strong reader reactions illustrate that *Generation X* was not just another debut novel by a young writer. Even those who dismissed it as being "shallow" and a "remorselessly pretentious book" cannot deny that it received attention like few other novels in its time. Sarah Dunn, in *The Official Slacker Handbook* (London: Abacus, 1994), includes it in her list of "The Books We Love to Hate" (83), but the section in which this list appears is titled "Pretending to Read" (82). Could it be the case that the "Generation X" debate overshadowed the reception of the novel, making it a hip book to hate, but not to actually read?  

While this would support the claim that the novel *Generation X* cannot be separated from the "Generation X" discourse (cf. 3.4.4.), it also stresses the need for close reading and detailed analysis of the text in question. Even an informed and well-balanced critique like Lainsbury's "*Generation X* and the End of History" falls prey to the temptation of transferring "Generation X" stereotypes into the discussion of the novel: "The focal point of Gen X consciousness, its producer and product, its medium and message, is television. By default, television becomes for Gen X a replacement for the discredited master narratives of Western Civilization" (235). Lainsbury fails to realize that television plays a distinctively minor role in the lives of the principle characters in *Generation X*. While the narrator, at age fifteen, is...
"happily watching snowy network television offerings" (3) at the beginning of the novel, and feigns "interest in a TV Guide" (81) to evade conversation with Tobias, it is disclosed later that Andy does not even own a TV, as his younger brother Tyler remarks with astonishment and concern (cf. 149). In the first chapter, the characters do not gather to watch TV, but to see the sun rise (cf. 7). Instead of consuming the "offerings" of television and assuming that "merely renting a video on a Saturday night" is enough (11), they come together for a different purpose: "we come up with stories and we tell them to each other" (14). The "discredited master narratives" are being replaced by "bedtime stories" (14), not by television.

Thus, a contextualizing approach makes close reading necessary rather than doing away with it. The attributes of the text have to be analyzed before their relation to contextual circumstances can be established, as Lainsbury's lapse illustrates. Television is not a central issue of the novel—its visual aspect, however, is.

7.2. Visual Art
7.2.1. It Just Does Not Look Like a Novel

"Looking back on it now, I can see that there were these enormous flashing neon signs saying, 'Doug, be a writer, Doug, be a writer,' which I didn't pay any attention to. It wasn't even until two (or three) years ago that I even thought of myself as a writer and made the commitment and decided not to do (visual) art any more."159

There can be little doubt that Generation X is intended to be a text that tests a reader's preconceptions as to what a novel should be. [...] Coupland's training in the visual arts influences his construction of the book. Even its size and shape serve to defamiliarize the reader. It just does not look like a novel. (Lainsbury 230)

Douglas Coupland's artistic career began with visual art and design, and before he concentrated on writing, he was a sculptor. In November and December 1987, when he was 26, he had a solo show at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), an installation titled "The Floating World."160 Stephen Godfrey, who reviewed the show, notes that Coupland was "the youngest artist to receive a solo show at the VAG in several years," and calls it "an extraordinary catalogue of, and tribute to, symbols of both urban and art history."161 Promising as this start seemed, Coupland's career moved in a different direction: "It marked the end of my brief professional sculpture career, and after the show I began writing full time."162

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158 There is one instance when Andy actually watches television (cf. 144). It is in his parents' house, and he "inhale[s] a box of chocolate Lu cookies while watching cable TV," and later realizes, "I am so bored I think I'm going to faint." Consuming—inhaling—television provides no distraction here; it rather supports the feeling he should have stayed in Palm Springs ("This was not a good idea coming home for Christmas."), back where there is no TV. Furthermore, it is the "Global Teen" (cf. 105-6) Tyler who reveals television as being his focal point of consciousness when he, faced with the candles Andy set up on Christmas Day, exclaims, "It's a video, Andy, [...] a total video" (147).


161 Coupland's "Scrap Book" on his website (http://www.coupland.com/6_00.html) features two pictures from his exhibition as well as a review (Stephen Godfrey, "Brooding nature meets urban cool in Vancouver shows," The Globe and Mail 28 Nov. 1987). This is how Coupland describes it: "The overall size of the installation was 32 x 32 feet, and the objects were all handmade out of wood and plastic. The show was titled, 'The Floating World—an illusion [sic!] to the Japanese term used to describe the transient nature of bourgeois life'" (http://www.coupland.com/6_02.html).

162 All quotes from Godfrey's review are taken from its "reprint" on Coupland's website.

162 Qtd. from Coupland's introduction on his website (http://www.coupland.com/6_02.html).
Coupland’s background and training as a visual artist and sculptor is highly significant for his work as a writer. It stresses the importance of *bricolage* (cf. 3.5.) for his overall artistic concept, as will be illustrated later. Describing Coupland’s VAG show, Godfrey observes "an emphasis that artistic symbols and their inspiration, in everyday life, are a part of the same inventory." He finds it "appropriate that the installation is in the Children’s Gallery, because the elements of The Floating World have the direct simplicity of building blocks or pieces of a jigsaw, simply waiting for each viewer to put the pieces together.” Also, the sensitive set-up of the objects "allows viewers to forget the objects’ normal scale and context and to accept their new, surrealistic arrangement.”\(^{163}\)

Turning to Coupland’s novel *Generation X*, its design is its first striking aspect—even before opening the pages.\(^{164}\) It does not have a "normal scale;" 9.00 x 7.88 inches are not the standard and familiar dimensions for paperback novels. The clouds in the upper half of the front and lower half of the back cover appear to be an over-familiar sight only until one notices that they are upside-down. Moreover, there is not just one, but a variety of colors the novel comes in: bright yellow, orange, pink, green, and white, with either the top (the clouds) or the lower half colored, or the picture of the clouds being inverted.\(^{165}\)

Opening the book and looking at the actual text does not help its appearance as a "normal" novel either. The wide margins feature illustrations (by Paul Rivoche), slogans (like "Economy of Scale is Ruining Choice" 80), and, predominantly, the "Gen X" vocabulary: definitions of newly coined words and terms like "Option Paralysis: The tendency, when given unlimited choices, to make none" (139), often illustrated by examples: "Ultra Short Term Nostalgia: Homesickness for the extremely recent past: 'God, things seemed so much better in the world last week’" (96).

However, other characteristics of the text are not that unusual. There are 179 pages, divided into three parts of eleven, twelve, and eight chapters respectively, making a total of 31 chapters, plus an appendix titled "Numbers" (181-183), consisting of statistical and demographic data. The chapters vary in length between barely one page ("Grow Flowers," 129-130) and eight pages ("Adventure Without Risk is Disneyland" 153-160); they are titled, but not numbered.

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163 Coupland’s ongoing interest in this technique is documented in the "Collages" section of his website (http://www.coupland.com/collages.html).

164 I am referring to the U.S. paperback edition of the novel that St. Martin’s Press published in March 1991 (there was no hardcover edition). The UK edition has the same dimensions and text design, but a different cover design.

165 Page iv of *Generation X* identifies Judith Stagnitto as the designer of the book. It is not clear how far Coupland was involved in this, but his website features his original cover design with the comment, 'This is what I wanted the cover of 'Generation X' to look like but the publishers didn’t go for it' (http://www.coupland.com/1_02.html).
This look at the design of the book and its text creates an ambivalent impression. Is this "experimental" fiction, or, on closer inspection, a rather "conventional" text that was just designed to look "postmodern" and extraordinary? Reading the novel should provide clarification. Still, even before matters of plot, action, and stylistic traits become the center of interest, the encounter with the novel's protagonists might cause further perplexity, due to what Lainsbury calls "a bizarre juxtaposition of the bland homogeneity of the well-groomed, white, middle-class cartoon characters and the flip iconoclasm of their utterances" (230)—or, in the less elaborate words of the narrator himself (cf. Generation X 82):

7.2.2. Do People Really Talk Like This?

Coupland originally intended to write a non-fictional book, a kind of "life style guide" for his generation.166 When he moved to Palm Springs, California, with the advance he got from St. Martin's Press, he "departed from the handbook format and began inventing characters," and Coupland himself claims the reason for this was that he wished he had "people to hang out with" (Neill and Matsumoto 105). Here are some random examples of how those people talk throughout the novel:

"Funnee, Dag, Funnee. God. Another bond peddler and another nouvelle dinner of seed bells and Evian water." (Generation X 6) — "Suddenly I was into this très deeply." (21) — "And pllll-eze don't try to tell me that somehow it's love." (84) — "Very well. But ne dump pas on moi, okay?" (85) — "Ciao, bambino," she says, "It's Splitsville for this little Neapolitan waif." (107) — "Yeah yeah yeah. So I'm early. And it is c-o-l-d out, Andy. Shocking cold; break-your-ears-off cold." (154) — "Fermez la bouche, Andy. It was rhetorical." (167)

The profusion of French words and phrases may be explained by the Canadian background the author shares with one of the principal characters, Dagmar Bellinghausen: "None of these Canadians translate the French phrases they use as part of their conversation, and the other characters understand them perfectly," as Laurel Boone notes in his review of Generation X, which he nevertheless calls an "essentially American book" (Boone 30). However, for non-Canadian readers these fragments of French in combination with the abundant use of italics and other typographic extravagances may cause a certain effect when reading the novel, the same effect Lainsbury detected in the design of the book and its text: it defamiliarizes the reader (cf. Lainsbury 230); it breaks with conventions, evokes surprise and puzzlement, and thus interrupts the flow of reading. This makes the "consumption" of the novel a difficult and complex task that requires participation and commitment, because the reader "is aware at all times of being inside a constructed thing rather than inhabiting the capitalistic dreamspace of contemporary realism, where the experience of fictional others is offered up as yet another mode of consumption" (Lainsbury 230).

166 Cf. Neill and Matsumoto, "X Marks The Angst" 105-6. — Cohen and Krugman dislike the book for its non-fiction origin: "One of the many reasons why Generation X is such a bad novel is that it wasn't conceived as fiction—Coupland's publishers originally commissioned him to pen a Preppie Handbook-style Ecch guide. Before he even wrote the first page Coupland decided that such a book was unworthy of his extraordinary talent" (Generation Ecch! 114).
This *foregrounding*\(^{167}\) of the materiality of the text can be further illustrated by two examples from two different levels. First, the *design* of the chapter beginnings with the cloud-motif inserts, echoing the book's cover, and the paragraph symbols ("¶"): a square (the hazy, gray clouds) framed by another square (the text of the chapter beginning) framed by the final square—the margins and boundaries of the whole book. Lainsbury claims that this is a "stylistic tic that calls attention, through their absence, to the conventions of the literary presentation of material" (231). As far as the "¶" symbols are concerned, one may also claim the opposite: it is their presence, their visibility, that stresses the text as being text. Usually, these paragraph markers convey their iconic meaning only in a typographic context, when a text is typeset. Now the reader sees them instead of a "real" paragraph break, so these symbols are used as substitutes for the function they symbolize.

The foregrounding is not only visible in the text's design; it also characterizes the way in which it is *narrated* to us. Andy, on the phone with Claire, illustrates "the note of confidence" in her voice by stating that there are "more italics than usual" (153), and her family has "italicized conversations" (34). *Italics* cannot be *heard*, they can only be *seen* in print, so Andy makes his readers aware that they are *reading* a text rather than *listening* to someone telling a story. The modulations of the voice that these italics represent, sometimes for a single syllable ("Chernobyl" 110; "Elena" 154), have to be realized by the reader's *interior* voice—which is *silent*, not audible, making the reading of the text a *visual* rather than an *oral* experience.

Consequently, the *visual* aspects of the book are by no means secondary; they shape the way it is read even before one starts doing so. Form and content are inseparable, and the editors of *Postmodern American Fiction* were aware of that when they preserved elements of the text's design in their reprinted excerpt from *Generation X*, which is no *organic* work of art in the Aristotelian sense:

> The avant-gardiste work proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artefact. The opposite holds true for the organic work: it seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. In the organic work of art the material is treated as a whole, while in the avant-gardiste work the material is torn out of the life totally and isolated. The aesthetic avant-gardiste fragment challenges people to make it an integrated part of their reality and to relate it to their experience. (Sarup 148)

With these general, but decisive points in mind, a reading of the novel now can be undertaken, concentrating on the concept of storytelling, in connection with the narrative structure of the book. Also, the characters' preoccupation with nuclear apocalypse and the "End of History" will be investigated. Concluding the reading, the "Generation" presented in the novel will be discussed. Is this "X Generation" Coupland is writing about really a "Generation?"

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167 For a definition of the term *foregrounding*, cf. ch. 4 in Geoffrey Leech's *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London: Longmann, 1969), "Foregrounding and Interpretation" (56-72): "As a general rule, anyone who wishes to investigate the significance and value of a work of art must concentrate on the element of interest and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern. Such deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms have been given that special name of 'foregrounding', which invokes the analogy of a figure seen against a background. The artistic deviation 'sticks out' from its background, the automatic system, like a figure in the foreground of a visual field" (57).
7.3. Reading Stories Told

7.3.1. Epigraphs

The fact that *Generation X* begins with two epigraphs has been neglected in reviews of the novel. The two quotes from people identified as "Tracey, 27" and "Helen, 52" (vii) give no further information about their origin. The first and longer quote is the description of the outfit of an unidentified woman and an example of the term defined on page 15, "Decade Blending: In clothing: the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood." In a novel that draws so much attention to its visual appearance, this "blending" method to create a personal clothing style can be seen as yet another instance of *bricolage*. Also, the mention of "that really sad blue the Russians used before they all started to wanting to buy Sonys and having Guy Laroche design their Politburo caps" (vii) makes clear that Tracey is referring to a world in which the borders between East and West, socialism and capitalism, have collapsed—the Russians now partake of the free market ("Sonys") and allow fashion designers to improve the look of their uniforms.

Tracey's quote is juxtaposed with the shorter statement by Helen, a mother who hesitates to kick her adult children out of the house: "It would be cruel. And besides—they're great cooks" (vii). Apparently, Helen refuses "Down-Nesting" (144) as a method to avoid her children. This also alludes to the idea of "Safety Net-ism: The belief that there will always be a financial and emotional safety net to buffer life's hurts. Usually parents" (34), an idea obviously nurtured by "children aged 20 to 30 who have boomeranged home" (144).

The epigraphs already introduce two important aspects of the novel: Firstly, an eclectic borrowing and "blending" of elements, in this case clothing styles from past decades, to construct a personal statement, and secondly, the relation between parents and children—the relation between two generations within a family.

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168 I have found no mention of these epigraphs in any articles, reviews etc. so far.
169 The "70s Mary Quant" make-up in the epigraph links it with the "Mary Quant earrings" in the example of Decade Blending (15).
170 Hebdige comments on the importance of *bricolage* for youth cultures in the section "Style as *bricolage*" in *Subculture* (102-106).
7.3.2. The Story as a Failure

The first chapter begins with an episode from the life of the first-person narrator who is as yet unidentified, the story of how he flew to Manitoba (Canada) at the age of fifteen "to witness a total eclipse of the sun" (3) in the late 1970s. After recounting this brief episode, the narration shifts to present tense, introduces the setting of Palm Springs, California, as well as his two neighbors and friends Dag (from Toronto, Canada) and Claire (from Los Angeles, California); his own identity is disclosed as Andy (from Portland, Oregon), and they are all at his bungalow (cf. 4-5). The time being a night "[o]ne and a half decades later" (4) with the late 1970s (1977-79) as the point of reference, the present year must be 1992, '93, or '94. Accordingly, Andy is "almost thirty" (47); Claire states she'll be "thirty soon" (6), and although there is no clear reference to Dag's age, it can be assumed that it is roughly the same. Andy and Dag are working as bartenders in a local bar; Claire is selling perfume at a local store (cf. 5).

The plot and time structure, or rather, the frame story,\textsuperscript{171} can be summed up easily. A few hours after watching the sun rise, the three (with Andy’s two dogs) drive to West Palm Springs Village to have a picnic. There, they tell each other stories, the first instance of storytelling in the novel, occupying the rest of part one (1-64). At the beginning of part two (65-130), Andy relates that Dag disappeared five days ago, the day after the picnic. He returns the following day, having spent the time in Nevada, visiting test sites for nuclear bombs. Tobias, Claire’s boyfriend, is introduced, and another day later, they are joined by Elvissa, another friend of Claire’s, and the five of them sit at the swimming pool next to Andy’s bungalow for the second major round of storytelling. The same night, Andy and Dag work at the bar, and Dag accidentally sets fire to a car on their way back, witnessed by a man named "the Skipper" (cf. 117). Andy, Dag and Claire then gather in Andy’s bungalow for the third round of storytelling, which concludes Part two. Part three (131-179) begins with another episode from fifteen years ago: the story of the group portrait of Andy’s family. Then, "[t]wo days before Christmas" (136),\textsuperscript{172} Andy flies to his parents and Claire flies to Tobias, who is in New York. Dag stays in Palm Springs. Andy celebrates Christmas with his parents and his younger brother Tyler and returns to Palm Springs five days after Christmas, on Dec. 30 (cf. 153), and has a phone conversation with Claire. She recounts her adventures in New York with Tobias and his mother Elena. The following night, Dec. 31, Andy and Dag work as bartenders at a party at movie producer Bunny Hollander’s house in Palm Springs, and it is disclosed that it was Hollander’s car that Dag had burned. At the party, the police appear and take Dag with them to question him about the car. The next morning, "New Years Day" (169), Andy is on the road and

\textsuperscript{171}Due to reasons pointed out in the following, I favor the term "frame story" instead of "plot."

\textsuperscript{172}While the time frame for Andy’s narration in parts one and two can be easily reconstructed due to explicit mentions of how many days have passed—a period of nine nights and eight days—, there is no indication as to how many days pass between part two and three. However, since Andy announces "Christmas with the family in Portland soon" early in part two (77), it can be assumed that the whole frame story (with the exception of New Years Day) takes place in December.
driving south to meet up with Claire and Dag, who have already departed. Due to some fortunate circumstances, the police did not believe Dag was responsible for the burned car. The three now want to open a hotel in San Felipe, Mexico.

One might be tempted to go even further and summarize the whole novel in even fewer words (or cartoon panels, for that matter): Andy, Dag, and Claire meet in the desert and tell each other stories, and at the end they disappear (cf. Fig. 10). This simple organization of the frame story prompted many critics to dismiss it as simplistic and to speak of the "marginal quality of the narrative" (Cohen and Krugman 114). If one considers how many of the time-honored "classics" in literary history feature an even simpler frame story, these reproaches seem peculiar. As the whole frame story is intercut with stories told by the characters, brief biographies, anecdotes, and comments from the narrator, its significance recedes into the background, stressing these sub-stories and providing the frame for them. Consequently, aspects like plot, action, character development, and other traits of more "traditional" novels become secondary in this fragmented and open form of the frame story.

Moreover, it is exactly this lack of any "Grand Narrative" that is portrayed in the characters's self-proclaimed project "to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process" (8) at the beginning of the novel and in Dag's friend Margaret's presumption that "most of us have only two or three genuinely interesting moments in our lives, the rest is filler, and that at the end of our lives, most of us will be lucky if any of those moments connect together to form a story that anyone would find remotely interesting" (23-24). At the end of the novel, Andy comments on the "failure" of one of the stories he told his friends: "I say the story was a failure, because, well, nothing happened" (172).

Frame, filler, failure, worthwhile tales—the concept and continuous process of storytelling is of central importance in the lives of the characters in Generation X, and thus for the whole novel. However, before investigating this framework of stories within the novel, its links to the framework without will be considered briefly. The framing visualized in the design of the chapter beginnings does not actually end with the margins and boundaries of the book itself, as no novel exists autonomously in the intertextual library of literary history.

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173 I am referring to "classics" like Arabian Nights, Boccaccio's The Decameron, and Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, but without the inference that Generation X has the same status in literary history (not yet, anyway).

174 Jean-François Lyotard introduced the term "Grand Narrative" in La condition postmoderne (1979). An English translation was not available to me, so I quote from the German edition (Das postmoderne Wissen. Ein Bericht. Graz: Edition Passagen, 1986): "In der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft und Kultur, also der postindustriellen Gesellschaft, der postmodernen Kultur, stellt sich die Frage der Legitimierung des Wissens in anderer Weise. Die große Erzählung hat ihre Glaubwürdigkeit verloren, welche Weise der Vereinheitlichung ihr auch immer zugeordnet wird: Spekulative Erzählung oder Erzählung der Emanzipation" (112). For discussions of the term, cf. ch. 6 in Sarup's Guide ("Lyotard and postmodernism"), and John Docker's chapters 9 ("Are We Living in a Postmodern Age?") and 10 ("Mapping Frederic Jameson's Grand Narrative") in Postmodernism and Popular Culture. Docker sums up Lyotard's critique of "Grand Narratives" this way: "In the postmodern age we no longer have a positivistic science that claims to know the truth; rather, science […] now tells stories, competing stories, as in any other area of knowledge" (109).
7.3.3. Intertextuality: More Than Xerox

*Less Than Zero* is no 'MTV novel,' a genre which due to the differences between visual and verbal texts will remain impossible. But it is a tale which manages to translate the fast-paced urgency, the total lack of historical awareness, the additive impact and the macabre glitter of musical television into narrative strategies which deserve to be taken seriously as expressions of a contemporary lifestyle and indications of future literary developments.¹⁷⁵

Ellis's debut was the first true *Ecch* novel, shifting the focus of the genre from earnest young professionals to soulless young punks. This chronicle of a passel of spoiled L.A. brats is told in the supposedly innovative form of short, videolike bursts of emotionally inert prose. (Cohen and Krugman 104)

"The intertextual connection of any one specimen text or region of discourse with any other or with many others is not a given, but an arbitrary, though interested, procedure," as Vincent Leitch points out (4). New Historians insist on "situating the text, on stitching it back into the intertextual quilt of its initial context," (Ryan xiii). In the case of *Generation X*, this procedure does not even need to be arbitrary and due only to the random connections the critic can form, depending on her/his literary knowledge and memory. In June 1998, a new reprint edition of *Less Than Zero* was published by Vintage Books, bearing the Library of Congress subject heading "Generation X—Fiction." With its original publication year being 1985, it is now indeed the first "X" novel.

The use of the label "Generation X" for Bret Easton Ellis' first novel apparently erased all the labels formerly associated with *Less Than Zero*, "MTV novel," "Blank Generation," and "Brat Pack." It has already been established that exactly the same process was observable in the case of the "Lost Generation" novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *This Side of Paradise* (cf. part 4.3.), and even the time span of six years between the two pairs of novels is corresponding (1920/26; 1985/91). There is still more that connects them: they were all "firsts," they were all successful, they all induced critics to talk about a new "Generation," and they all brought instant fame to their white, male, middle class authors. Also, all four novels feature two quotations as epigraphs. The clearly distinguishable similarities *Generation X* shares with *This Side of Paradise* end here, but the parallels to the other two novels in question only begin.

Both *The Sun Also Rises* and *Generation X* introduce the motif of "Generations" via their epigraphs, and both novels are concerned with the sun. Whereas in Hemingway's novel the cycle of the sun offers comfort, promising eternal renewal and regeneration as expressed in Ecclesiastes' view on coming and going generations, the first chapter of Coupland's novel announces that "The Sun is Your Enemy" (3). The total eclipse of the sun Andy witnesses, staring "at the heavens" and watching his "sky go out" (4), calls into question the unchanging promise of a

¹⁷⁵ Peter Freese, "Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*: Entropy in the 'MTV Novel'?" *Modes of Narrative, Approaches to American, Canadian and British Fiction*. Eds. Reingard M. Nischik and Barbara Korte. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1990: 84. — May one claim that one of these "future literary developments" emerged in the blending of "the differences between visual and verbal texts" *Generation X* represents?
new day, a new start, that Hemingway’s use of the sun symbol implies. This negative “mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination” (3) Generation X begins with, conveyed by the solar eclipse, is the same mood with which Less Than Zero’s narrator closes the novel: he is troubled by “images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun” (208). Before, when Clay, Less Than Zero’s narrator, is about to “see the worst” in a room of the hotel “Saint Marquis” on “Sunset Boulevard,” the sun is characterized as “huge and burning, an orange monster” (Zero 172).

The epigraphs in Ellis’s novel are two quotations from song lyrics; one is from a song by the Los Angeles punk band X, “The Have Nots” (1982), the other from Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” (1972). Both Generation X and Less Than Zero are set at the West Coast. It seems to be an echo of the Led Zeppelin quotation, “There’s a feeling I get when I look to the West...” (cf. Zero 7), when Andy, Dag, Claire, and Andy’s dogs “look eastward” at the beginning of Generation X—with Andy feeling cold (“I shiver and pull the blanket tight around myself, for I am colder than I had realized”), immediately followed by his wondering “that all things seem to be from hell these days: dates, jobs, parties, weather...” (Generation X 7). “West” and “Heaven,” along with any positive connotations they may evoke in the Led Zeppelin song, are reversed to “East” and “Hell” in Generation X. Hell,” as Andy explains later, “is the town of West Palm Springs Village” (14). Clay remembers “Christmas in Palm Springs. It was always hot” (Zero 68).

In both novels the narrator travels home to his parents for Christmas. "Fuck Christmas," a card on Clay’s desk says when he comes home, and he notices "that it’s beginning to get really cold" (Zero 11) in his room after reading it, while Dag tells Andy "to try not to burn down the house" (Generation X 136) as he gets on the plane to fly home. Andy, however, lights up hundreds of candles in the living room of his parents on Christmas Day, feeling "the room heating up," with "all surfaces devoured in flame" and the light making the eyes of his family "burn" (146).

Clay’s "obsessive concern" (Freese, “Entropy in the ’MTV Novel’?” 74) is a billboard he sees when he stops at a red light on Sunset Boulevard: “Disappear Here” (Zero 38), appearing as a leitmotif throughout the novel, until Clay himself leaves and disappears at its end. When Andy explains the concept of "new human beings" in Japan he says that the same group also exists "over here," bearing the non-name "an X generation—purposefully hiding itself. There’s more space over here to hide in—to get lost in—to use as camouflage. You’re not allowed to disappear in Japan” (Generation X 56). A few days later, "Dag disappeared" (67), proving Andy’s point. At the end of the novel, all three friends move away to Mexico.

176 The significance of the sun in Generation X will be further discussed in part 7.4.3.
177 I am quoting from the 1986 Penguin edition of Less Than Zero.
178 Later, at a party, a boy with an “Under The Big Black Sun T-shirt” bumps into Clay (185).
179 According to Freese, the West does not convey any positive notions in Less Than Zero either: “For Clay, however, the traditional promise of westward expansion has completely evaporated” (75).
180 Andy’s clothes express his own desire to disappear: “I dress to be obscure, to be hidden—to be generic. Camouflaged” (15).
As for The Sun Also Rises and Generation X, there is a curious correspondence between the animals featured in both books. In Hemingway's novel, Jake Barnes and his friend Bill Gorton pass by a taxidermist's in the streets of Paris, France, and Bill wants to buy a stuffed dog:

"Just one stuffed dog. I can't take 'em or leave 'em alone. But listen, Jake. Just one stuffed dog."
"Come on."
"Mean everything in the world to you after you bought it. Simple exchange of values. You give them money. They give you a stuffed dog."
"We'll get one on the way back."
"All right. Have it your own way. Road to hell paved with unbought stuffed dogs. Not my fault." (The Sun Also Rises 78)

In the first chapter of Generation X, Claire relates her "[d]ate from hell" (5) with Dan to Andy and Dag, its "low point" taking place when Claire and Dan passed by a "store that sells chickens that have been taxidermied" (6):

"We were driving by and I just about fainted from wanting to have one, they were so cute, but Dan [...] says, 'Now Claire, you don't need a chicken,' to which I said, 'That's not the point, Dan. The point is that I want a chicken.' He thereupon commenced giving me this fantastically boring lecture about how the only reason I want a stuffed chicken is because they look so good in a shop window, and that the moment I received one I'd start dreaming up ways to ditch it. True enough. But then I tried to tell him that stuffed chickens are what life and new relationships was all about, but my explanation collapsed somewhere—the analogy became too mangled" (Generation X 6).

In Generation X, the dogs are alive and watch the sun rise with Andy, Dag, and Claire a few hours after Claire's story about stuffed chickens—"don't forget the dogs" (7), the narrator reminds the reader. In The Sun Also Rises, Jake and Bill go to a restaurant shortly after their conversation about stuffed dogs—and they have "a roast chicken" (82) for dinner. To confuse matters even more, Claire comments on French-speaking dogs (cf. 11) and "teases the dogs with bits of chicken" (17).

Obviously, like in the case of Less Than Zero, this is another reversal of certain properties of a text Generation X alludes to. However, once discovered and followed, these intertextual references, and especially those to the stuffed animals, are teasingly puzzling. Stitching them back into their original contexts and trying to establish what their incorporation and transformation in Generation X might signify only leads to more questions than one originally intended to answer—the analogies indeed become mangled, and possible explanations collapse. Nevertheless, this points out the specific nature and function of intertextuality in the novel. It is not a simple matter of copying fragments from other narratives and attaching them to a new one; instead, the process of narrative bricolage transforms the fragments it uses up to a point where they become almost unrecognizable—a process of recycling material. Thus, the circulation and exchange of stories becomes

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181 This is not the last chicken the two eat together. After fishing in the Irati River in chapter seven, Jake and Bill have a lunch consisting of chicken and hard-boiled eggs, inducing Bill to make comments about the question whether the chicken or the egg came first (cf. The Sun Also Rises 126-7).

182 An obvious example of such a transformation is the chapter "Trans Form" (145-7), in which Andy uses candles and tinfoil to transform the "normally dreary living room," yet preserving an odd familiarity of a dream-like quality, as his mother’s reaction illustrates.
more important than their exact source. Accordingly, the quotes used as epigraphs for *Generation X* cannot be traced back to any original context they might have appeared in, whereas it is comparably easy to determine the origins of the epigraphs in *This Side of Paradise, The Sun Also Rises,* and *Less Than Zero*—the last even giving copyright information for them (cf. 6). The method of "Decade Blending" referred to in the first epigraph of Coupland’s novel apparently also applies to its narrative technique: a playful de- and re-contextualizing of fragments to (re)construct a "new" story out of them.

### 7.3.4. Size Does Matter: Big Stories vs. Little Stories

"In short, the argument of Lyotard (and some other post-structuralists) is this: big stories are bad, little stories are good," as Madan Sarup points out in his *Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (146). While the "big story" in *Generation X* obviously failed, the "little stories" have a central position in the lives of the characters in it—or rather, they constitute their lives.

This function of the "little stories" is stressed from the first chapter on. Claire says that "it’s not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments;" rather, these moments have to connect—not becoming one story, though: "our lives become stories" (8, my italics). This is also what connects Andy, Dag, and Claire with each other, up to the point of being the "policy" (13) for their lives, inspired by Andy’s experiences at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings:

> It’s simple: we come up with stories and tell them to each other. The only rule is that we’re not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA, and at the end we’re not allowed to criticize. This noncritical atmosphere works for us because the three of us are so tight assed about revealing our emotions. A clause like this was the only way we could feel secure with each other. (*Generation X* 14)

Turning experiences, emotions, fears, and doubts into fictional stories makes understanding and caring easier. When Dag disappears for no apparent reasons the day after the desert picnic and later calls Andy, he cannot communicate the fears and worries that drove him to a former test site for atom bombs in Nevada (cf. 68) directly to his friend. "You wouldn’t understand" (68), he charges, and Andy replies: "Then make a story out of it" (69). Dag’s story characteristically

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183 This also rules out any chicken-or-egg questions about order and origin of fragments.
184 The origin of the Gertrude Stein quotation, however, becomes dubious on closer inspection, as has been pointed out earlier (cf. ch. 4.2.).
185 This literary strategy is congruent with Lévi-Strauss’s characterization of the work of the *bricoleur:* "Von seinem Vorhaben angespornt, ist sein erster praktischer Schritt dennoch retrospektiv: er muß auf einer bereits konstituierte Gesamtheit von Werkzeugen und Materialien zurückgreifen; eine Bestandsaufnahme machen oder eine schon vorhandene umarbeiten; schließlich und vor allem muß er mit dieser Gesamtheit in eine Art Dialog treten, um die möglichen Antworten zu ermitteln, die sie auf das gestellte Problem zu geben vermag. Alle diese heterogenen Gegenstände, die seinen Schatz bilden, befragt er, um herauszukommen, was jeder von ihnen 'bedeuten' könnte. So trägt er dazu bei, ein Ganzes zu bestimmen, das es zu verwirklichen gilt, das sich aber am Ende von der Gesamtheit seiner Werkzeuge nur durch die innere Disposition der Teile unterscheiden wird" (*Das wilde Denken* 31).
begins with the formula "once upon a time there was" (69). Aspects of _fantasy_ and _fairy tale_ are typical of many of the stories that are told in the novel, and the three even created a "world" as a setting for many of their fictions: "Texlahoma is a mythic world [...]. It's a sad Everyplace" (39). The _other-worldliness_ of Texlahoma can be taken quite literally, as it is "an asteroid orbiting earth" (39-40).

The whole concept of storytelling, however, and the special "policy" Andy, Dag, and Claire share, attains another distinctive quality with a look at the "secrets" in _Generation X_. When Andy explains the "policy," he mentions that Dag believes "that everybody on earth has a deep, dark secret that they'll never tell another soul as long as they live" (14). Later, Andy tells his readers "a secret story," a story he "won't even tell Dag and Claire" (47). Shortly before Dag burns the car in part two, he tells Andy a "secret" about his future (cf. 116): his plan to open a hotel in San Felipe. This is where stories become a commodity and currency, as people who "told good stories could stay for free" (116). Tyler says to Andy, "you have some secret that prevents you from entering the mundane everyday world" (149).

In New York, Tobias reveals to Claire "what's on his mind" (156): "He said that my main attraction for him was his conviction that I knew a secret about life," a secret Tobias wanted to get "for himself—for an escape he hoped to make—except that he realized by listening to us talk that there was no way he'd ever really do it. He'd never have the guts to live up to complete freedom. The lack of rules would terrify him" (156-7).

Andy calls the "policy" he shares with his friends also a "game," and it has only one rule (cf. 14). A "policy" or "contract" between "players," laying down the "rules" of a "game," are central constituents of what Lyotard calls "language games" in _La condition postmoderne_. These "language games" are central for the concept of storytelling—in societies, as Sarup explains:

In traditional societies a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criterion defining a threefold competence—'know-how', 'knowing how to speak' and 'knowing how to hear'—through which the community's relationship to itself and its environment is played out. In the narrative form statements about truth, justice and beauty are often woven together. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of rules that constitute the social bond. (Sarup 135)

Tobias is seeking such a "know-how" when he wants to know the "secret" Claire shares with Andy and Dag—"knowing how to live," a knowledge obtained from listening to them talk. Even though there is just one rule in their game, the "social

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186 A discussion of all the stories in _Generation X_ would exceed the limits of this study. This is how Lainsbury describes them: "Most of the stories concern alienated individuals who feel a profound need for integration into either a social or spiritual order; in other words, they all feel a need for their existence to be legitimated by reference to a narrative that would make sense of it" (235).

187 This is reminiscent of the Brontë sisters, who created a mythical world named "Gondal" as the setting for many of the stories they told each other in their childhood.

bond" it constitutes between them is what forms their community. The "magic insight" (156) sought by Tobias lies in the freedom he cannot commit himself to, being terrified by the lack of rules, failing to realize that the same freedom establishes new sets of rules to live by. There is indeed a value in the exchange of stories, like in Dag’s vision of his hotel, and they do become "worthwhile" tales as they are told. The "secret" power of storytelling, narrative, and literature is revealed in the narrator’s own "secret story," the story Andy uses "to tell something about myself" (47).

Con 7. De Words 3. Words Struct Re 5. Words

Nothing really pleases me till
Everything falls apart
Then I get to try to put it back together
—Dog’s Eye View, "Everything Falls Apart" (1995)

Polonius. What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet. Words, words, words.
—Hamlet, Act II, Scene II.

"Once upon a time there was a young man named Edward," Andy’s secret story in the chapter "Re Con Struct" begins (47). It is the story of Edward’s decline into alcoholism, and as Edward’s life was "losing its controlability" (48), a break within the story takes place. The focus shifts from his outer life to his thoughts—"Now, here’s what Edward thought: he thought that he was a very smart guy in some ways. He had been to school, and he knew a great number of words. […] Words, words, words." (48)—and then to his imagination: "Edward imagined that he was using these words to create his own private world—a magic and handsome room that only he could inhabit" (48-9).

Entering this room that exists only in Edward’s imagination, the story gains a surreal, almost Kafkaesque quality. The walls of the magic room "were lined with oak bookshelves, overflowing with volumes; framed maps covered other sections" (49). Visitors were forbidden, except for Mrs. York, "a bun-headed and betwheed grandmother, handcarved by central casting," who supplied Edward with alcohol. Making "piquant little observations on life," Edward sat in his room that was "sometimes so sophisticated that it was only allowed to exist in black and white" (48) and read, smoked, and talked to Ludwig, his "faithful spaniel" (48).

Obviously, the room is Edward’s personal interiorized library, filled with mental maps and books—his world. Its "black and white" appearance, marking the degree of its sophistication, is not only "reminiscent of an old drawing room comedy" (49). It also stresses the physicality of the words, words, words: black letters on white paper, the building blocks of Edward’s wor(l)d(s), and the same objects the readers of Generation X use to construct and create the world they inhabit when they are reading its text—or, for that matter, any text.

Edward’s untroubled existence inside his magic room came to an end when one day, as he was reaching for a book he wanted to "reread," his dog transformed
"into a flaring, black-gummed sepia gloss rottweiler" (49), threatening his life. Mrs. York also changed, "wearing a blond wig," and this new Mrs. York left Edward in the car of a tennis pro (50). Edward was "trapped in the room, able only to roll back and forth across the bookshelves on the heights of his wheeled ladder. Life in his once charmed room had become profoundly dreadful" (50). The only option he had was "to leave the room" for the first time in "what seemed ever," but "was actually about ten years" (50). He was "really amazed" with what he found outside:

In all the time he had been sequestering himself, being piquant in his little room, the rest of humanity had been busy building something else—a vast city, built not of words but of relationships. A shimmering, endless New York, shaped of lipsticks, artillery shells, wedding cakes, and folded shirt cardboard: a city built of iron, paper-mâché and playing cards; an ugly/lovely world surfaced with carbon and icicles and bougainville vines. (Generation X 49-50)

In the "transfixing madness" of this city, all "directions were impossible" and even unwanted: when "he asked an inhabitant where he could buy a map, the inhabitant looked at Edward as though he were mad, then ran away screaming" (51).

In a chapter titled "Re Con Struct," it is not difficult to discern what this story is about. First, the Judeo-Christian belief in the creative power of the word, central in Western thought and philosophy, is evoked, when it is employed to create a world. This world is a library of texts which the individual inhabits, reading, rereading, and making observations on life. Then a break occurs: the once charmed and magic room is no safe place anymore. Outside of it, the "endless" city is not built of words, but of relationships and material objects. The creative power of the words, severed from their material referents, falls apart into binary oppositions—it is an "ugly/lovely world" now, a world impossible to map because directions have lost their meaning.

Significantly, the fundamental change in Edward's magic room of words, words, words is brought about by a dog that bears the same name as one of the "precursors of the postmodern critique of philosophy" (Sarup 150), Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was a friend of George Edward Moore, professor of philosophy in Cambridge, and took over his chair in 1939. Like Ludwig-the-dog's demeanor in Edward's room, the work of Wittgenstein can be divided into two distinctively different, even antagonistic phases. Lyotard's notion of "language games" is based on concepts developed by Wittgenstein, whose predominant philosophical concern was with language, words, and what they mean. His

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189 As we are invited to reconstruct, are we allowed to go so far as to reread "dog" backwards? Or to reconstruct the narrator's name ANDREW as EDWARN?

190 Cf. Henry Staten, Wittgenstein and Derrida (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985): "There is controversy over whether the late work (the phase of the Tractatus), or whether there is fundamental continuity" (xvi). Staten assumes a "discontinuity."

191 "Wenn Wittgenstein die Erforschung der Sprache ab ovo wiederaufnimmt und seine Aufmerksamkeit auf die Wirkungen der Diskurse konzentriert, so nennt er die verschiedenen Arten von Aussagen, die er dabei auffindet [...] Sprachspiele" (Lyotard 39). — Lyotard is referring to Wittgenstein's Philosophische Untersuchungen (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1960).

192 Cf. Godfrey Vesey's foreword in Understanding Wittgenstein (Ed. Godfrey Vesey. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1974): "Wittgenstein's abiding philosophical concern was with the conditions of an utterance having sense—and so with what it is to mean something, to think, to understand, and to infer" (ix).
theories and philosophical observations paved the way for post-structuralists and deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida.\footnote{Cf. “Introduction: From Form to Differance” in Staten’s Wittgenstein and Derrida (1-27).}

Obviously, the break in Edward’s life can be read as an allegorical reference to the emergence of Post-Structuralism in linguistics and literary theory, criticizing the central position of language and meaning in Western philosophy. A gap has opened between world and word as Post-Structuralist critique has deconstructed the world/word relationship, arguing that all we can speak of are word/word relationships:

> This critique of meaning has induced a shift in the way we think of the relationship between language and world, the “sign” and the thing to which it refers or for which it substitutes. Deconstruction disputes the idealized notion of language as a transparent “window” onto thought or the world. Instead, deconstructionists emphasize the “materiality” of language and the ways language mediates our relationship to the world. Our concepts and the reality we perceive are enabled and sometimes even created by language. Yet language is not entirely adequate or commensurate to reality: the gap between word and world never closes. (Gey et al., Introduction xx)

"Many postmodern authors explore and exploit this gap in their fiction," as the editors of Postmodern American Fiction assert (xx), and deconstruction "sharpened the realization that the meaning of any text is never completely under the control of either the author or any one reader, and so it remains always contingent and, to some extent, indeterminate" (xxi). The difficulty arising out of this is "more likely to be an excess rather than a shortage of meaning, since meaning proliferates uncontrollably under any condition" (xxi)—and especially under a postmodern condition.

Just as Edward’s life was "losing its controlability" (48) due to his alcoholism, the structure of his "magic room," with the bookshelves and maps of his interior, imaginative world, fell apart. The words, words, words lost their meanings—"Control is not Control" (156), as one of the slogans in Generation X proclaims. Andy, who writes "I study languages" (47), is telling this "secret story" to illustrate "the fact" that he does not "want to go through life alone" (47). He does not tell it to his friends; he tells it to his readers: "I'll tell you a secret story" (47, my italics). Sharing this story with the readers, making us his confidants, Andy invites us to "Re Con Struct" the fragmented world and "to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process," because "[e]ither our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them" (8). To help those that are lost in the endless city of an accelerated, postmodern culture to find this way, Edward, at the end of his story, is selling "maps," the commodity lacking in the new "ugly/lovely world" (51).\footnote{The maps themselves are also subject to deconstruction, however, as Andy is watching "couples bickering over maps falling apart from having been folded and unfolded so many times" (169) at the end of the novel. Still, their falling apart is due to overuse rather than indeterminacy.}

Thus, the policy of storytelling not only connects Andy, Dag, and Claire, it is also what binds us to them, to the text—to literature. Andy, narrator and storyteller, seeks the company and participation of his readers. He offers us his secret, a "secret about life" Tobias suspects Andy, Dag, and Claire to possess, a "magic in-
sight" into the lives the three "have built here on the fringe," giving them the "strength to quit everyday existence" (156). In a world deprived of determinable, controllable meaning, the fractured nature of experience and the loss of the "Grand Narrative" is answered by an attempt to share and exchange the fragments, the stories, the facts, and the fictions we have left—"These fragments I have shored against my ruins," as the inhabitant of another Waste Land earlier in the 20th century summed up his effort to reassemble and reconstruct what was left to him.\textsuperscript{195}

Storytelling helps the characters in Generation X to communicate their emotions, a function that is both therapeutic\textsuperscript{196} and constructive. The exchange of stories creates a feeling of mutual trust between them; telling stories both helps and heals: "Just tell me. You may be able to help me and not even know it" (14). Reading those stories told in the novel, we, as readers and spectators, partake of this therapy as we reconstruct what is offered to us. Lainsbury, summing up his reading of Coupland’s novel, points out that a "return to simpler times" in which directions were still valid and the experience of the world was less fragmented is "clearly impossible" (238). Instead,

people must learn to live in the complexity of a world that they have inherited, regardless of whether they participated in its creation. Complex artworks such as Generation X can help them to do this. [...] The thoughtful confrontation of reader with avant-garde text helps to shape a sensibility that can appreciate complexification, rather than seeking escape in modernist fantasies of individual fulfilment and closure. (Lainsbury 238)

Thus, literature becomes a self-conscious, cooperative, yet individually realized project to restore a sense of direction in a world that has become deprived of definite directions—a map we may use to find our own way(s). As the recovering alcoholic who can no longer communicate with his own children stresses, storytelling has a significant and undeniable social function, engaging us in a communal project of mutual help and breaking down borders of silence and fear: \textsuperscript{197}

"Never be afraid to cough up a bit of diseased lung for the spectators," said a man who sat next to me at a meeting once, a man with skin like a half-cooked pie crust and who had five grown children who would no longer return his phone calls. "How are people ever going to help themselves if they can't grab onto a fragment of your own horror? People want that little fragment, they need it. That little piece of lung makes their own fragments less scary." (Generation X 13)

Andy is "still looking for a description of storytelling as vital as this" (13).

\textsuperscript{196} When Andy invites Claire to move to Palm Springs, he says: "Clean your slate. Think life out. Lose your unwanted momentums. Just think of how therapeutic it could be" (36).
\textsuperscript{197} This also corresponds with Lyotard’s notion of language games: "Language games for Lyotard are indeed the social bond which holds society together, and he characterizes social interaction primarily in terms of making a move in a game, playing a role and taking part in various discrete language games. In these terms he characterizes the self as the interaction of all the language games in which it participates. Lyotard’s model of a postmodern society is thus one in which one struggles within various language games in an agonistic environment characterized by diversity and conflict" (Sarup 151).
7.4. Living on the Edge

There’s something wrong with the world today
I don’t know what it is
Something’s wrong with our eyes
We’re seeing things in a different way
And God knows it ain’t his
It sure ain’t no surprise

—Aerosmith, "Livin’ on the Edge" (1992)

7.4.1. Borderline Cases

Peter Freese, commenting on American fiction of the 1960s and ’70s, identifies Edge City as its locale (cf. 229-30). In the last decade of the millennium, the feeling that we are living on the edge has increased even further, and Generation X is one of the literary texts that communicates this feeling as one of its chief concerns.

When Andy observes in the first chapter, he consciously chooses "the edge of town" as his standpoint to live in the desert town of overlooking the San Andreas fault line (cf. 4) and thus the edges of the North American and Pacific tectonic plates. They do not could hope to find some eastward”—with Andy were all promised heaven we ended up with can't comparison" (7). The oft-quoted statement at the end of the second chapter begins, "We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate" (11). Moreover, they eat round of storytelling "on a equivalent of blank space

Thus, a threefold significance of the desert the characters in the novel inhabit is established in the opening chapters: it is a geographical, spiritual, and literary wasteland. The option of westward expansion has disappeared, as we have reached California, where there can be no frontier anymore. Religious promises have disappeared, as "all things seem to be from hell these days" (7). The "Grand

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Narrative" has disappeared, as the storytellers now live "small lives" in the margins and the blank spaces at the end of the text.

One of the stories that is told at the picnic is "an end of the world story" (62), in a chapter titled "December 31, 1999" (61). While this date is not indicative of the period of time the narration takes place in (cf. part 7.3.2.), it supports the millennial aspects in the novel. The closing section of the novel, Andy's car drive to Mexico, takes place on "New Years Day" (169), and the last chapter is titled "Jan. 01, 2000" (175). The feeling of being on the edge with which the novel opened is evoked again at its end, as Andy is "waiting to cross the border" (169) to Mexico:

And I see the fence on the border, the chain link border fence that reminds me of certain photos of Australia—photos in which anti-rabbit fencing has cleaved the landscape in two: one side of the fence nutritious, food secreting, and bursting with green; the other side lunar, granular, parched, and desperate. I think of Dag and Claire when I think of this split—and the way they chose by free will to inhabit that lunar side of the fence—enacting their difficult destinies: Dag doomed forever to gaze longingly at his sun; Claire forever traversing her sands with her dowsing rod, praying to find water below. (172)

Crossing borders, going over the edge, is connected to the "destinies" of the characters. Furthermore, when Andy is on his way to join his friends on the "lunar side," he experiences "an unusual incident" (175). Just as he is "suddenly able to see the horizon for the first time that day," he has a "vision that could only have come from one of Dag's bedtime stories: it was a thermonuclear cloud" (176). At the end of the novel, the "bedtime stories" and the sense of living on the edge are fused with a predominant fear the characters share: nuclear apocalypse.

7.4.2. Apocalypse Ciao

"I've got an end of the world story" (62), Dag announces the story that concludes part one of Generation X. "The end of the world is a recurring motif in Dag's bedtime stories, eschatological You-are-there accounts of what it's like to be Bombed, lovingly detailed, and told in deadpan voice" (62), Andy explains. This affectionate—loving—obsession with "The End" in the form of nuclear apocalypse corresponds with the general feeling of being on the edge in the novel, but it is immediately preceded by the information that Andy, Dag, and Claire "never fell in love" with each other and share an "entirely platonic" friendship (61). This "nonsexual friendship with a member of the opposite sex" is called "Platonic Shadow" (62).

Derrida uses Kant's critique of Plato when he speaks "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" (1982),199 an essay in which he characterizes the traits of "an apocalyptic type of document" as "prediction and eschatological

predication, the fact of telling, foretelling, or preaching the end, the extreme limit, the imminence of the last" (80). Its concern is with truth:

Whoever takes on the apocalyptic tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; the tone is the revelator of some unveiling in process. Unveiling or truth, appophantics of the imminence of the end, of whatever returns at the limit, at the end of the world. Not only truth as the revealed truth of a secret on the end or of the secret of the end. Truth itself is the end, the destination, and that truth unveils itself is the advent of the end. (Derrida, "Apocalyptic Tone" 84)

Apocalypse, the revelation and unveiling of truth, is "the transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself" (Derrida 87), and thus becomes the defining characteristic of all language and writing: "In that case, if the apocalypse reveals, it is first the revelation of the apocalypse, the self-presentation of the apocalyptic structure of language, of writing, of the experience of presence, either of the text or of the mark in general" (87). The apocalyptic tone in Derrida's own writings has been noted "above all" in the "United States where one is always more sensitive to phenomena of prophetism, messianism, eschatology, and of the apocalypse-here-now" (90), as Derrida points out.

In a later essay, "No Apocalypse, Not Now" (1984), Derrida developed his discourse on the apocalypse further. He claims that the possibility of total nuclear annihilation in our age has implications for apocalyptic thought and writing:

Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding. But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it. ("No Apocalypse" 23)

As "nuclear war has no precedent" and has never occurred so far, Derrida calls it a "non-event" (23), and the "terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text" (23). Thus, the "growing multiplication of the discourse—indeed, of the literature—on this subject may constitute a process of fearful domestication, the anticipatory assimilation of that unanticipatable entirely-other" ("No Apocalypse" 23).

Since a nuclear war would mean the "irreversible destruction" of the "juridico-literary archive" (26), it would therefore also erase the very possibility for literary discourse itself. So, for Derrida, the apocalypse is the fundamental and ultimate premise that brings literature into existence (cf. 26-28):

In two points. 1. Literature belongs to the nuclear age by virtue of the performativ character of its relation to the referent, and the structure of its written archive. 2. Nuclear war has not taken place, it is a speculation, an invention in the sense of a fable or an invention to be invented in order to make a place for it or to prevent it from taking place (as much invention is needed for the one as for the other), and for the moment all this is only literature. Some might conclude that therefore it's not real, as it is entirely suspended in its fabulous and literary évêché. ("No Apocalypse" 28)
In the afterword for his German translation of these two essays, Michael Wetzel argues that Derrida’s outlook allows us to call our age postapocalyptic: we have talked, heard, seen, and written so much about total nuclear destruction that it has already happened many times in our collective imagination. As soon as the non-event becomes a real event, though, no one would be there anymore to talk about anything afterwards. "The end approaches, but the apocalypse is long-lived" (Derrida, "Apocalyptic Tone" 89), and so we have to live with it having happened in our texts until it really happens—which would erase us, our texts, and the possibility to speak of an apocalypse, and thus of truth.

Dag’s "end of the world story" in the chapter “December 31, 1999” has a function that concurs with Derrida’s notion of the postapocalypse. As the two friends in the story experience the nuclear onslaught in a supermarket, their "minds become the backlit NORAD world map of mythology—how cliché!" (Generation X 64). They picture the "traced paths of fireballs" that pass "steadily, inexorably" over geographical features of their mental maps of the world (64), an image they are familiar with because nuclear war has become a popular myth, up to the point of being a cliché, being repeated over and over again. The fat man in front of them, speaking in a "normal" voice, shows that this myth has prepared him for the actual event: "I always promised myself [...] that when this moment came, I would behave with some dignity in whatever time remains" (64), and he pays his check at the supermarket cashier before dying.

The very moment of apocalypse ("The Flash"), however, becomes a genuine moment of truth and revelation for the two friends. While they were arguing and accusing each other as being "so negative all the time" (62) before the flash, the very last moment they share is spent with a simple gesture of emotion and affection: "Just before all of this, your best friend cranes his neck, lurches over to where you lie, and kisses you on the mouth after which he says to you, 'There. I've always wanted to do that.'" (64). Thus, the platonic and loveless friendship that is emphasized at the beginning of the chapter (cf. 61) is juxtaposed with the epiphanic revelation of true feelings and love at the end of Dag’s story—which is a fictional end of the world within a work of fiction.

The motif of nuclear apocalypse and the end of the world is sustained throughout the novel. Claire and her family arrive in Palm Springs "on the hot, windy Mother's Day weekend that Nostradamus [...] had predicted would be the end of the world" (33). Dag tells a story about Otis, who "thought a lot about New Zealand and the Bomb" (69) and is concerned about the size atomic bomb mushroom clouds have. Then, there is the Trinite/Plutonium incident in Claire’s apartment (cf. "Monster Exist" 73-77), the cartoon about "The Blinding Flash of Light!"

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202 The symbol used at the end of letters, telegrams, etc. to indicate a kiss is "X" (cf. Webster’s).
(133), and Dag’s idea of how to dispose of all the plutonium in the world (cf. 162).

Finally, on December 31 in the chapter "Plastics Never Disintegrate" (161-68), Dag’s "end of the world story"—or at least its function—becomes reality for him and his friend Andy.

Dag, who escaped from Bunny Hollander's party when the police arrived, is sitting at "the end of a flash-flood pipe" outside the house, and he feels relieved by "this moment of finally getting caught" (166). Andy "can't conceive of a less wise place to be sitting at the moment. Flash floods really are flash floods. One moment everything's hunky-dory, the next there's this foaming white broth of sagebrush, abandoned sofas, and drowned coyotes" (166). The impending danger is not "The Blinding Flash of Light" anymore, but a flash of water, drowning these two human inhabitants of the desert wasteland like coyotes. Just before Dag returns "to the big shiny party" (168) with the police waiting there for him, he turns to Andy: "'Here, bend over to me a second.' I comply, whereupon he kisses me, triggering films in my mind of liquefied supermarket ceilings cascading upward toward heaven. 'There. I've always wanted to do that'" (168).

Dag enacts his former "bedtime story" at the point where he thinks the story of his life reached an end, finally getting caught by the police. Before that, Andy tells Dag a "small story" about a little daughter of the family he was living with in Japan (166-7). The point of the story "was that she had to get punished for something before she could open communication" (167). In Dag's case, the punishment that is evoked is grotesquely out of proportion: apocalypse, the ultimate end of existence. Still, only facing the apocalypse a communication about the "true" feelings one has is possible—it is indeed the final and "transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience itself" (Derrida, "Apocalyptic Tone" 87). Considering this, the social function of language games, storytelling, and communication becomes even more important. Claire remarks about her family:

"God, when they start talking like that—you know all of this sex gossip and end-of-the-world nonsense, I wonder if they're really only confessing something else to each other."

"Like?"

"Like how scared sick they all are." (Generation X 37)

By evoking the myth of the nuclear apocalypse, Dag's "end of the world story" in Generation X provides a frame in which story and life of the characters come together—a fusion—, making the non-event a fictional "reality" for them. By kissing Andy, Dag triggers "films" in Andy's mind, where the images of the apocalypse are stored, and which is the only place in which it can take place—and does take place. Thus, there can only be a permanent post-, never a real apocalypse.

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204 Furthermore, when Dag asks Andy if he knows how he is going to die, Andy is upset: "Bellinghausen, don't get morbid on me, okay" (167). Dag points out that he was not talking about actual death: "It was rhetorical" (167). Death is a rhetorical figure of speech like Derrida's concept of nuclear apocalypse—one can only talk and write about it; the actual event would also end the discourse about it.
When the cloud that is "not imaginary" appears on Andy's horizon in the last chapter, he wonders why nobody is "reacting" (176). When he finds the "simple source" of it, burning fields, he is filled with "profound relief," noticing that "[t]he event had also become something of a chance tourist attraction" (176):

> These fields were carbonized to an absolute matte black of a hue that seemed more stellar in origin than anything on this planet. It was a supergravitational blackness unwilling to begrudge to spectators a single photon; black snow that defied XYZ perspective and that rested in front of the viewer's eye like a cut-out paper trapezoid. (Generation X 177)

Beholding this black hole together with all the other spectators, Andy calls it "a restful unifying experience—like watching tornadoes off in the distance. It made us smile at each other" (177). Thus, the horror of the final appearance of a "thermonuclear cloud" (176) at the end of the novel vanishes and is replaced by a different, more positive and optimistic vision, as people do not crook their necks to watch "their sky go out" (4) anymore. Watching and smiling at the edge of what turned out to be not a "real" apocalypse, the human audience, unified and "silently respectful of the accidental wonder before them" (177), is resting.

### 7.4.3. Staring at the Black Whole Sun

Black hole sun won't you come
And wash away the rain
—Soundgarden, "Black Hole Sun" (1994)

I'm not the only one starin' at the sun
Afraid of what you'd find if you took a look inside
Not just deaf and dumb I'm starin' at the sun
Not the only one who's happy to go blind
—U2, "Staring at the Sun" (1997)

In John's vision of the Apocalypse in the last book of the bible, Revelation, the sun turns black as the sixth seal is opened: "There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red" (Rev. 6,12). The sun, source of light, changes into its opposite, blackness. The "supergravitational" black hole that opens at the end of Generation X is not the only example of light turning into a gravitational phenomenon that makes holes appear in the novel. When Andy lights hundreds of candles on Christmas Day, his family members see "the normally dreary living room covered with a molten living cake-icing of white fire, all surfaces devoured in flame—a dazzling fleeting empire of ideal light. All of us are instantaneously disembodied from the vulgarities of gravity" (146). Andy feels that "this light is painlessly and without rancor burning acetylene holes in my forehead and plucking me out from my body" (146).

In a novel that opens with a total eclipse of the sun and the information that "The Sun is Your Enemy," the artificial, yet "ideal" (146) light of the candles and the

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“black snow” from which not even “a single photon” (177) can escape, make the real sun appear to be a rather dubious entity. Still, the sun is one of the main concerns of the characters. There are 12 references to the sun in the first chapter alone, including “sunlight” and “sunbeams” (7). The first “language game” the reader witnesses in the novel is opened by Dag’s question “What do you think of when you see the sun?” (7). The images Claire and Dag present tell of sunlight “gone bad” (7) and its cancerous effects—a “surf bunny” discovering “her first keratosis lesion” (8).

Lainsbury points out that “what separates the experience of the generation of young people to which Andrew Palmer belongs from all preceding generations is the ontological status of the sun. The sun is still the life source, but it no longer occupies the unambiguous central and positive position it has had in virtually all human symbologies; now it is also a potentially lethal entity” (231). Nevertheless, towards the end of Generation X, “The Sun is Not Your Enemy” (167) anymore. The status of the sun in the novel seems to be more complex than Lainsbury assumes.

In the first chapter, Andy, Claire, and Dag watch a sunrise. “Sun-Rising, or Dawn” is a “symbol of the commencement of a new cycle of life. The Higher Self (sun) beginning to appear in manifestation on the higher planes,” as G. A. Gaskell explains in his Dictionary of all Scriptures and Myths.206 Thus, it is a symbol of hope, of a new beginning. However, as the sunrise is preceded by a total eclipse of this hope in Andy’s narration, this juxtaposition reveals that “the Sun is ambivalent: on the one hand it is resplendent and on the other it is ‘black’ or invisible,” which J. E. Cirlot notes in A Dictionary of Symbols.207

The notion of the damaging effect the sun has for humans, as stressed in Claire’s and Dag’s spontaneous thoughts about sunlight, is reversed a few chapters later when a member of Claire’s family wonders: “Hey... is it possible to damage the sun? I mean, we can wreck just about anything we want to here on earth. But can we screw up the sun if we wanted to? I don’t know. Can we?” (35) Claire apologizes for this desecration of the “great and universal symbol of the Higher Self,—God manifest,—the central source of Light and the Life within the soul” (Gaskell 730) when she is “staring at” and “talking to the sun and telling it she was very sorry if we’d hurt it or caused it any pain” (Generation X 38). Dag, however, wants to “get rid of all the world’s plutonium” by putting it in rockets and firing it "right

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207 London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962: 304. This dualism of the sun symbol is mainly due to the rhythm of nightly “disappearance” and daily reappearance (cf. 304).
"into the sun." (162). This "clever" idea links Dag's fear of atomic bombs with the sun symbol—"In fact, the first practical investigation into atomic energy was made as part of the attempt to explain the source of solar power," as R. Grant Athay points out in the *Encyclopedia Americana.* On the other hand, Dag's "memory of earth," the "most perfect moment" of his life (94), is also connected to the sun. He inhaled the smell of the gasoline he had spilled as a child, with his father telling him that it smelled "like the future" (94): "And at that point I saw the bright orange light of the sun coming through my eyelids." Furthermore, Dag's vision of his own death consists of being picked up by an angel in the desert, almost being "blinded" by it, and then being "carried, soundlessly and with absolute affection, directly into the sun" (168). Andy sums up Dag's destiny saying he is "doomed forever to gaze longingly at his sun" (172).

As Andy notes near the end of the novel, "the sun contradictorily shines" (161) in it. While potentially lethal and associated with the end of one's life, it is also the teleological destiny at least Dag envisions for his human existence. The "mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination—a mood that surely must have been held by most young people since the dawn of time as they have crooked their necks, stared at the heavens, and watched their sky go out" (3-4) that captivated Andy as he beheld a disappearance of the sun— which is "vital to the existence of life on earth" (Athay 11)—is juxtaposed with the "restful unifying experience" (177) of beholding a black hole.

Significantly, Andy is on his way to join his friends on what he calls "the lunar side of the fence" (172) when he passes the black hole of burning fields. It is by choice and "free will" (172) that they leave the realm of the "great and universal symbol of the Higher Self" (Gaskell 730), representing the wholeness of life itself, and disappear into a more fragmented territory:

> The idea of the invincible character of the Sun is reinforced by the belief that whereas the Moon must suffer fragmentation (since it wanes) before it can reach its monthly stage of three-day disappearance, the Sun does not need to die in order to descend into hell; it can reach the ocean or the lake of the Lower Waters and cross it without being dissolved. Hence, the death of the Sun necessarily implies the idea of resurrection and actually comes to be regarded as a death which is not a true death. (Cirlot 303)

Thus, it is not possible to damage the sun, or at least not its symbolic significance. The sun also rises in *Generation X,* but represents a belief in the cyclic nature of life and human experience which the inhabitants of a post-apocalyptic wasteland cannot take for granted anymore. However, they experience this as a loss and therefore are doomed to gaze longingly at the wholeness they do not partake of anymore. The lunar side of the fence, "granular, parched, and desperate" (172) and suffering from perpetual fragmentation, is a more appropriate habitat for post-

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209 Cf. Revelation 19,17: "And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried to all the birds flying in mid-air, 'Come gather together for the great supper of God.' Before the angel in Dag's vision of his death appears, he says that "[t]he sun will be right overhead and behind me there'll be this terrific flapping of wings—louder than the flapping any bird can make" (167).

210 Cf. Gaskell 730: "The Higher Self (sun) is the central harmoniser of the higher qualities [...], and completes the life of the soul with the perfect order of its final evolution."
modern storytellers who, like Claire, "prefer talking with incomplete people; they're more complete" (36). The sun is not their enemy anymore because they opted out of its cyclic race and its symbolic significance. The wholeness of the sun is replaced by the fragmented incompleteness of the lunar side of the fence.

7.4.4. The End of His Story
Considering that "Rome, the most powerful political force of Antiquity, and the originator of the historical sense, upheld solar hierophany, which, during the empire, dominated all other cults," J. E. Cirlot concludes that "there is a parallel between predominantly solar cults and 'historical' forms of human existence" (302). Furthermore, the "cult of the sun reached an advanced stage of development only in the New World, and—most advanced of all—in Mexico and Peru" (302).

The westward movement of the sun pointed out the way for the "discovery" of this New World. Empires and explorers, and history along with them, move westward, but the characters in Generation X have arrived at the westernmost edge of the New World. In the end, they do not follow the sun and go further west; they go south to Mexico—which, according to Andy, is lunar, not solar anymore. Their chosen course leads them further away from ideas they perceive as being past—away from history. This is what Andy had in mind when he fled from Japan: "Two days later I was back in Oregon, back in the New World, breathing less crowded airs, but I knew even then that there was still too much history there for me. That I needed less in life. Less past" (59), and so he moved to Palm Springs, California.

"Generation X is a meditation on the end of history" for Lainsbury, who adds the term "posthistorical" (cf. 232) to the discussion of the novel. "The End of History?" is the title of Francis Fukuyama's influential essay from 1989.211 He claims that "[i]n watching the flow of events over the past decade or so, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something very fundamental has happened in world history" (3), and that a "triumph of the West, of the Western idea" has taken place. This is "evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" (3). For him, this indicates an end-point: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period

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211 The National Interest 16 (1989): 3-18. Fukuyama bases his essay on Hegelian ideas: "Hegel believed that history culminated in an absolute moment—a moment in which a final, rational form of society and state became victorious" (4). Hegel "proclaimed history to be at an end in 1806. For as early as this Hegel saw in Napoleon's defeat of the Prussian monarchy at the Battle of Jena the victory of the ideals of the French Revolution, and the imminent universalization of the state incorporating the principles of liberty and equality" (4-5).
of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4). This "victory of liberalism," however, "has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in the real or material world" (4). "The end of history will be a very sad time," as Fukuyama laments in his closing remarks:

The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed. (18)

On the same page that presents the slogan "Nostalgia is a Weapon" (Generation X 151), Andy reflects on his feelings about history while visiting a Vietnam memorial with his brother Tyler—on his way to leave his parents who have "turned the house into a museum of fifteen years ago" (137):

Okay, yes, I think to myself, they were ugly times. But they were also the only times I'll ever get—genuine capital H history times, before history was turned into a press release, a marketing strategy, and a cynical campaign tool. And hey, it's not as if I got to see much real history, either—I arrived to see a concert in history's arena just as the final set was finishing. But I saw enough, and today, in the bizarre absence of all time cues, I need a connection to a past of some importance, however wan the connection. (Generation X 151)

Living in the "modern ruin" (14) of Palm Springs, in a time when it is possible to imagine that "the sun has begun to project the odor of old Life magazines" (7) and makes wheat die of "history poisoning" (8), a time in which Historical Under- and Overdosing display the same symptoms ("addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts" 7, 8) and in which the "end of the cold war is an anticlimactic end of history for the characters in Generation X" (Lainsbury 233), the loss of "genuine capital H history times" (151) is answered with an attempt to restore a connection to the past by telling fictional stories: little stories instead of Big History. Texlahoma, the setting for many of these stories (cf. 39), is "an asteroid orbiting earth, where the year is permanently 1974, the year after the oil shock and the year starting from which real wages in the U.S. never grew ever again" (39-40). The stories are projected onto an asteroid—a moon—where there is no history, only the permanent present of North American mid-seventies middle class security.

The future Claire, Andy, and Dag plan for themselves on the lunar side of the fence in Mexico turns stories into a commodity, reinstating a sense of imagination, idealism, art and philosophy that Fukuyama declared lost in post-history. The three extend the policy of storytelling that constitutes the social bond between them and invite others to share and join their community in their hotel. Capital H

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212 Other slogans in Generation X that show this concern with history include: "Historical Slumming," "Vaccinated Time Travel" (11), "Historical Under/Overdosing" (7/8), "Stop History" (40), "Legislated Nostalgia," "Now Denial" (41), "Ultra Short Term Nostalgia" (96), and the chapter title "Quit Recycling the Past" (13).
history may be over, but "Less is a Possibility" (144), and "Emallgration: Migration toward lower-tech, lower-information environments containing a lessened emphasis on consumerism" (173), fueled by "Terminal Wanderlust: A condition common to people of transient middle-class upbringings. Unable to feel rooted in any one environment, they move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location" (171), becomes a viable life-style in a postmodern, postapocalyptic, and posthistorical age. On a pilgrimage through the fragmented and accelerated culture of their times, the lunatic tales Andy, Dag, and Claire tell each other provide stability and fellowship.

Andrew, the narrator and thus the bearer of these good tidings, is called Palmer, which is the name for "a pilgrim who carried a palm leaf to signify the making of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land," or "any pilgrim" according to Webster's. In the last chapter of the novel, the religious symbolism condenses and an "unusual incident" (175) happens to him. Driving through Imperial County, "America's Winter Garden," he passes a "town called Mecca," with "date palms" colonading the highway (175). He steals an orange from a "roadside grove" and is caught by its farmer, who does not expel him from his Garden, but gives him another orange—with a "forgiveness" that feels "very absolute" to Andy (175). While eating the orange, he has the "vision" of the "thermonuclear cloud" on the horizon (176). Beholding the blackness of the burning fields, Andy and the other spectators are joined by "a dozen or so mentally retarded young teenagers" (177). Then, a "co-caine white" bird, an egret, flies in "from the west" (177), and it seems "to belong more to the Ganges or the Nile rather than to America" (178). Just before it retreats "westward," the egret changes its "arc" and flies right over the spectators, who feel "chosen" (178), and grazes Andy's scalp. He, the chosen one, bows down before one of the retarded teenagers; the others join them and touch his head, until Andy is "dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace, each member wanting to show their affection more than the other," and "this crush of love" is "unlike anything" he had ever known (179).

The pilgrim has received his blessing at the end, and he goes someplace else to continue his mission to reveal his (post-) apocalyptic "secrets and truths" that both constitute and give license to his storytelling. What he has told us, at least in the frame story, took place in December, the time of Advent, the season preceding the annual celebration of the first coming of another storyteller, the Messiah—Xmas. There is no second coming in Generation X, however, as Andy, our messianic messenger, leaves and disappears at its end. The three parts of his narration are over, but there is a fourth part, consisting of facts, figures, and little fragments of information, fragments that are not enclosed in a frame story anymore. We may (re)construct some kind of frame for ourselves: His story ends; we can begin to tell our own stories now.

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213 The pilgrim Andrew Palmer even carries a cross with his name: A Saint Andrew's cross is "a cross shaped like an X" (cf. Webster's).
214 The title of this fourth part of the book is "Numbers" (181), the name of the Fourth Book of Moses.
7.5. Last, but not Lost: "X"

58. »Ich will ›Name‹ nur das nennen, was nicht in der Verbindung ›X existiert‹ stehen kann.—Und so kann man nicht sagen ›Rot existiert‹, weil, wenn es Rot nicht gäbe, von ihm überhaupt nicht geredet werden könnte.«—Richtiger: Wenn ›X existiert‹ soviel besagen soll, wie: »X« habe Bedeutung,—dann ist es kein Satz, der von X handelt, sondern ein Satz über unser Sprachgebrauch, nämlich den Gebrauch des Wortes »X«.« (Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* 320)

7.5.1. Xcursus: Generation Xs in the XX. Century

While this thesis is primarily interested in the "Generation X" discourse of the 1990s and the use of the term in Coupland’s novel, it is necessary to point out that Coupland was not the first to use it: "Generation X," as a term for young people, had already surfaced several times before.

The Internet magazine *Dryer* features "The Secret History of Generation X" in five "Exhibits" (http://www.cardhouse.com/people/dryerx14/genx.html). According to *Dryer*, the term was used for the first time in *Holiday Magazine* in December 1952:

We don't ordinarily go in for giving away office secrets, but we don't mind telling you that the biggest excitement around this shop for some time has been over the developing of a giant, three-part, picture-and-text story that has gone under the projection name of "Generation X." What, you may well ask, is Generation X? It is our tag for what we believe to be the most important group of people in the world today—the boys and girls who are just turning 21. These are the youngsters who have seen and felt the agonies of the past two decades, often firsthand, who are trying to keep their balance in the swirling pressures of today, and who will have the biggest say in the course of history for the next 50 years. Understanding these young people, *Holiday* thinks, is certainly the best means of understanding our world today. We think you will understand them better after you meet them in these pages beginning next month, in the story entitled *Youth and the World*. You will meet them—young men and women from such places as England, Israel, India, France, Germany, Yugoslavia, Japan, South Africa, Italy and the U.S.—in pictures [...] and in text based on the subjects' answers to a penetrating questionnaire about their lives, work, hopes, beliefs and fears. We are pretty close to it, of course, but we believe that *Youth and the World* is one of the most ambitious and exciting magazine projects ever undertaken. Don't miss it.215

The "Generation X" that achieved the most notoriety before the 1990s, however, was the band of British punk rocker Billy Idol: "With Idol as the band's voice [...], Generation X broke a lot of punk conventions, and were ultimately ostracized by their peers for refusing to be (or even feign being, as many others did) anti-commercial."216 In "Your Generation" from 1977, the band declared, "Your generation don't mean a thing to me"—as if answering The Who's "My Generation." Still, Idol's use of the name Generation X was already second-hand, as a look in Pete Frame's *Rock Family Trees* confirms. Frame's data on the first line-up of the band (December 1976 to May 1977) includes the information that they were "[n]amed after a 1964 book they found in Idol's mother's bookcase."217

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215 The original edition of *Holiday Magazine* was not available to me, so this quotation is taken from the Dryer homepage. It would be interesting, though, to see if "Generation X" remained a "projection name" throughout this series of articles, or if the "X" was defined later.

216 Qtd. from the *Dryer* webpage, which identifies it as coming from a "Trouser Press Record Guide review for Generation X (Chrysalis) 1978."

This 1964 book was written by Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson (Generation X. London: Tandem, 1964)\(^{218}\) and is also a featured exhibit in the Dryer history: "Today's generation talking about itself... talking about Education, Marriage, Money, Pops, Politics, Parents, Drugs, Drink, God, Sex, Class, Colour, Kinks, and Living for Kicks" (Cover blurb, as qtd. by Dryer). Dick Hebdige mentions the book in Subculture and identifies it as being about the 1960s British mod youth culture: "In Generation X, Hamblett and Deverson quote a 16-year-old mod from South London: 'You'd really hate an adult to understand you. That's the only thing you've got over them—the fact that you can mystify and worry them'" (167n).

A year later, in November 1965, Pete Townshend's band The Who provided this "Generation X" with its anthem: "My Generation," a rather worrying song that is loud and straightforward, both musically and lyrically, while also affirming: "I'm not trying to cause a big sensation/I'm just talking 'bout my generation." Keith Altham, in his liner notes to an anthology of The Who’s music, claims that

Townshend mirrored the hopes and fears of the "give it to me now or later" generation. He wrote a whole series of brilliant cameos of the times, captured the feelings of millions of young people. He began with the song which became the anthem for Generation X. Daltrey’s stuttering vocal and the band’s explosive style offered the perfect setting for 'My Generation'. It was lyrically, musically and visually the epitome of what the Mod era was about in Britain. It still is.\(^{219}\)

Thus, the "X" as a qualifier for "Generation" was clearly not Coupland’s creation or invention, and he himself did not refer to any of these previous uses of "Generation X" when he tried to explain where the title of his first book came from.

### 7.5.2. The X Way Out: A Class of Their Own

The book’s title came not from Billy Idol’s band, as many supposed, but from the final chapter of a funny sociological book on American class struggle titled Class, by Paul Fussell. In his final chapter, Fussell named an "X" category of people who wanted to hop off the merry-go-round of status, money, and social climbing that so often frames modern existence. The citizens of X had much in common with my own socially disengaged characters; hence the title. The book’s title also allowed Claire, Andy, and Dag to remain enigmatic individuals while at the same time making them feel a part of the larger whole. (Coupland, "Generation X’d")

Coupland’s revelation of his source for the "X" in Generation X is as interesting as it is tempting to accept it without further questioning. After all, a look in the final chapter of Class shows that there seem to be a lot of parallels between Fussell’s "X people" and the characters in the novel—who move away at the end: "X people move away when they, not their bosses, feel they should. They like where they live, and when they stop liking their location [...] they move."\(^{220}\)

Fussell, however, is not investigating the sequence of generations and their names; he is interested in the "touchy" (15) subject of social class within the context

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\(^{218}\) Unfortunately, it seems to be impossible to find a copy of this Generation X in libraries or used book stores.


\(^{220}\) Paul Fussell, Class. A Guide Through the American Status System (New York: Summit Books, 1983) 181. The final chapter is titled "The X Way Out" (179-87) and is also featured in the Dryer history of "Generation X."
of late 20th century America: "It should be a serious subject in America especially, because here we lack a convenient system of inherited titles, ranks, and honors, and each generation has to define the hierarchies all over again" (18). Thus, belonging to a specific social class is decided by choice:

In this book I am going to deal with some of the visible and audible signs of social class, but I will be sticking largely with those that reflect choice. That means that I will not be considering matters of race, or, except now and then, religion or politics. Race is visible, but it is not chosen. Religion and politics, while usually chosen, don't show, except for the occasional front-yard shrine or car bumper sticker. (Fussell 18)

This proposition speaks of a certain ideological blind spot in Class. If only choice is the way by which one's social class is determined, an open, free, and liberal structure is implied, which does not necessarily correspond with the social reality in the United States—at any point in history. Fussell fails to realize that race is neither clearly visible nor freely chosen—it is the categorization of people in terms of "race" that can prevent the free choice of the social class an individual wants to belong to. His is indeed a funny sociological book on American class struggle, or a rather cynical one. Still, as far as Fussell's characterization of his "X people" is concerned, it reads like a summary of Claire, Andy, and Dag's chosen life on the edge:

"X" people are better conceived of as belonging to a category than a class because you are not born an X person, as you are born and reared a prole or a middle. You become an X person, or, to put it more bluntly, you earn X-personhood by a strenuous effort of discovery in which curiosity and originality are indispensable. And in discovering that you can become an X person you find the only escape from class. Entering category X often requires flight from parents and forebears. The young flocking to the cities to devote themselves to "art," "writing," "creative work"—anything, virtually, that liberates them from the presence of a boss or supervisor—are aspirant X people, and if they succeed in capitalizing on their talents, they may end as fully fledged X types. (179-80)

Also, like Andy, Dag, and Claire, "X people are verbal. They're good at languages and take it for granted that it is disgraceful, because merely American and provincial, to remain monolingual" (Fussell 185). As the picnic with the first round of storytelling in part one of Generation X demonstrates, the meals of X people "tend to last a long time, what with all the prolonged comic and scandalous narrative at table" (Fussell 183). Like Andy, the inventor of the one-rule game of storytelling and the narrator of the book, "X people tend to make their own rules and to get away with so doing, which means that many of them are writers" (Fussell 185).

Nevertheless, the bricoleur Coupland did not just take all of Fussell's ideas and had his fictional characters personify them in his novel. For instance, Fussell claims that "X people watch a lot of TV but never look at anything remotely improving" (183), but watching TV is not an issue in Generation X (cf. 7.1.). While there are some undeniable correspondences between Fussell's "X people" and Coupland's characters, it is significant where Fussell locates the origin of X-thood:

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221 Fussell also highlights the accelerated nature of American society: "The society changes faster than any other on earth, and the American, almost uniquely, can be puzzled about where, in the society, he stands" (18).

222 It is a "car bumper sticker" that twice ignites Dag's "destructive tendency" (cf. Generation X 5 and 115). Rather than showing the owner's religion, however, the stickers express cynicism.
X people constitute something like a classless class. They occupy the one social place in the U.S.A. where the ethic of buying and selling is not all-powerful. Impelled by insolence, intelligence, irony, and spirit, X people have escaped out the back doors of those theaters of class which enclose others. And people fearful that X-fool may be somehow un-American should realize that, on the contrary, it is firmly in the American grain. Knowing that, Mark Twain created an exemplary category-X person and said when first introducing him, "Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will." (Fussell 186)

Thus, we have arrived in the realm of fictional literature again, and it has become obvious that Fussell’s "social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies" (Greenblatt, Curse 157)—and this is firmly in the American grain. Realizing the literariness of Fussell’s category X, we see that social and literary discourses indeed are inseparably engaged in negotiation and exchange of concepts and ideas.

Coupland’s remark on the origin of his "X" turned out to have some validity and significance, but it also calls into question any uncritical use of the term "Generation X" as the label for a generation that is defined by years of birth. "X" really seems to define "not a chronological age but a way of looking at the world" ("Generation X’d"), as Coupland claims, and it is a rather literary way of looking at it. Fussell’s ideas are not necessary for this realization, as a consideration of the "X" as a symbol and its use in the novel reveals.

**7.5.3. It's Hard Not to Xplain**

This is the game that moves as you play

—X, "The Have Nots" (1982)

Webster’s gives a variety of definitions and usages for "x" and "X," among them "to indicate one’s choice or answer by or as by marking with an X," "to delete or cancel (written or printed matter);" "the first of a set of unknown quantities," "a variable;" "a person or thing unknown or unrevealed." Coupland chose to use this indeterminate variable as the qualifier for the "Generation" he presents in his first novel. However, it might not be justifiable to speak of such a "Generation" at all in the context of Generation X, as its characteristics and name remain unrevealed.

Andy introduces the term "X generation" when he is telling the story of the "strange thing" (54) that happened to him in Japan, the event that motivated him to leave everything behind and move to Palm Springs. Mr. Takamichi, the "Grand Poobah of the company" (55) Andy was working for, invited him to his private office, and his co-workers were "shooting jealousy rays" (56):

I felt I was being excommunicated from the shin jin rui—that’s what the Japanese newspapers call people like those kids in their twenties at the office—new human beings. It’s hard to explain. We have the same group over here and it’s just as large, but it doesn’t have a name—an X generation—purposefully hiding itself. (56)

The term appears only a few times more: When Tobias denies being a "yuppie" and complains, "By the time goodies like cheap land and hot jobs got to me they just sort of... started running out" (90), and Andy reacts with surprise: "I realize that
Tobias, in spite of his mask, is \textit{shin jin rui}—X generation—just like us" (90). The definition of "Yuppie Wannabe’s" on the adjacent page goes, "An X generation subgroup that believes in the myth of a yuppie life-style being both satisfying and viable. Tend to be highly in debt, involved in some form of substance abuse, and show a willingness to talk about Armageddon after three drinks" (91). There are more X generation subgroups: "Black Holes" and "Squires" (135), and other terms: Andy claims that he, Dag, and Claire are "members of the poverty jet set, an enormous global group" (4-5, the term is defined on page 6). Andy’s "baby brother by some five years" (105) Tyler labels himself and his clique "Global Teens, [...] though most are in their twenties" (106). Also, there is the "Bleeding Ponytail: An elderly sold-out baby boomer who pines for hippie or pre-sellout days" (21).

Is Coupland talking about a "generation" or a "group" of people in \textit{Generation X}? The definition of "Boomer Envy: Envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births" is followed by the one for "Clique Maintenance: The need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego: ‘Kids today do nothing. They’re so apathetic. We used to go out and protest. All they do is shop and complain’“ (21). Coupland uses the term "Generation," but also points out its dubious nature via these two definitions. While "Boomer Envy" and "Clique Maintenance" are used as ideological instruments that draw a line between \textit{us} and \textit{them}, it is "hard to explain" (56) what this \textit{us} really is—the \textit{new human beings} of the X generation do \textit{not} have a name. The "X" marks an unknown quantity and quality. If anything at all, it means that clear labels and names have been deleted and canceled—x’d out. We are presented with names for the subgroups into which the X generation falls apart, but there can be no name or label that unifies and collectively represents \textit{all} these subgroups—their common denominator remains a variable. The X can mean anything, so it represents diversity, variety, and plurality, not unity, agreement, or coherence. Even Tobias, whose outlook on life seems to be diametrically opposed to that of Claire, Andy, and Dag,\textsuperscript{223} is X generation just like them, because the label is a \textit{non}-label. There can be no larger whole, no unifying principle, neither for those who tell each other fragmented little stories, compensating for the loss of the "Grand Narrative," nor for those like Tobias who desperately crave undiminished totality: "I want everything and I want it now" (\textit{Generation X} 159).

In a novel that draws so much attention to poststructural and postmodern issues, any \textit{definite} label would come as a surprise. According to Andy, the X generation is "purposefully hiding itself" (56). They \textit{choose} "to get lost" (56) in the abundance of space America provides, and the territory of their \textit{America} is not confined within the borders of the United States—they "chose by free will" (172) to

\textsuperscript{223} Tobias expresses his contempt for their life-style at the end of the chapter "Adventure without Risk is Disneyland" (159-160): "We’re all lapdogs; I just happen to know who’s petting me. But hey—if more people like you choose not to play the game, it’s easier for people like me to win" (160). He fails to realize that the game of storytelling they share makes "win" or "lose" insignificant categories.
move to Mexico. This does not allow the conclusion that these *new human beings* are *lost*; they know where they are going. Considering their concern with nuclear apocalypse and "Survivulousness: The tendency to visualize oneself enjoying being the last remaining person on earth" (62), they seem more like the *last* generation of human beings. This, however, would be just another attempt to define the *X*, something one should refuse to try, welcoming its open character and pluralistic nature—a free-floating signifier for "The Floating World" literary *bricoleurs* like Coupland construct for us.

Still, a variable like *X* always invites and lures us into committing closure. It is hard *not* to explain *X*, but in the postmodern condition of indeterminacy we are allowed to *play* with it, de- and re-constructing our life-stories in a language game where the only rule is that "we’re not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA, and at the end we’re not allowed to criticize" (14). Thus, like recovering alcoholics, we can help each other overcome our longing for *singular* truth and *determinacy* of meaning and direction, a dependence that dulls our senses and makes us unfit for the demands of the world we live in now. This is not only a game that moves as we play, as the punk band *X* points out; it can also be quite entertaining and amusing for those who like to play the language game of postmodern literature.

42. Aber haben etwa auch Namen in jenem Spiel Bedeutung, die nie für ein Werkzeug verwendet worden sind?—nehmen wir also an, "*X*" sei so ein Zeichen, und A gäbe dieses Zeichen dem B—nun, es könnten auch solche Zeichen in das Sprachspiel aufgenommen werden, und B hätte etwa auch sie mit einem Kopfschütteln zu beantworten. (Man könnte sich dies als eine Art Belustigung der Beiden denken.) (Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* 311)
8. Here We Are Now...

Fig. 13. "Generation X" in MTV's The Real World

8.1. Get It?

As executive editor of St. Martin's Press, Jim Fitzgerald was responsible for publishing Coupland's first novel in 1991. He was in his forties at the time and recalls discussions about Generation X within the company: "There was great support from Generation Xers and a little concern from people who were older—the marketing staff [...]. I said, 'You either get it or you don't.' There are still people here who don't get it" (qtd. in Abcarian, "Boomer Backlash"). In an article in People magazine, Coupland claimed that the shared cultural experiences that bind "Xers" together are "like a secret password or handshake [...] If you don't get it, you don't get it" (Neill and Matsumoto 105). Still, he said he was "surprised how many people get the book" (106). The Times noted that "until Generation X spread like a plague through the country, its author thought the only people who would understand were those on the northern West Coast: Vancouver, Seattle and Oregon," and quotes Coupland: "The only people I thought would connect to it were a few people I grew up with. I never thought it would cross the Rockies."224 Generation X connected to a few people more, although Karen Ritchie's confession "I didn't get it, but I liked the name" (Marketing to Generation X 6) illustrates that these connections sometimes did not go very far beyond the title of the book. Still, many readers responded differently. Coupland told the Orlando Sentinel Tribune that his book "didn't do well at first. It's been a slow, incremental building to whatever it's become," and his interviewer added that it became "a cult classic."225 Many of its younger readers connected enthusiastically to what they read in the novel:

The book seems to have struck a chord. Since it was published last spring [...], 70,000 copies have been printed, driven mostly by word of mouth. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer asked for readers' responses and received a respectable 120 replies. One fan, 26-year-old Heather Coen, defined her generation's ethos thus: "We leave the overachievement to the elder siblings, the prison cells of those office jobs to the thirtysomethings, and we live off Mom and Dad as long as the umbilical chord will stretch." Another Seattle resident, who signed himself Brian D. Blank, 29, wrote: "I'm cynical. I'm wary. This book has helped me realize just how many of 'us' there really are. (Neill and Matsumoto 105)

Less than a year later, Scott Lawrence noted that Generation X "has been translated into 12 languages [...] and seems to be on some sort of permanent exhibit near the top of the Canadian best-seller list,"226 while Mark Muro stressed that "[l]ike no one before him, he made a name stick to his generation:"

Moreover, Coupland located a familiar tone: the jaded, self-aware deadpan of media-blitzed, no-big-deal twentysomethings. [...] Suddenly, journalists breathlessly compared his book to such earlier generational watersheds as "The Sun Also Rises" and "Catcher in the Rye," while youths called talk shows to express in Coupland-like witticisms their new-discovered discontent. Pretty soon, some 125,000 copies of "Generation X" had been sold, and Coupland had arrived. He'd become the unwilling voice of his generation.227

Unwilling or not, the new bestseller author Douglas Coupland could not avoid being pushed into a certain category and lineage in literary history. He was called the "voice of his generation," and "with every newspaper and television interview, every magazine story, every laudatory book review, it's going to be a hard label to shirk," as Abcarian predicted in 1991 ("Boomer Backlash"). Muir even declared that Coupland "broke into the generation-defining business" (4) with his first novel.

Apparently, different people "got" different ideas about it from reading the book: while many older readers did not "get it," the younger ones supposedly did. As Coupland told Scott Lawrence, "I think younger people roar through the books and really enjoy them and I think older people find them disturbing [...]. I think with different generations, you have different kinds of brain. People literally think differently; they format their information and see the work in different ways" (qtd. in "King Of Hip"). This different formatting of information has often been called infotainment, a format David Shields recognizes in Generation X:

As Frederick Barthelme recently said, CNN is now everyone's favorite non-stop novel, and it's difficult not to see Cambodia, Generation X, and Maps to Anywhere as sophisticated approbations and transformations of the "infotainment" format. I would be surprised if in the next decade ambitious North American writers did not continue to blur to the point of invisibility the line between documentary and drama, between confession and pre-recorded message. (Shields 240)

The "get it/don't get it" test presents an either/or (right/wrong?) opposition that seems problematic. The text emerged from the analysis as having a self-consciously open and fragmented structure, and readers are invited to "Re Con Struct"

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for themselves what is offered to them. Still, if some chose to see Generation X as the proclamation of a new "Generation" with Coupland as its spokesman, this reading seems to be opposed to certain tendencies in the text that subvert such a generalizing utilization of the term "Generation X." If the text itself blurs the line between fact and fiction, its reconstruction must be considered a highly individual process, depending on the choices readers make to reassemble its components and to connect it to their own experiences—their own life stories.

However, Searle's notion of "collective intentionality" and "collective agreement," along with his formula "X counts as Y in C," implies that these individual readings are also engaged in a larger societal context that influences and shapes them. If enough people agree on a reading of Generation X that identifies Coupland as the "voice of his generation," and if this interpretation is reiterated and promoted often enough, it becomes so "successful" that it dominates other readings. These other interpretations, like Lainsbury's, may even present viewpoints contradicting the dominating one, claiming that the text "challenges its readers to avoid the dangers of reduction, of trying to bring the many things that the novel does into an agreement with a preexisting worldview" (Lainsbury 238). The "career" of the term "Generation X" in connection—and, later, in dis connection—with Coupland's novel will illustrate this point.

### 8.2. Gen Xplosion & Gen Xploitation

> I'm no politician; I see through their game
> It's my demographic they're trying to tame
> They lump us together and they give us a name
> 'Rock the vote, you kids!' and share in the blame
> —The Caulfields, "All of My Young Life" (1995)

#### 8.2.1. Monsters, Money, DemographX

In a review of Generation X in 1992, Mark Brett wrote that "Douglas Coupland has been accused of playing God, creating a generation in his own image."228 Kim Frances, interviewing Coupland for Elle magazine in 1993, claimed that "Douglas Coupland created a monster, and its name is Generation X."229 In 1995, Coupland complained in "Generation X'd" that the characters in his novel were blown up "to represent an entire generation," and that this misrepresentation was partly due to "baby boomers, who, feeling pummeled by the recession and embarrassed by their own compromised 60s values, began transferring their collective darkness onto the group threatening to take their spotlight. The result? Xers were labeled monsters." At the end of the article, he urged his mislabeled peers to crawl "toward some form of truth, tirelessly, en masse, waging war against the forces of dumbness," and pleaded: "So please, be a monster."

Monsters or not, Coupland was held responsible for coining the term "Generation X" and thus providing a handy substitute for the other names for American

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youth that were already in circulation. Examples for the proliferating employment of the term were given at the beginning of this study (cf. 2.1), but a look at some more choice instances provides new insights into the matter.

The April 1995 edition of *American Demographics* featured a cover story about "The Generation X Difference," written by Nicholas Zill and John Robinson:

A few years ago, American newspapers and magazines were filled with stories about a peculiar new generation that faced terrible employment prospects, exhibited perverse tastes and behavior patterns, and was even more politically apathetic than its predecessors. Then researchers found that some of the characteristics the media attributed to Xers contradicted each other. Other Xer labels were not supported by trend data, and still others applied to a minority of young adults. (24)

Zill and Robinson also point out that "the proportion of young adults who attain college degrees is only half as large among blacks as it is among whites" (26), that there is a preference for visual art over literature among young people—"While the proportion of young adults who read literature regularly has been on the decline, the proportion who go to art museums or galleries has been rising" (26)—, and that "twentysomethings of the 1990s are clearly not the same as young adults of the past. In many ways, they are more diverse and complex" (33). The "few unifying traits" they supposedly exhibit are a sense of "insecurity," the critical importance of education for their "life chances," and that it is taking them longer than previous generations "to fully enter the adult world" (Zill and Robinson 33).

A sidebar titled "Talking About Whose Generation?" by Cheryl Russell and Susan Mitchell concedes that the "generation gap is alive and well in America" (32). Still, the authors say that only "one-third of Americans consider themselves members of a particular generation," but that those "who feel they belong to a generation don't agree on what to call themselves" (32). Young adults have "the hardest time with labels, which isn't surprising considering the choices they've been handed by media and other powers that be—baby bust, Generation X, the Lost Generation" (33). Also, the "trouble with age-related labels is that they apply to each generation only for a short time" (Russell and Mitchell 33).

While these considerations seem to imply that labels like "Generation X" indeed are simplifications of complex and very diverse demographic data, the same issue of *American Demographics* also includes an article by Karen Ritchie, "Marketing to Generation X," an adaptation from her book of the same title. The advise she has for marketers is plain and simple:

If you wish Generation X to adopt your product, it must be perceived as a useful product—not one to be purchased for reasons of status or to make a statement, but one that fulfills a genuine need. Never mind that young people and others tend to get their wants and their needs mixed up. We’re talking about perceptions. (39)

Without attempting to disguise it, Ritchie reveals what "Generation X" means to marketers: Young people whose money they want. Never mind what "Xers" genuinely need—what counts is what we want them to think they need to buy. When we're talking about "Generation X," we're talking about money.
8. Here We Are Now...

8.2.2. Isn't it Ironic?

Seven years after announcing the "Twentysomthing Generation," Time magazine again ran a cover story about young American adults. The July 9 issue of Time in 1997 shows the picture of a young, goatee-bearded man and the words: "You called us slackers. You dismissed us as Generation X. Well, move over. We're not what you thought." The cover story by Margot Hornblower, "Great Xpectations" (58-68), is subtitled, "Slackers? Hardly. The so-called Generation X turns out to be full of go-getters who are just doing it—but their way."

The "News flash!" Hornblower presents is that "youngsters are ambitious get-aheaders—even more so than their parents and grandparents" (58). Hornblower still uses "Generation X" as a defining label for them, asserting that it "stemmed from Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel, Generation X, a tale of languid youths musing over 'mental ground zero'" (58). Also, fictional characters are used as representatives of "Xer" mentality again, and Coupland still serves as its voice:

Whether Xers stay home or strike out on their own, the generation gap yawns as wide as ever. Twentysomethings can paint a scathing portrait of their elders. "I think I was conceived on an acid trip," muses one Xer in the film Reality Bites. Another asks, "How can we repair all the damage we inherited?" Novelist Coupland, in a memorable essay in 1995, accused boomers, "pummeled by the recession and embarrassed by their own compromised 60s values," of "transferring their collective darkness onto the group threatening to take their spotlight." (Hornblower 68)

Hornblower's conclusion, however, dismisses the notion that the "Generation X" consists of "lazy, listless baby busters" and "[n]et surfing, nihilistic nipple piercers whining about McJobs" (58). Instead, she claims that "today's twentysomethings have learned to cope. They may be cynical about institutions, but they remain remarkably optimistic as individuals" (68). Hornblower uses the example of a song to illustrate this optimism: "For Gen X, the lyrics of Alanis Morissette's Hand in My Pocket [1995] defines the guarded hopefulness of the new generation" (68):

I'm broke but I'm happy
I'm poor but I'm kind...
I'm lost but I'm hopeful baby
What it all comes down to
Is that everything's gonna be fine, fine, fine
I've got one hand in my pocket
And the other one is giving a high five.

Ironically, the sample from the lyrics leaves out lines like "I'm high but I'm grounded," "I'm young and I'm underpaid / I'm tired but I'm working," and "I'm sad but I'm laughing"—lines that point to a sense of instability and disenchantment rather than to hopefulness, one could argue. Considering Morissette's exalted vocal style, one could also claim that there is a hint of unguarded sarcasm and disillusionment in the song. This, however, depends on the perception of the listener. It is still not plausible how a single song—or novel—should be able to represent an entire "Generation." Moreover, according to Morissette, "What it all boils down to / Is that no one's really got it figured out just yet."
8.2.3. Oh Well, Whatever, Nevermind

In early April of 1994, Kurt Cobain, lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter of the Seattle "grunge" rock band Nirvana committed suicide. His song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" had propelled the band to fame in 1991. "One day he was just another nihilistic Sub Pop [Nirvana’s record label] loser, the next he was the throat-wrenching voice of a generation," as Cohen and Krugman recall (143). The Generation Ecch! authors try to substitute their incessant sarcasm with a less jokingly tone when they talk about Cobain shooting himself in the head:

All shotgun jokes aside, the sad truth is that the tragedy of Cobain’s suicide will forever be overshadowed by his legacy as a rock’n’roll icon, which, even more sadly, was one of the main reasons why he killed himself. Kurt Cobain was confused, deeply depressed, chemically imbalanced and a stone junkie to boot. He never wanted to be the spokesperson of a generation, or even a rock star, but from the minute Nirvana became huge he was never anything but. His final act only sealed that fate. If Kurt could see the canonization that accompanied his demise it would kill him. Again. (Generation Ecch! 142)

Evidently, Cohen and Krugman could not leave it at that, as their undignified linking of Cobain’s suicide with that of a prominent figure of another "Generation" shows: "On or about April 5, Kurt holed up in the room above the garage of his old empty house in Seattle and treated himself to an early morning breakfast of buckshot. Buckshot—the breakfast Ernest Hemingway ate" (148). Ecch! indeed.

Douglas Coupland wrote a "Letter to Kurt Cobain" when the singer fell into a coma while on tour in Rome, about a month before his suicide: "Everyone’s reflexive response was to make a joke about it all, but in the end we couldn’t. Inside us there are 33 1/3 records, and to make a joke about you would have been to scratch a needle across that record; irony was jettisoned." In his emotive and affectionate letter, Coupland writes that "against the hype, against the odds" (99) he cared about his fellow generational "voice"—who perhaps was driven to suicide because he was categorized as such. Moreover, if the analysis of Generation X and its historical context indicates that calling Coupland the voice of "Generation X" does not seem to be justified, the case of Cobain is even less understandable. The lyrics to "Smells like Teen Spirit" are cryptic and ambiguous—if one can make out the words at all, as the parody "Smells like Nirvana" by "Weird Al" Yankovic (1992) questions. According to the CD inlay of Nevermind (1991), the chorus goes: "With the lights out it's less dangerous, here we are now, entertain us, I feel stupid and contagious, here we are now, entertain us, a mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido, yay." Whatever Cobain wants to imply with this, his becoming the "voice of his generation" is as questionable as Coupland’s.

230 The "Letter to Kurt Cobain" was first printed by The Washington Post on April 9, 1994, and reprinted with an addendum in Coupland’s Polaroids from the Dead, from which the quotation is taken (96).

231 Volume 19.2 (Summer 1995) of Popular Music and Society is devoted to an analysis of Kurt Cobain as a role model and pop culture icon and the media coverage of his suicide. In their study "Kurt Cobain, Generation X, and the Press: College Students Respond" (3-22), Norman Pecora and Sharon R. Mazzarella claim that “this media coverage constructed a narrative that declared Kurt Cobain to be the ‘voice’ of his generation” (4). Their interviews show that college students reject the idea that one musician […] could be the voice of this media-labeled generation,” and that their statements are “debunking a part of the Generation X myth” (20). They also “call for future research on the members of the so-called Generation X so that we as a society are not reliant on the myths, stereotypes, and generalizations that stigmatize an entire generation of young people” (20).
8.2.4. Slackers and Xers: Close Cousins

Words logically follow things; the ground trembled off and on for eons before someone shouted “earthquake.” But not long ago a word for which there were hardly any corresponding things entered the vocabulary of certain white young Americans. The word was “slacker,” and it seemed to bring into existence the phenomenon it was meant to describe. Perhaps because of that reversal of nominal logic, that cognitive flip, “slacker” is still extremely difficult to define.232

The third multimedial coincidence in 1991 that advanced the “trend” towards defining the “Twentysomething” debate in new terms was Richard Linklater's film Slacker. Apparently, as in the case of Cobain, Coupland felt a kinship to Linklater and contributed a foreword to the 1992 book version of Slacker. "I'm happy to know there are dreamers out on the edge," Coupland concludes, "characters like those Rich created in Slacker—characters out of key, in and out of love, drifting, slightly twisted, still willing to listen—childlike and full of wonder with their world—people I would like to consider my friends" (Coupland, Foreword 2).

In "Slacking Toward Bethlehem," Andrew Kopkind notes that Slacker has "no plot, no continuing narrative, no recurring characters" (183), like Generation X:

> What emerges from such loose connections is an exhibition of pictures from a generation rejecting [...] pursuits that have nothing to do with what its members want, who they are, or where they are going. In that, Linklater's slackers are close cousins to the characters in Douglas Coupland’s best-selling novel, Generation X, the other signal media event of the slacker culture. [...] Coupland's novel has only slightly more plot than the movie does, but they share more than narrative looseness. (183)

While Kopkind claims book and film have certain "thematic tropes" in common, he also points out that neither they nor their authors can serve as representatives: "A generation may seem to be defined by its most immediately engaging members under the media spotlight, but they do not encompass the whole of that generation's experience. In other words, 'slacking' means 'what slackers do,' and little more" (188). This, along with Kopkind's notion that the word "slacker" seemed to bring into existence what it was meant to describe, suggests that words do not necessarily and logically follow things when it comes to naming "Generations."

8.2.5. Through the GenX Looking Glass

"Generation X means a lot of things to a lot of people. We are a culture, a demographic, an outlook, a style, an economy, a scene, a political ideology, and a literature"—this is how Douglas Rushkoff begins his introduction "Us, by Us" (3) in The GenX Reader he edited in 1994. He claims that "GenX is the nightmare of a postindustrial, postmodern age" (4) and that by growing up with TV and commercials, "GenXers" have "learned that 'content' means lies, and that in context lies brilliance" (5).

Most of the articles and essays collected in Rushkoff’s Reader were originally published between 1988 and 1993 and reflect a wide range of opinions concerning the generational debate in these years. Coupland is represented with an interview

(from Elle magazine Sept. 1993) as well as an excerpt from his novel Shampoo Planet. The mix of fictional stories, political and sociological essays, interviews, comics, and other items demonstrates, according to Rushkoff, that "while twentysomethings may indeed have dropped out of American culture as traditionally defined, we also stand as a testament to American ingenuity, optimism, instinct, and brilliance" ("Us, by Us" 4). He declares that "GenX is a life philosophy designed to help us cope with the increasingly and disorientingly rapid deflation of our society" (6). In his introductory statement to the Reader's first chapter, "Here We Are" (10), Rushkoff defines "GenX" as a "framing device:"

GenX is merely a kind of self-conscious irony, the ability to step back from direct experience and watch oneself experiencing life. The moment GenX began was the moment when the first buster "bracketed" his own experience, the minute someone stepped back and, in a wink-wink-say-no-more fashion, related the ironic distance he felt from his own existence. (GenX Reader 10)

Apparently, Rushkoff tries to avoid using "Generation X" as the label for a demographic "Generation" and instead establishes "GenX" as a term that denotes a creative strategy to "survive" in the postmodern era. The approach to media and art he outlines in chapter five, "Metamedia" (160), also involves a sense of bricolage:

More than a case of form reflecting content, GenX self-reflexive art and media use forms within forms as the basis of content. Employing VCRs, computers, photocopying machines, and other "cut-and-paste" technology, the GenX artist creates an impact through his or her ability to keep the audience aware of its relationship to media. For us, a "junk culture" of screens within screens is a self-reflective societal looking glass. (GenX Reader 160)

Even if Rushkoff's "Us" remains vague and indeterminable, the diversity of the texts he presents in The GenX Reader illustrates how many different, often contradicting voices were grouped under the label "Generation X"—and how little this label has to do with the novel of the same title. While the approach to what Rushkoff calls "GenX self-reflexive art and media" partly applies to Generation X—forms within forms, or stories within stories as the basis of content—, his collection of texts points out that the discourse on "Generation X" did not originate with Coupland's first novel and that it was not the only text that reflected a changed sensibility towards art, literature, and media. Thus, the Reader provides further evidence that Generation X is just one piece in a larger construction of a social reality, and that Coupland is just one voice among others, not the voice of any "Generation." This makes Rushkoff's book essential reading for anyone who wants to know what the "Generation X" discourse is all about. It presents a disparate, dissimilar, and divergent report on American youth that shows that labeling and treating it as one uniform and homogenous mass—a "Generation"—is not possible, and that marketing attempts that try to do so are doomed to failure.

Not many people took notice. The GenX Reader has been out of print since 1996.
8.2.6. Denial and Disconnection

A few months ago it became clear to us that we weren’t connecting with any of the images that the new, self-appointed “twentysomething” authorities had been creating. We’re not in Seattle, not in the corporate world, not “slackers,” not going to law school, not skiing in Colorado, not anything specific. It’s disconcerting when you realize that Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X* has no connection to your life, *13th Gen* was written by two guys in their forties, and all the movies and TV shows about people your age are just soap operas in disguise.\(^{233}\)

While Rushkoff highlighted a rather positive and postmodern approach to the "Generation X" phenomenon, others resolutely denied and dismissed its implications. In 1993, Michael Wexler and John Hulme were "sick of labels and code names and pop sociology insights about this 'mysterious' group of 'twenty-somethings,'" and they decided to "collect the best short stories by up-and-coming writers and allow them to express what’s happening in their own lives" (Introduction iix). The result was published as *Voices of the Xiled: A Generation Speaks for Itself* in 1994. Again, *fictional* stories were employed to represent a "Generation."

Others tried to gather *facts* as evidence against the "Generation X" concept. In 1992, Michael Lee Cohen, a 27-year-old law school graduate, interviewed 161 people from across the U.S. He examined how young persons in their twenties from diverse backgrounds felt and thought about their lives and their future. Cohen published 43 of these interviews in *The Twentysomething American Dream: A Cross-Country Quest for a Generation* (New York: Dutton, 1993). In his introduction to the book, Cohen claims that fiction writers, "including Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, David Foster Wallace, and Doug Coupland, and filmmakers, including Richard Linklater and Cameron Crowe," have tried to define "what it means to be a young adult in today’s United States" (3):

> But most young adults are not coked-out aspiring authors or rich, spoiled, world weary preppies. [...] Most of them are nor hiding from the world by escaping to the California desert, whiling away the days by telling tales and boozing. Most of them are not paralyzed by a crushing sense of “futurelessness,” fretting about the likelihood that they will be forgotten by History. (Cohen 3)

Cohen lets young adults tell their own stories, but is aware of the decisive problem with *narrating* the *story* of one’s life: can fact be discerned from fiction? He answers, "I can say this much: in those few instances when I did have an opportunity to compare the teller’s story against reality, the facts always checked out" (6). Cohen claims "there was no reason to lie" (6) for the interviewees, and that their statements paint a more truthful picture of a "Generation" than other accounts: "By offering many different perspectives—sometimes complementary, often contradictory—I have attempted to provide a composite portrait of the twentysomething generation, one that approaches the richness and diversity of this generation’s world" (9). Thus, his book also is a composition—a construction. Diverse and rich as it may be, it only accurately displays *a* world—not *the* world.

The most elaborate attempt to define the facts behind the "Generation X" construct is by Geoffrey T. Holtz: *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind "Generation X"* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995). Its cover blurb claims that it is "the first-ever factual, no-nonsense look at what happened in the 60s, 70s, and 80s—a detailed tour of the events and trends that set the stage for a misunderstood generation," and that "a media sound bite doesn't make a generation; demographics, politics, culture, and economics do." In his introduction, Holtz dismisses the labels "Baby Busters," "New Lost Generation," "13er" (cf. 2-3), and, finally, also "Generation X:" The now almost omnipresent name coined by novelist Douglas Coupland [...] with its use of the mathematical symbol for the unknown, pays homage to this generation's disdain for accepting any single definition. However, while this designation does capture a certain spirit of anonymity, and serves the characters in his novel very well, this much-hyped, slightly derogatory label seems to be nearly universally disliked among the members of the young generation whom it is supposed to define. (Holtz 3)

While Holtz fails to point out that the novel does not attempt to define a "Generation," but to present it as undefinable, he himself apparently cannot resist to participate in the generation-defining business: "I'm proposing a new name, at least for the remainder of these pages—a name that speaks to the individualistic, multifaceted, difficult-to-define nature of this group. 'The Free Generation'" (3). Thus, his impressive assemblage of statistics and charts that explain demographics, history, culture, education, economics, and politics creates the impression that, after all, it just serves to promote another name, another label. Again, Strauss and Howe's notion that "we're writing about it, so we have to give it a name" (*13th Gen* 23) emerges as the guiding principle of generational writings.

Many more examples for the use of the term "Generation X" in the discourse on young Americans in the 1990s could be given. There is one book, though, that illustrates how the discourse disconnected itself from the novel *Generation X*. Peter Sacks' *Generation X Goes To College* from 1996 claims to be *An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching in Postmodern America*. In it, there is not a single reference to Coupland's novel, or where the term came from and what it means. Obviously, Sacks accepts it as the defining label for American college-aged youth and expects his readers to be familiar with it. Similarly, he tries to find a "Slogan of the Age" (cf. 117), pinning down the concept of postmodernity in one handy expression. He dismisses "Anything goes" and *The X-Files*' "Trust No One" (cf. 118), but there is one he likes:

But perhaps the best candidate for postmodernity's byword is given to us by Nirvana and Kurt Cobain, the grunge rockers many observers might contend are emblematic of Generation X culture: "Here we are now/Entertain us," says a line from "Smells Like Teen Spirit," a lyric that hits upon the domination of entertainment values in contemporary culture, spanning politics, education, and even religious institutions. Indeed, one might modify Nirvana's lyric along the lines of Descartes to say, "I am entertained, therefore I am." (Sacks 118)

Indeed, this is an eye-opening account of how sampled slogans, divorced from their original contexts, are used and abused to fit the purposes and interests of those who are writing about "Generations" for Postmodern America.
9. ...Entertain Us: Epilogue

"Wait," interrupts Dag. "This is a true story?"
"Yes."
"Okay." (Generation X 54)

9.1. *Generation X* and "Generation X"

The study of the literary text *Generation X* in the historical context of other 20th century "Generations" in America has proven to be a complex undertaking. Clear facts were hard to discern, and if they were not contradicting each other, some emerged as being more fiction than fact, or even as having turned into myths. Moreover, it is not possible to tell the story of the "Lost Generation" and the story of the latest "New Lost Generation" in American literary history without this mixture of factual and fictional sources of information.

The survey of different "Generations" shows that their names are always a result of some form of borrowing, of transferring a term or statement from one context and discourse into another. As long as enough people uphold the validity of the de- and re-contextualized terms, they remain in circulation: "X" can only count as a qualifier for "Generation" in a societal context that is collectively agreed upon. This process of *construction* is influenced by the interests different people involved in it pursue.

If literary historians want to present literature and authors in terms of movements, groups, decades, and "Generations," they need convenient names and labels. Notwithstanding the way these terms are used by the authors themselves, they serve as dividing lines to mark different stages and developments in literary history—new styles, new authors, new labels. These labels do not illustrate, but construct a seemingly coherent progression and evolution in literary history.

Marketers pursue different goals. They need characterizations of target markets to be able to devise effective marketing strategies for their products. They rely on demographic data and statistics to construct an array of different groups and "Generations" of consumers, each with their own needs and patterns of behavior. Their interest in "Generations" is purely economical.

In politics, talking about "Generations" can become a tool that is used to enforce or disguise ideological interests. If the predominant image of young Americans mainly applies to white, middle-class college students or graduates, other segments of the population are marginalized. Bill Clinton, dismissing the notion of the so-called "Generation X, filled with cynics and slackers," instead sees "a generation of seekers"—addressing exclusively UCLA students, not the entirety and diversity of American youth, of which many do not even get a fair chance to become such a "seeker" at places like UCLA.

In the case of "Generation X," its name and label was taken from a novel of the same title, whose author was called the spokesman of this "Generation." A critical reading of the novel *Generation X* showed that it partakes of a *variety* of discourses in late 20th century and cannot be read as an announcement or manifest of a dis-
tinct "Generation" of young Americans. Most notably, it displays a sense of cultural fragmentation and of alienation from what the narrator calls "genuine capital H history times" (151). For those who experience this as a loss, the text offers answers by engaging the readers in a playful process of reconstruction and storytelling. Not offering a name for a new "Generation," the variable "X" is employed to point out that definitions of this sort are not only broad simplifications, but also interchangeable—and thus pointless. They only serve to construct a distinction between groups of people, reinforcing their common sense of identity within a group only in terms of contrast and difference to another group, and not because of an intrinsic set of shared characteristics. "X" does not mark a spot; it marks differance in the constructions of social and cultural reality. While the words have lost their meaning(s), the names can make all the difference in a postmodern world.

Consequently, the novel offers a comment on generational debates that makes its title seem highly inappropriate as the replacement of labels like "Twentysomethings" or "Baby Busters"—labels that were inappropriate to begin with. As far as the relation of the novel to the construction of the generational discourse in the 1990s is concerned, Generation X and "Generation X" apparently have little more in common than the name.

### 9.2. The Odds and The End

Every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes. Literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably. A critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. — If these three statements somehow seem familiar to the reader of this study, this is a correct notion. They are taken from Aram Veeser's list of basic New Historicism assumptions that was presented in chapter 3.6.2. As the contextualizing analysis of Coupland's Generation X has shown, they also apply to this study.

Collating, comparing and combining many different sources, gathering evidence from diverse contexts and areas of investigation, de- and recontextualizing what was found, and making excessive use of quotations, I used many of the same principles and mechanics that are involved in the construction of "Generations." Thus, the concept and structure of my study itself reveals how elements that already exist can be re-organized and put under a headline, presenting them as a "new" whole. If I carried out this construction work successfully, and if the resulting structure seems to be convincing, valid, well-built, and maybe even aesthetically pleasing to those who behold it, this can be regarded as further evidence of the central importance of bricolage in contemporary postmodern literary discourse.
And if the result does not seem to be convincing for some readers, it may still serve them as a starting point for new, maybe improved constructions.

Either way, one of the primary goals of this thesis is achieved: to reintegrate the discourse on "Generation X" into the context that provided the term, re-establishing its link to fictional literature, and thus, its link to literary criticism—a discipline that so far largely ignored this example of how much power its domain, fiction, still has today. To use Greenblatt’s terms, literature charges social discourses with aesthetic energies (cf. *Curse* 157), thus participating in the shaping and construction of what we perceive as reality—our world. The (self-) awareness of the process of de- and reconstruction in which literature engages us may have increased in the postmodern era, but Greenblatt stresses that this is no cause for alarm or disillusionment, as literature still has another important function: "Literature may do important work in the world, but each sentence is not hard labor, and the effectiveness of this work depends on the ability to delight" (*Curse* 9).

If this study fell prey to the practices it exposed, it did so willingly and emphatically. Any textual and narrative presentation of the "facts" involved in a discourse has to be aware of its own constructedness. ¶What brackets these constructions together is the personality of the bricoleur: my preferences and my decisions which of the fragments that were available to me I should use have shaped my text. Thus, my personal prologue and these personal statements in the epilogue are the brackets that call attention to my own involvement in the matters I discussed—as a reader of *Generation X* group "Generation X" sup- been talking about my gen- fascinates me in a literary not only its ability to traditional and Horatian to *instruct* me. I may fol- not, but I gladly follow the stories and to reconstruct them, connecting them to my experiences, my world, and my life story. ¶We are all storytellers, and Douglas Coupland suggests that we share our stories to establish new relationships for a postmodern and postapoca- lyptic world in which language itself, our tool to create and construct "reality," is regarded as unstable and not trustworthy anymore. Acknowledging that *fictional* accounts of the world have no lesser status than those that are assumed to be *factual*, I value Coupland’s novel as evidence of how a literary text can interact with the culture and society that produced it. ¶Even more importantly, it also interacts with its readers—using the basic principle of storytelling, as expressed in the words, words, *words* of Andy, the narrator of *Generation X* (4):

This world.
I tell you.
10. Bibliography


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**Discography**


