

Sarduy's essay "Writing/Transvestism" where the politics of reading transvestism are explored (Review 9, Fall 1973). Garber claims, "this emphasis on reading and being read, and on the deconstructive nature of the transvestite performance, always undoing itself as part of its process of self-enactment, is what makes transvestism theoretically as well as politically and erotically interesting - at least to me." Garber's fascination with the transvestite is a fascination with the imaginary space where the "transvestic fantasy," characterized by the "complex interplay, slippage, and parodic recontextualization of gender markers and gender categories" demands to be read.

While the "theatrical" transvestite, as opposed to the actual transvestite, does indeed provide ample ground for the textual play in which Garber indulges, we should also remember that to be on the wrong side of the distinctions the transvestite transcends is to be marginalized, oppressed, even endangered. Garber does not ignore the negative implications of calling into question those categories that structure society, but in her idealization of the transvestite's destabilization of binary terms she does seem to gloss over some important distinctions.

First, is there a difference between the way we might read the theatrical or on stage transvestite and the way transvestites read themselves? Would discussions with transvestites corroborate Garber's reading of their function in society or suggest something else? I am not suggesting Garber write a different kind of book, nor would I introduce the disputed distinction of original and imitation, but I do suggest the conflation of real transvestites with fictional or theatrical ones might well be problematic.

Second, the inclusion of transsexuals in the broad category of

transvestite raises another set of questions. While Garber makes some interesting observations about transsexuals, particularly with respect to issues of gender and subjectivity (see chapter 4), her location of transsexuals on a "transvestite continuum" where the difference is reduced to one of degree, is highly questionable. If the transvestite fantasy is to put gender categories into play, and to keep the fantasy in play, as Garber claims, then how can transsexuals who, as Garber acknowledges, "wish to literalize that fantasy through an alteration in the body" be seen as sharing the same fantasy? To take another example from Garber's theory, she claims that "if transvestism offers a critique of binary sex and gender distinctions, it is not because it simply makes such distinctions reversible but because it denaturalizes, destabilizes, and defamiliarizes sex and gender signs." While Garber's multiple examples of transvestism appear to corroborate this claim to function as critique, her descriptions (and my understanding) of transsexuals blatantly contradict it. For transsexuals, sex distinctions are reversible, genitalia are essentialized (as Garber also notes), gender identities are considered stable and fixed, and corresponding sex and gender signs are rigidly upheld. Other instances of what I would call undercutting differences could be mentioned, but my point is that Garber's inclusion of transsexuals in the category transvestite undermines rather than supports her theory.

Another distinction that becomes blurred in the transvestic space of Garber's book is the distinction between what is conscious and what is unconscious. It seems to me transvestism's potential for critique, "for rupture and for the reconfiguration of the cultural Imaginary" will be rather weak as long as that critique

functions at an unconscious level for both transvestite and spectator. Garber has a tendency to idealize the figure of the transvestite (both the theatrical and the actual) whose actions are not necessarily freely chosen or consciously embraced, but the result of compulsion. Likewise, our fascination with transvestism, our desire to cross gender boundaries as well as other boundaries, may only exist at the level of the unconscious. Garber is fond of psychoanalyst Robert Stoller's phrase "a fetish is a story masquerading as an object" because, like the transvestite, the fetish only works when it is in disguise, when the story remains unconscious. However, Stoller also warns that "if the text becomes conscious, the fetish no longer in itself causes excitement, is no longer a fetish." To continue the analogy, then, the transgressive power of the transvestite can only function at an unconscious level, it cannot be realized in the world. What is disconcerting is that neither the transvestite nor those who are fascinated by her/him consciously embrace the deconstructive potential she/he represents. Until we find some way of making the unconscious desire a conscious one, we will continue to be haunted by that phantom, the transvestite. On the other hand, perhaps that means Florida's transvestite thieves will continue to elude the voyeuristic police who, not having read *Vested Interests*, have not learned to see in the transvestite the embodiment of their own desire.

Patricia Elliot teaches in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Blank Generation

BY Todd Dufresne and Clara Sacchetti

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales For An Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991

Generation X chronicles the search for meaning and identity in our post-mortem, post-structural and, in particular, post-baby boom world. In effect, and not unlike Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, Coupland captures the fragmentation of modern life experienced by the "twenty-something" crowd - the so-called "X generation." In the process he introduces the reader to 96 seductive, often amusing, anecdotal characterizations of postmodern culture. And these he places, parodying intro textbooks everywhere, in the book's wide margins.

Structurally and thematically, the novel opens under the ominous shadow of a solar eclipse over the Manitoba prairie in the late 1970s. Alas, this significant image marks an opening which is already a closing, a blotting out of the sun, of reason itself. But it also marks, of course, the promise of rebirth, of a new day in the sun. This, then, is the crux of "a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination" that envelops the characters (and perhaps the readers) of *Generation X*. The eclipse can thus be read, and even demands to be read, as the beginning of the end of our posted values (or lack thereof). Or again, the eclipse marks a first step in Coupland's Christian revaluation of our postmodernist devaluations. This, at least, is the sub-text upon which the novel operates.

In *Generation X*, the search for meaning functions almost entirely in the most negative and reactive terms. Coupland's enemy is predominantly the economic and social culture of the hippie turned yuppie, a culture (or shadow) to which he directs sometimes funny, but always resentful, arrows of hostility. For instance, one of Coupland's anecdotes reads: "Bleeding Ponytail: An elderly sold-out baby boomer who pines for hippie or pre-sellout days." But such resentment is not limited to the baby boom generation. Railing against his parents, one character states: "Sometimes I'd just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of futurelessness. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear." Siblings are also attacked ("Global Teens"), and so too are the "sub-groups" which comprise the X generation. Coupland characterizes (or, if your prefer, caricatures) this subgroup thus: "Yuppie Wannabes" (those who desire and affirm the yuppie lifestyle), "Squires" (those couples who yearn for "Eisenhower-era" plenitude), and "Black Holes"

(those who romantically reject these options).

In addition, Coupland adds a fourth, undefined group; a group which is either the true X generation, or is that which goes beyond its (coopted) devaluations. This is a group, in other words, which mediates Coupland's more disguised attack on postmodern values. Not unlike the "Black Holes," they have chose "by free will to inhabit that lunar side of the fence." Escaping their unfulfilled lives, each character enacts the logic of the desert father and relocates to the desert town of Palm Springs. Claire, for instance, leaves her old job in Los Angeles as a garment buyer, loses her "unwanted momentums" and escapes the "endless, compulsive and indulgent" family discussions of Nostradamus, JFK, Warhol, Tylenol and milking horses. Dag, having suffered his (seemingly inevitable) "Mid-Twenties Breakdown" - "My crisis wasn't just the failure of youth but also a failure of class and of sex and the future and I still don't know what" - leaves his job as a "Yuppie Wannabe" and escapes the "Veal-Fattening Pens" and "Sick Building Syndrome" of

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL RIVOCHÉ



Toronto office life. And finally, Andy leaves his former employment with a "teenybopper magazine office in Japan" and, in the process, escapes his history: "I needed less in life. Less past."

Out in the desert, the three diagnose the sickness that had once made them, among other things, "confuse shopping with creativity." In the process, they invent funny, morbid, bitter stories about real and imagined life, stories that are cathartic and foundational. They invent, in other words, intersubjective "tales for an accelerated culture" which overturn values and "make their lives worthwhile in the process." Claire states: "Either our lives become stories, or there's no way to get through them." One product of this work-in-progress is the mythical asteroid world of "Texlahoma" - a place where citizens are routinely fired from their "Mcjobs", and where kids take drugs and fantasize about "pulling welfare-check scams as they inspect each other's skin for chemical burns from the lake water." Notably, it is also where "the year is permanently 1974... the year starting from which real wages in the U.S. never grew ever again." It is also a year, we might add, when war-marching, flag burning hippies slowly began turning into bar-hopping, briefcase toting yuppies.

In the course of the novel, we learn that these tales of revaluation, of resentment, are modelled on Andy's experience at Alcoholics Anonymous. There he was advised: "Never be afraid to cough up a bit of diseased lung for the spectators . . . How are people ever going to help themselves if they can't grab onto a fragment of your own horror?" Once again, postmodernity (in the largest sense of the word) is treated as an addiction which must be overcome, posted. The novel's reactive structure, or meta-structure, is thus mirrored in its prescriptive advocacy of AA's confessional approach to addiction. It functions, that is, not

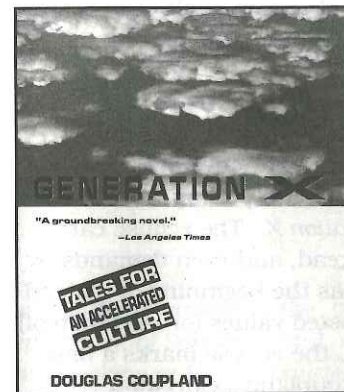
by self-affirmation but by negative self-abdication. Not surprisingly, then, Coupland depicts the self as transcendental, liquidated. And thus, for instance, Andy happily dreams of the day when his "brain will turn into a thin white cord stretched skyward up into the ozone layer and humming like a guitar string."

The combination of transcendental values with a reactive structure of overturning finally designated Coupland's revaluative effort as essentially Christian. At its deepest level, then, Coupland's enemy is less the baby boomer and late-capitalism than it is the figure of Nietzsche and post-structuralism. In effect, Coupland announces the resurrection of Nietzsche's dead God, of meaning it(Him)self. It is surely to this end, for instance, that his novel opens with the chapter, "The Sun Is Your Enemy," and closes with the slogan, "The Sun Is Not Your Enemy." Meaning and identity are salvaged, in other words, in the salvation of the desert sun, of God as ultimate signified. But to this end, all segments of our postmodern society are rejected - from yuppie to X generation.

These Christian (re)values find expression in a number of ways throughout the novel and operate structurally in the passage from darkness to light, prairie to desert, library (as Platonic cave) to sun, eclipse to apocalypse (the last chapter, "Jan. 01, 2000"), death to rebirth, yuppie to Christian. But Christianity is also present through the dreams and aspirations of the three main characters. Andy dreams, as suggested, of transcendence and communion. And Dag - who, not unimportantly, resembles "the lapsed half of a Mormon pamphleting duo" - also imagines the day of his transcendent resurrection, stating: "The sun will be right overhead and behind me there'll be this terrific flapping of wings - louder than the flapping any bird can make." However, and this cannot be surprising, Claire does not imagine

the angel who will carry her "directly into the sun." Rather, she imagines "dowsing for water" in the desert, her hope limited to finding a certain "someone": "Someone who's dowsing for water, just like me." No doubt, tarnished by her encounter with a "Yuppie Wannabe," Claire seeks love and purification from a latter-day John the Baptist. Women, then, are the included excluded of Coupland's dream of escape from postmodernity. But such misogyny, of course, is just another instance of the Christian resentment which pervades the novel.

Generation X is written in a sexy, aphoristic style and certainly taps into some real and often justified anger. Consequently, the Christian content of its popular surface is easily missed, or dismissed, treated uncritically like a twenty second commercial or a six syllable "sound bit." But for these reasons Coupland's novel is an especially insidious and dangerous piece of pamphleteering. It is, therefore, unfortunate that many critics - apparently enamoured by its glittering surface - have reviewed *Generation X* as the "defining document" for a lost generation. As two undefined parts of that generation, we can only pray they are wrong.



Clara Sacchetti is studying Anthropology at York University. Todd Dufresne is pursuing his graduate degree in Social & Political Thought, also at York University.

