“Do You Really Want to Hear This?”: Douglas Coupland and “Canadian” Writing

*Only Canadians care about Canada, believe me – do you really want to hear this? I have gone to school in the States and in Europe; Japan is like a second home to me; my financial life comes out of New York – my life is a result of doing what I do. Most Canadian books deal with small town life or the emigration experience – boring! It’s not my life. There’s no Canadian category that I fit into as a writer and that freaks out the Canadian writing establishment because it means that they have to create a new category, which is work. So it is easier for them to see me as American, which is obviously not true.*

When Douglas Coupland said this he had recently published a Vancouver guide-book, *City of Glass*; moreover, his second guide book, *Souvenir of Canada*, was in the pipeline, and he was working on the novel *Hey Nostradamus*, set in North Vancouver. Although some of his earlier novels – *Shampoo Planet*, *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* – also make use of B.C. settings, the more recent work to me suggested a “Canadian turn” in Coupland’s writing, which is why I had asked him to elaborate on what it meant to be a Canadian writer. But his response is enigmatic. Evidently, he identifies with the transnational rather than the national (“The States, Europe, Japan”). Moreover, he contends that most Canadian books are boring and deal with “small town life or the emigration experience,” which is not a genre of writing that he can relate to. At the same time he is annoyed with the “Canadian writing establishment” which reads him as an American – why?

In an article published about half a year after this interview, Coupland brings up the topic again. At a literary festival in Paris he finds, much to his chagrin, that he has been listed as “American” in the festival catalogue. “I’m Canadian,” he insists to one of the organisers. Coupland adds, “my own writing, fiction and non-fiction, has never been more focused on Canada and what makes us us” (article “Strong and Free” in *Maclean’s*). If we read the interview and the article in conjunction we find that Coupland is critical about “generic” Canadian literature, and wary about a nationalist Canadian discourse. He is also, however, deeply concerned with what it means to be Canadian, insisting on being read as a writer from Canada (while complaining that “only Canadians care about Canada”). This is a precarious position. However, as I hope to show in this paper, Coupland’s stance is not only performed on a theoretical tightrope, but given steady expression in his work. I believe, moreover, that reading Coupland’s fiction and non-fiction as precisely Canadian writing is crucial if we want to understand how he addresses the apparent contradictions of writing/not writing Canadian. (It may be “work”, as Coupland has it, but hey! isn’t that what we’re here for?)
Coupland’s locus par préférence is the suburb. In *Souvenir of Canada* Coupland writes: “For millions of Canadians, the suburbs are life’s main experience, yet their lives are more or less stripped from the history books. The few times suburbanites are ever referred to is with disdain” (107). And he ironically comments that the suburbs which he and “the bulk of Canadian society” inhabit is “apparently an infrastructural residue, good only for housing and servicing consumers” (107). Fittingly, Coupland’s fictional characters move about in suburbs or equally non-descript places, such as shopping malls (*Shampoo Planet*), industrial parks (*Microserfs*), hotels, bungalows in the desert (*Generation X*). In his non-fiction, too, Coupland’s starting point is recent suburban Canadian history. The short texts usually begin in autobiography – eating maple-walnut ice cream (“gag”), hiking up Grouse Mountain, driving the Trans-Canada Highway. He then makes some kind of “Canadian” statement about this experience. The one about the Trans-Canada, for instance, reads: “most [Canadians] have a first-hand experience of the capacity of long journeys to corrode relationships” (*Souvenir* 119).

The accompanying pictures are important too; they supply a dimension often missing in Coupland’s fiction and non-fiction, which one can call specificity, or the trace of the real, or particularity, or texture, or thick description or even, local colour. Coupland is interested in the image of the immediate past; but he does not wish to reanimate the past, not breathe life into it. For even in these pictures rich in detail and associations what the reader/viewer sees is the imprint of time and life rather than life itself unfolding. Characteristically, one of Coupland’s favourite art-forms in *Souvenir from Canada* is the still-life (see his Canada Picture series or the ones by Karin Bubas. The title of his essay collection *Polaroids from the Dead* also captures this idea of immediately registering, freezing, what is past.

The suburb is located between the wilderness and the city, it is a place with little local colour and less history. The suburb although richly populated is a “no-man’s” land, a generic Western habitat, without the taint of character and history that clings to the old world, its very newness its greatest asset. As Michael Brockington has pointed out the suburb is a true Utopia – a good place, but also a no-place, a place which is neither city nor countryside. As I understand it, Vancouver is appealing to Coupland because the city to some extent shares these suburban (non)characteristics: “Vancouver can neatly morph into just about any North American city” (*City of Glass* 6). Vancouver is the image or idea of the American city: “Vancouver feels like a functioning model of how American cities and neighbourhoods were supposed to have functioned in 1961” (34). Coupland’s Vancouver, then, comes across as a simulacrum, a replica of the idea and ideal of the American town, not the real thing, but the hyper-real thing. The idea of Canada as a truer America ties in with Coupland’s general view of the two countries: “Canada and the U.S. have diverged to the point where it’s no longer true to say that we’re essentially the same thing. Did we change while the U.S. remained the same? I doubt it. We’ve
changed somewhat, but the U.S. has changed as well, big time, and we’ve simply decided not to go along for the ride” (“Strong and Free”).

The characters that inhabit Coupland’s modern and suburban Utopia are as featureless and morph-like as the buildings. Typically, in *Life after God* the narrator says, “I have always tried to speak with a voice that has no regional character – a voice from nowhere --- the accent of a person who has no fixed home in their mind” (174). Diversity is another way of achieving the non-definable. Under the heading “clans” (in *Souvenir*) Coupland discusses the difference between being Vancouver and being in the vicinity of Newcastle, England, where “in a genetic sense, about seventy percent of my DNA comes from” and where the people look like “most of the people in my family”. Coupland finds the latter an eerie experience which “rapidly takes on the texture of a science fiction movie where pod people have supplanted a region’s citizens” (18). The realisation hits him that he as a Canadian sorely misses “the variety of people.” And although one can discuss whether “clan” thinking is accentuated in a multicultural environment or not, diversity certainly makes it difficult for any one group to colour or lay claim to a nation, region or city.

Let me rehearse a couple of the things that I have said so far: from Coupland’s Vancouver vantage point being Canadian is to be suburban, “American,” adaptable, modern and multicultural. Equally important, however, for Canadian self-perception is proximity to nature. If the Californian beach is the *Ultima America*, the final frontier of the American west, Coupland’s Canadian west coast does not look towards the sea but to the forest and mountains. Robert McGill, who has shown the importance of ecology in Coupland, writes, “If Los Angeles is the city that rose out of the desert, then Vancouver is the city that rose out of the forest; each ecology carries a powerful mythological weight that informs literary representations of the city that grew from it” (264). The northerly orientation of Coupland’s writing is poignantly expressed in the essay on “Lions Gate Bridge” from *Polaroids from the Dead*:

I want you to imagine you are driving north, across the Lions Gate Bridge, and the sky is steely gray and the sugar-dusted mountains loom blackly in the distance. Imagine what lies behind those mountains – realize that there are only more mountains – mountains until the end of the world, mountains taller than a thousand me’s, mountains taller than a thousand you’s. Here’s where civilization ends; here is where time ends and where eternity begins.

Here is what Lions Gate Bridge is: one last grand gesture of beauty, of charm, and of grace before we enter the hinterlands, before the air becomes too brittle and too cold to breathe, before we enter that place where life becomes harsh, where we must become animals in order to survive (74-75)

*Survival*, the title of Margaret Attwood’s seminal work on Canadian literature, resurfaces here in an author who seems unwilling to accept that his novels could be seen as typically Canadian. Coupland’s protagonists do not have to struggle with the natural forces in order to survive, but the idea, the possibility, the metaphor is there; these are people poised, on (the) edge, looking. McGill writes, “while the suburbs are a product of modernity, they stare into the noumenal chasm of nonhuman space” (265). Again and again Coupland returns to the proximity of the wild. He recounts bears
coming down to raid his garbage cans or the plane that crashed in the mountains and was not found until years later. His own home on a mountainside could easily have the most fantastic view of the ocean and the city; instead he prefers to have it all surrounded by trees and vegetation ("I don’t like views," he said in one interview). In his fiction too, nature plays an important role. In *Girlfriend in a Coma* the descent into the canyon gives a glimpse of eternity; in *Life After God* the narrator wraps up his story with a revitalising bath in a forest stream (a counterpoint, I am sure, to the well-known pool meditation earlier in the book); *Generation X* ends with a nature epiphany when Dag, the narrator, sees (and is hurt by) a white egret in a moment of “beauty” and “privilege.” Under the heading “Salmon” in *City of Glass* Coupland recounts an experience that he used in fictional form already in *Girlfriend in a Coma*:

> …the river was a series of pools. In one of these pools was a school of salmon, which had turned purple and red as they neared the end of their life cycle. There were perhaps a thousand of them all clustered together in a clump the shape of a brain, stable, swimming in one place. It was one of the most beautiful sights I’d ever seen. On an impulse, I stripped down to my BVDs and stepped into the water, cold to say the least, and walked right into the middle of “the brain,” with these creatures swimming around me. I tried to imagine what it is they could be thinking – some message so old and so basic that earthly newcomers like humans would never get it (107)

Nature and danger are Coupland’s and many modern Canadians’ next-door neighbours (even if the actual struggle for survival is less keenly felt today). Coupland is not alienated from nature as some critics say; rather, the danger and beauty (inseparable from the danger) that it offers is a liberating and aesthetic and religious experience. Possibly it is also very Canadian. Attwood suggests that identification with animals and with the natural world, especially with hunted or threatened animals, is a development within Canadian literature. If “English animal stories are about ‘social relations,’ American ones are about people killing animals; Canadian ones are about animals being killed, as felt emotionally from inside fur and feathers” (74). It should be possible to trace a trajectory in Canadian literature from fighting for survival over identification to ecological writing today. In my opinion Coupland has a place in such an arc of Canadian writing.

Then there is the case of human losers. Attwood, again, states that Canadian literature is all about victims: “stick a pin in Canadian literature at random, and nine times out of ten you’ll hit a victim” (39). If this is still true about Canadian literature in general I cannot say – Attwood’s book came out in 1972 – but it is certainly true of Coupland’s work – fiction and non-fiction alike. In his non-fiction, Coupland cultivates the victim position of Canada, suburbanites, animals, the environment and memorabilia. Moreover, his novels are filled with the failed. In *Hey Nostradamus* Jason heroically stops an ongoing school massacre but is then made into a scapegoat, an experience that cripples him for life. In *All Families are Psychotic* Janet Drummond gets HIV after having been hit by a bullet that has passed through her son’s already infected body. Her husband, incidentally, fired the gun. This sounds uncannily like Attwood’s prediction that if a boy meets a girl in Canadian literature it is highly likely that “the girl gets cancer and he gets hit by a meteorite” (237).
Finally, the truest sign of a Canadian writer is of course denial. The first quote or epigraph to the preface of *Survival* goes: “He doesn’t want to talk about Canada…There you have the Canadian dilemma in a sentence. Nobody wants to talk about Canada, not even us Canadians. You’re right, Paddy. Canada is a bore” (9).

Now who does that remind us of?

**Works Cited**


—. “Homepage.” [http://www.coupland.com]


