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CONFRONTING MASCULINITY: THE GEN X NOVEL (1984-2000) AND THE SENTIMENTAL MAN

Robert E. Woolridge

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, robwoolridge@yahoo.com

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CONFRONTING MASCULINITY: THE GEN X NOVEL (1984-2000) AND THE
SENTIMENTAL MAN

by

Robert E. Woolridge

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 1999
M.A., Southern Illinois University, 2002

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree

Department of English
in the Graduate School
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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SENTIMENTAL MAN

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Robert E. Woolridge

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of English

Approved by:

Dr. Joseph Shapiro, Chair

Dr. Edward Brunner

Dr. Robert Fox

Dr. Natasha Zaretsky

Dr. George Boulukos

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Robert E. Woolridge, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English, presented on January 17, 2019, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: CONFRONTING MASCULINITY: THE GEN X NOVEL (1984-2000) AND THE SENTIMENTAL MAN

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Joseph Shapiro

Experimental novels written from 1984-2000 by authors associated with Generation X collectively struggle with common sense notions of masculinity in their various decades at the end of the twentieth century. Relying on confessional, first-person narration, first novels written by white men stage a critical engagement of outdated patriarchal norms in an effort to produce a more progressive masculinity based on sentimentality. In the 1980s, McInerney and Ellis novels, *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and *Less Than Zero* chronicle the struggles of empty, yuppie men who cannot make connections with their peers due to their emotionally devoid lives. By the 1990s, Douglas Coupland proposes a new, sentimental masculinity with his protagonist Andy who narrates *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. Andy creates sympathetic connections with his peers through the act of confessional storytelling. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* does similar cultural work as Coupland's novel by creating an anti-sentimental, nameless narrator so bereft of emotion that he creates a hypermasculine alter-ego and violent groups to avoid the emotional emptiness of his life. Finally, Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) produces the most progressive, evolved masculine narrator, Dave, who spends the entire novel coming to terms with the death of his parents while raising his brother as a son. The novels, in both content and form, become more complex and richer reflecting the development of their protagonists and their philosophical arguments for progressing into sentimental men.

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to two people I lost along the way. Their lives and deaths touched me deeply and inspired me in ways they could never imagine.

William Gregg Goodman (July 11, 1951-July 22, 2014) was a dear friend and proved to me that men can evolve and become better versions of ourselves. I miss you dearly.

My fallen Gen Xer, Eric Wayne Houser (August 21, 1976-February 18, 2014), I cannot express the loss and pain I carry. I love you brother; you are with me always.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I. I Smoke My Camel Straights and I Ride My Own Melt...

A central character in the 1994 Generation X film *Reality Bites* is twentysomething Troy Dyer, a male character who suffers (dire) anxiety about work, his relationships with women, his broken family, and his future. These anxieties manifest in his daily life and cause serious problems. As a philosophy-major dropout, he works a menial job at a newsstand only to be fired for stealing a Snickers bar he believes is owed to him, an episode that illustrates his apathy toward diminished work opportunities. His true passions are music and his unrequited love for the female protagonist, Lelaina, but he is unable to pursue either seriously due to his fear of committing to anyone or anything. Instead, he professes that life is meaningless: “There’s no point to any of this,” he explains to Lelaina. “It’s just a ... random lottery of meaningless tragedy and a series of near-escapes.” A fear of abandonment inherited from his absentee father leads Troy to reject emotional connection before he can be rejected. In a climactic scene, Lelaina confronts Troy (and the random woman he has brought home) about his self-inflicted stagnation:

Don’t just dick around at the same coffee house for five years. Don’t dick around with her or with me. I mean, try at something for once in your life. Do something about it, but you know what? You better do it now, and you better do it fast, because the world doesn’t owe you any favors. And whether you know it or not, you are on the inside track to Loserville, U.S.A., just like [your father].

This scene shows a woman speaking truth to an emotionally stunted Generation X man and forcing him to face the repressed pain in his life. Moreover, Lelaina goes straight to the heart of Troy’s conflict by attacking his sense of entitlement and by arguing that Troy’s troubles and

failures stem from his unknowingly following his father's path. Lelaina, I'd suggest, also critiques early-twentieth-century patriarchal masculinity. Later in the film, Troy returns from his father's funeral and finally admits he is in love with Lelaina. Once free of his father and the ideological control he represents, Troy is able to become a new, emotionally open man. The film ends with the two embarking on an emotionally open relationship full of hope and promise.

In the chapters to follow, my concern will be on a cluster of Generation X novels—not films—and their representations of manhood, but *Reality Bites*'s Troy Dyer points to the core focus of these Generation X novels: emotionally alienated twentysomething men and whether it is possible—and how it might be possible—for these men to overcome their alienation. Through the character of Troy Dyer, *Reality Bites* offers a critique of what I call Gen X masculinity. And just as Troy is fundamentally defined by inner conflicts about family, employment, and the power of women, so too are the narrator-protagonists of Gen X novels by Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Douglas Coupland, Chuck Palahniuk, and Dave Eggers. Like Troy, the narrator-protagonists of these novels are white, educated, and—sometimes inescapably, sometimes not—subject to emotional repression as a result of their struggles in life and how they process (or, really, stumble in processing) these struggles. The major difference between Troy and the male protagonists in the Generation X novels I examine is that many of the latter are unable to hear the truth women offer, so they fall back to outdated notions of early-twentieth-century masculinity; often their refusal to evolve represents the worst examples of patriarchal misogyny. However, this does not mean the novels celebrate or excuse these characters' lack of growth or development or evolution. Instead, I argue that the first novels of Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Douglas Coupland, Chuck Palahniuk, and Dave Eggers all critique a form of white masculinity bound up with the repression of emotions, and thus a form of male subjectivity that

is defined by an inability—and a refusal—to build sympathetic connections with others. In fact, I contend that when we study the Gen X novel chronologically, what we see is a kind of literary evolution, in which over the course of the late '80s and '90s, Gen X novelists increasingly imagine and ultimately demand the possibility of a sentimental man who willingly participates in the betterment of his life and the lives of those around him by connecting emotionally to people both like and unlike himself.

Sentimentalism is a core component of this literary project because my reading focuses on protagonists evolving into sentimental men in Generation X novels written from 1984 to 2000. At a first glance, sentimentality and white male protagonists may seem to make strange bedfellows since sentimentalism has historically been associated with femininity. However, as Chapman and Hendler point out, “attention to the problematic conjunction of sentimentality and masculinity could also illuminate the politics of affect in twentieth-century American literature and culture” (13). Therefore, I contend that the Generation X authors in my project create white male narrators/protagonists that move from isolationism to “an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection” that is “both personal and communal,” built out of the “shared devastation and emotional loss” that is the foundation of “literary sentimentalism” (Dobson 266). What Generation X novels have in common is a set of protagonists who are flawed men attempting to cope with their anxieties and pain. In the early novels of McInerney and Ellis, the protagonists are unable to embrace their own personal suffering and choose alienation instead. Instructive in theme, the novels depend on an imagined audience that is supposed to see this failure as harmful to the individual and the characters around him. By the 1990s, Coupland’s narrator, Andy, becomes a model of positive sentimentality because by sharing his stories with his friends, he creates sympathetic networks of bonding that allows the

characters a safe space to heal their wounds and move past them, together. Palahniuk continues the theme of confronting masculinity by exposing the reader to the horrors that men can create when they willingly choose to destroy all traces of sympathy, which leads to violence and destruction. The most evolved version of the sentient male narrator is found in Eggers's novel whose protagonist, Dave, evolves beyond Coupland's Andy. Where Andy seeks connection in an intimate and restrictive group, Dave wants to form sympathetic bonds with members of Generation X as a whole. That these novels work collectively to create a historical narrative of evolving masculine sentimentality is the most important lesson they offer their audience.

The educational nature of the novels, in terms of a distinctive and positive sentimentalism, is essential to understanding the value I place on these works in terms of literary merit for readers. The 1980s novels *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis and *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney both possess narrators isolated and alienated from themselves and their peers. Both novels suggest there is no possibility for the protagonists to find or create a peer group with whom they are able to bond emotionally through the difficult transition from teen to young adult. By 1991, Douglas Coupland's experimental novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* challenges previous authors' monadic narrators through Andy, a sensitive intellectual who uses confessional stories to create a community with Claire and Dag, and this innovation signals a major shift in thinking on Generation X masculinity. Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of masculinity forged in rage. The unnamed narrator and Tyler Durden are emotionally empty men hell-bent on destruction to reclaim the traditional masculinity they believe has been stolen from them. Finally, in 2000, Dave Eggers's multi-genre novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* blurs the lines between fiction and memoir, inviting its reader to follow its protagonist's struggle to come to

terms with his devastating emotional losses, embodied in the death of his mother, and what they mean for the man this protagonist can and should become. Thus, the novels in my project, viewed together, stage an important critical study of Generation X masculinity in American culture at the end of the twentieth century imbued with the sentimental tradition of American literature because “sentimentality at the same time locates us in our embodied and particular selves and takes us out to them” (Howard 77). Just as the narrators in the novels are struggling with their interior emotional lives, the novels collectively provide readers with insight into these tensions. Moreover, the novels offer a path out of the struggle by teaching the lesson that sympathy is the model of healing both the individual and the collective.

My reading of the Gen X novel stands as a departure from the reigning wisdom on this branch of the late-twentieth-century novel, and before going any further, a few words are in order about this reigning wisdom. For many scholars, Gen X novels pale in comparison— aesthetically and politically—to contemporaneous novels by “major” novelists like Morrison and Pynchon. We find a version of this assessment, for example, in James Annesley’s *Blank Fictions* (1998) where Annesley contends that novels by Generation X authors like Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Douglas Copland (among others) should be read as “blank fiction,” a term he evolves from work by Robert Siegel in 1989 and Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney in 1992. Annesley critiques the Generation X novels as follows: “Instead of dense plots, elaborate styles and political subjects that provide the material for writers like Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon and Norman Mailer, these fictions seem determined to adopt a looser approach. They prefer blank, atonal perspectives and fragile, glassy visions” (2).

While the juxtaposition between Generation X writers and their more academically respected contemporaries is in many ways apt, I contend that the novels in my project actually

engage the political by critiquing outdated masculinity in the late twentieth century. Instead of delivering merely “fragile, glassy visions,” these authors articulate strong rebukes of a masculinity that refuses to evolve with its current historical moment. Yes, Ellis’s and McInerney’s novels reflect Annesley’s argument about the lack of “dense plots [and] elaborate styles,” but they nonetheless engage in critiques of regressive masculinity. Furthermore, Coupland’s 1991 novel ruptures the simplistic form of his predecessors by creating a multi-modal novel that also critiques emotionally stunted masculinity. Palahniuk’s 1996 novel offers a brutal takedown of retrograde masculinity by skillfully hiding the schizophrenic narrator’s dual identity until quite late in the novel, thus forcing the reader to confront the dangers of outdated masculine ideals. Finally, Eggers’s novel (published after Annesley’s book) completely breaks from blank fiction’s simplistic form by offering a white, middle-class male narrator who embodies the need for a sensitive, emotionally open white male storyteller. Eggers deftly incorporates memoir, fiction, drama, and poetry to underscore his argument. All told, the Gen X novels in my project should be viewed as politically charged works.

Moreover, the Gen X novel develops in complexity on the levels of not only content but also form from the late ’80s to 2000 by reevaluating gender politics and, specifically, *how* the Gen X novels weigh in on masculinity. All of the novels that I study in the chapters to follow are versions of first-person, autobiographical fiction. That they are such—that they take this form—might lead us to conclude that the Gen X novel reflects, and reifies, the commitment to individualism, even selfishness and self-centeredness and solipsism, of which the members of Gen X have so often been accused. Bob Lysk, for instance, describes Generation X as a “generation who may have had more time alone than any in history,” and thus “they became independent at a young age.” Likewise, Carlo Strenger hypothesizes that Generation X lives by

“the dominant imperative” to “design thy self” (xii). That Gen X novelists penned first-person, autobiographical novels (novels in which first-person protagonists take themselves as their primary subject) would seem to be confirmation of this understanding of Gen X itself.

Yet, I argue that first-person, autobiographical narration is in fact the vehicle by which, through which, Gen X novels in fact struggle against solipsism and what we might call regressive ideologies of monadic selfhood and masculinity. First-person narration gives the imagined reader a story about an individual’s experiences as well as that individual’s attempts to making meaning of those experiences. But more than that, I would argue, it offers the imagined reader a surrogate experience in a safe space. First-person narratives allow the reader to witness the failures without the consequence, offering a teachable moment. Likewise, the narratives provide the reader models of success that can be emulated. To embody the argument for a more sensitive, culturally aware white masculinity, the authors deploy first-person narration because its confessional, memoir-esque tonality speaks directly to the audience in an almost conversational mode that invites participation. Therefore, to demonstrate the need for confessional white men to be in touch with their emotional anxieties and needs, this first-person narration is imperative for both the authors and their narrators to embody the very means of the argument. That is not to say that all the narrators and their narrations are similar. In fact, the form of the novels is reflective of the narrators’ struggles (and authors’ politics). For instance, McInerney’s and Ellis’s novels are mostly straightforward narratives “blank” in affect because this reflects the lack of emotion and complexity within the narrators’ emotional existence. By the time Eggers presents Dave, the narrative structure, presentation, and affect all become dense and complicated, signifying the complexity of Dave’s emotional struggles and development as an evolved version of Generation X masculinity. In some Gen X novels, especially earlier ones, this

“pedagogy” works ultimately via negative examples. These “first-person narrators” reveal their limits—their failures, etc. become models for what the reader is not supposed to be, models for how the reader is not to respond to emotionally-charged struggles. In some Gen X novels, the reader is called to celebrate and model the behaviors that embrace sentimentalism as a positive form of evolved masculinity.

With Ellis’s and McInerney’s emotionally distant first-person narrators, alienation leads to failure both individually and culturally. By not connecting with their emotions or peers, these narrators have no chance of creating community because of a lack of shared experiences, psychologically or emotionally; they are cut off. Thus, Coupland’s creation, Andy, becomes a new paradigm for white masculinity as his narration becomes increasingly open and shared with Claire and Dag. As Andy opens up to the reader, himself, and his peers, he becomes a positive model for white masculine behavior. Palahniuk’s schizophrenic first-person narrator continues the theme of open communication’s necessity by becoming the “anti-emotional” white man. He longs for connection to his peers but backtracks into the emotional void of his 1980s predecessors, and his actions demonstrate that hypermasculinity and rage built on the 1950s model of virile breadwinner is not only obsolete but also destructive. Finally, Dave Eggers creates the most complex novel of the group in his collage of memoir, fiction, drama, and poetry offering a first-person narrator who is hyperemotional and sensitive, working to accept the death of his parents and raise his younger brother to be the new man he hopes to be, as well. While first-person narration is common to all the novels, the narrators and their narrations are all quite different, which calls attention to the successes and failures of sentimentality for the readers. McInerney, Ellis, and Palahniuk all create narrators who are emotionless and alienated from themselves and their peers, which mirrors their failures as sympathetic men. Similarly,

Coupland's and Eggers's narrators are emotionally open and honest (sharing their failures along with successes), which posits models of emulation for readers. Thus, whether offering negative or positive examples of sentimental masculinity, first-person narration is essential for the authors to offer answers to the shifting cultural landscape they traversed.

In constructing effective arguments for their imagined readers about the necessity of evolved masculinity, these novelists were responding to—and trying to manage—a number of very real historical developments that, for many young men, were terrible. All of these developments could and did produce—enable—reactionary political postures and identities from white men. But Gen X novels try to intercept these developments and reroute how these developments should be understood, experienced, managed, processed, etc. by specifically twentysomething white men. The major historical tensions facing these young men were the dissolution of the characters' nuclear family, the changing global economy making traditional economic mobility more difficult, and a new understanding of developing female empowerment. In terms of family, Dan Leidl offers a bleak indictment of the nuclear family: “In the United States, Generation X grew up amidst the death of the American family. We watched the decay and demise and grew callous to the loss. In the mid-'70s divorce rates started an ascent to its all-time high. Through the '80s and into the early '90s the divorce rate was hovering around 5 per every 1,000 people out there, and many of us felt the crush” (xx). In each of the novels, family is either destroyed by death or marred by divorce, and the characters cannot rely on their families to help them with their current struggles. Yet, Robert O. Self maintains, “Family was always more ideological than real. Rarely, if ever, was a single familial mode followed by a majority of actual Americans”; in fact, the belief in a family in which “a married man and woman established a home with only two generations present, and in which the husband

worked in the paid workforce while the wife engaged solely in family labor—was largely a fiction based on middle-class ideals of the mid-twentieth century” (9–10). Such fictions are often powerful ideological tools that are shown by the authors to haunt these novels’ protagonists as they struggle with an ambivalence toward family in which they often loathe, lament, and long for the illusion of family. As the novels evolve from the 1980s to 2000, Generation X novels increasingly discuss the need for male narrators to confront their disillusionment and replace the perceived loss.

Economic anxiety and a fear of the inability to become a traditional breadwinner is another major theme that binds the characters in many of these novels. Natasha Zaretsky’s contention that “masculinity and femininity, domesticity, childhood, old age, marriage, kinship, and community” (4) are ideas bound to the notion of family can be applied as a template of concerns in the novels. As the New Strategist Editors argue, “Generation Xers have struggled to compete with the masses of Boomers ahead of them and the large Millennial generation that follows at their heels. They have found jobs scarce, promotions hard to come by, and housing expensive” (1). Of course, jobs are more than economic security. Putting Zaretsky and the New Strategist Editors in the context of Generation X novels, it is clear to see that the narrators’ identities are often bound to traditional versions of the nuclear family, labor economics, and masculinity all tied to earlier-twentieth-century concepts of the “breadwinner.” For men clinging to historical notions of dominance bound to economic prosperity, another piece of identity becomes strained—making it necessary to create a new understanding of masculinity and community that is separate from the cultural stereotype of the masculine breadwinner that the protagonists cannot achieve. As their main characters are unable to embody this outdated ideal,

their authors devise narrators that can move forward and create a new, hopeful identity; the alternative is to cling to the past and suffer the consequences.

Finally, each of the novels confronts the struggle over women's shifting cultural power. To understand these historic tensions, I turn to Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), in which she argues that many "backlashes" against women have occurred because of men "grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-being," which became viewed as harbingers of "their own masculine doom" (11). The authors in my project directly engage this "masculine doom" by creating female characters who expose gendered tensions to the narrators while simultaneously offering them a chance to redeem themselves. Much like Lelaina, women in the Generation X novels challenge male power by prodding the narrators to become more emotionally evolved. At first glance, using female characters as tools to develop more emotional men could be read as sexist, portraying women simply as one-dimensional, emotional beings. However, I argue the authors make their female characters emotionally grounded, offering men glimpses of deeper insight. The reader understands the opportunity offered by the women as not only emotionally redemptive but also the conclusion the narrators must embrace for their own well-being. Thus, the novels engage in a tense moment in gender politics. This subtle celebration of women is often neglected in readings of the Generation X literature in my project.

By illuminating these historical tensions, I am offering a means of understanding changing cultural and literary trends from the 1980s to 2000 for young, white, masculine writers associated with Generation X. While Don DeLillo was publishing his postmodern masterpiece *White Noise* in 1985, McInerney offered *Bright Lights, Big City* in 1984 and Ellis *Less Than Zero* in 1985. In 1991, Amy Tan published *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Coupland published

Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture. In 1996, Joyce Carol Oates published *We Were the Mulvaneys* and Palahniuk published *Fight Club*. In 2000, Philip Roth published *The Human Stain* while Eggers published *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. My reading seeks to expose how the white male Generation X writers were doing more than simply complaining about the difficulty of being a white man in the late twentieth century while more-established writers were confronting racism, sexism, and other forms of inequality, oppression, and social conflict. In fact, these Generation X novels engage in their own identity politics, focusing on white masculinity's struggle to embrace cultural diversity, which engages similar concerns as their canonical literary contemporaries. Therefore, these novels make an argument about Generation X identity politics: To become an active agent in a more progressive country, a white man must become more open and sensitive to his life and the lives of others. Thus, first-person novels in my project not only become the tool for understanding this confused male identity but also use their forms to model the behavior they valorize by demonstrating the need for sentimental lives connected to the people around them and thus enabling possible community. It is through different varieties of first-person narration that Gen X novels seek to produce—to bring into being—what I call “evolved masculinity.”

II. The Chapters

In this dissertation, Chapter 1 focuses on white male anxieties concerning the family and friends, lack of fulfilling labor opportunities, and the empowerment of women in the urban settings of New York City and Los Angeles, where *Bright Lights*, *Big City* and *Less Than Zero* are critical indictments of the emotional repression of Jay McInerney's and Bret Easton Ellis's white male protagonists. Both characters are empty yuppies living empty lives in cities filled with empty peers. Throughout both novels, the narrators struggle with their failed families,

strained relations with their peers, and various women who challenge their pitiless lives. An important distinction between the protagonists are their age and class: Ellis's Clay is a college freshman home for Christmas break, and his parents are exceedingly wealthy, which allows him to avoid the complications of work life and experience the freedom to do virtually anything he wants. By contrast, McInerney's nameless second-person narrator is trapped in a job he hates and coping with divorce. Most importantly, both novels' 1980s setting allows a baseline for Generation X masculinity and the problems it faces. That both authors refuse to offer any real answers to the problems posed suggests little hope of redemption because the narrators remain emotionally unavailable. McInerney offers a glimpse of hope for his masculine narrator, but the answer appears to be to find meaning in his life alone. Ellis's Clay, conversely, is given no hope for solving his problems. He continues to live a life devoid of emotion or compassion for anyone, which leads to horrifying consequences.

Chapter 2 moves to 1991 and Douglas Coupland's narrator in *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, Andy, becoming an evolved man more in touch with his emotions and able to build sympathetic connections with his small peer group. Though Andy and his friends, Claire and Dag, contend with many of the same problems as their 1980s predecessors, Coupland proposes a way out of the emotionless trap. Andy and his friends engage in storytelling, fictional at first and evolving into autobiographical, which serves two functions: the stories allow the characters to express their fears and anxieties in healthy ways that benefit each emotionally, and most importantly, open communication forges sympathetic bonds and thus creates a strong sense of community for the three major characters. Andy's narrative serves as a strong template for Generation X men to face their fears and form bonds with people unlike themselves. Therefore,

Coupland's novel stands as an important, progressive change in masculine identity politics in the way of a narrator who grows increasingly sensitive to others.

Though often misread as a celebration of hypermasculinity and the labor politics of struggling white men in the 1990s, *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, I see as a subversive attack on a masculinity desiring a return to outdated early-twentieth-century patriarchal ideology. The nameless narrator and split-personality Tyler Durden are a strident return to the failed masculine tropes of the 1980s. Both men feel alienated from their families, peers, and jobs, so they decide that the only means of redemption is to become hypermasculine terrorists hell-bent on destroying a world that has taken their traditional power. Instead of seeing these men as heroes, I read them as failures that refuse the path Coupland's Andy presents for relying on emotional sincerity. That Palahniuk's male protagonist remains alienated from himself and his peers at the end of the novel is a damning critique of the dangers of emotionless men.

In the final chapter, I turn to Dave Eggers's novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which engages the major themes of anxiety with family, work, and women with much greater nuance. Much like Coupland's Andy, Eggers's Dave is a model for the kind of masculinity that should be celebrated in Generation X literature. When Dave is confronted with these thematic struggles, Eggers forces his narrator to become emotionally open, so he can create answers to his problems. Dave does not isolate himself from the world like the characters in the 1980s novels, nor does he become a violent tyrant like Tyler Durden. Instead, he feels his way through his conflicts, relying on his deceased mother's sentimentality as a model for his emotional growth. While his desire to create bonds is similar to Andy's, the major difference is that Eggers's Dave seeks to create sympathetic connections with his entire generation and not

simply a small group of peers. Thus, the call to be a progressive man, which benefits the narrator and his culture, is an evolved position when viewed historically against the other novels.

When viewed collectively, the novels in my project offer a chronological argument about masculinity in the late twentieth century. The Generation X men in this study are a direct critique of a masculinity that refuses to evolve, and they engage their historical moment in progressive ways beneficial to American culture. The characters that fail to evolve emotionally are left to suffer stagnant lives, while those who progress are rewarded with a new sense of purpose and community. In her *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*, Elizabeth Barnes argues, “Sentimental fiction’s evocation of personal feeling becomes a necessary precondition for participating in the feeling of others; it also acts as a moral corrective to the reader’s own behavior” (18). While her book focuses on the sentimental politics of early American literature, I contend these Generation X novels teach us to read them in a similar manner. Each of the authors in my project highlights the necessity for sentimental men who must become attuned to their own feelings so that they can build sympathetic connections with their peers. Because these narrators become models for a more evolved masculinity, their novels are more than the complaints of privileged white men lamenting the shifting cultural politics of their historical moment. The novels of Ellis, McInerney, Coupland, Palahniuk, and Eggers are, in fact, newer versions of sentimental literature that continue the American tradition of challenging readers to embrace the power of sympathy to become better citizens and thus benefit the body politic.

CHAPTER 2

GENERATION X NOVELS OF THE 1980S: INSINCERITY IN THE CITY

Upon returning home for Christmas break, Bret Easton Ellis's protagonist Clay is picked up from the airport by his ex-girlfriend Blair. While she drives him home, Clay echoes Blair's indictment of LA driving: "People are afraid to merge¹ on the freeways in Los Angeles" (9). As the drive continues, Clay cannot stop thinking about the statement and ignores everything else that Blair attempts to convey to him. Clay's thoughts that "all of this seems irrelevant next to that one sentence" and "nothing else seems to matter to me but those ten words" (Ellis 9) reflect his obsession with this critique. In fact, the phrase dominates *Less Than Zero*, occurring several times as he attempts to survive Christmas break while home from college. This driving scene is an important foreshadowing of Clay's struggle because it demonstrates two major problems for him that Ellis creates for the entirety of the novel. First, the fact that characters, including Clay, refuse to "merge" with one another highlights the alienation and isolation that dominate their lives. To merge into traffic would be to harmoniously enter into the chaos of the city, working within the bounds of society. Since no one in the novel is able to do so, no connection or community exists for them. Secondly, Clay's refusal to listen to Blair again underscores the lack of communication that prevails among peers, especially women. This unwillingness to merge into and work within a community is also found in Jay McInerney's novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, in which the twentysomething white male narrator hides behind his second-person narrative

¹ I juxtapose this quote with Whitman's "Who need be afraid to merge?" from *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's masculine voice calling for connection is much more evolved than the emotionally stunted voice Ellis offers which will be explored later.

as he aimlessly wanders through New York City, unable to make meaningful connections with anyone.

By setting both novels in the city, Ellis and McInerney depict the isolation and struggle for subjectivity in a chaotic world filled with superficiality and ambivalence. In McInerney's linear novel, New York City is decadent, filled with empty people living equally empty lives, reflecting the urban void of nightclubs brimming with drugs and debauchery. In Ellis's episodic novel, Los Angeles, by contrast, reflects much of the same emptiness but becomes a chaotic ground (in both form and content) fertile for sexual violence and cruelty beyond anything McInerney could imagine. I focus on Generation X fiction from the 1980s that offers critical indictments of a white masculinity that is devoid of emotion and unable to produce sympathetic connections. By focusing on the white male narrators of both novels, I argue that Ellis and McInerney offer damning portraits of white men unable to feel and build emotional connections with people because they choose to hide behind their pain. However, neither Ellis nor McInerney offers any solution to the problems their protagonists face, suggesting that the authors see no means of collective redemption.

By arguing that both novelists critique alienated masculinity and yet offer no solution to the problem, I am not claiming that their novels fail to offer lessons regarding white male alienation. In fact, both novels are insightful portrayals of the dangers that selfish masculinity creates, both for the subject and those around him. In fact, the novels capture a cultural moment in which young men were actually being celebrated for pursuing their own self desires. In her 1983 book, *The Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, adult manhood was no longer bound to the "expectation of marriage or breadwinning" (12). Manhood that "postpones marriage" or "avoids women who are likely to be become

financial dependents” and privileges “his own pleasures” is no longer “deviant” but, instead, is viewed as “healthy” (Ehrenreich 12). *Less Than Zero* and *Bright Lights, Big City*, both narrated by selfish men in the early 1980s, are anything but “healthy.” The pursuit of their own pleasure leaves them broken young men. Neither Clay nor the second-person narrator is able to build any sympathetic connections with the people in his life because he refuses to accept his suffering. Their lack of connections leads to self-destructive behavior such as abusing drugs to mask their emotional alienation from their peers. That neither protagonist is able to “merge” with anyone in his life suggests that the two men’s emotionally empty existences are the root of their problems. If either could open up and build sympathetic connections, he might be able to deal with his own issues while helping others in his life suffering the same fate. That neither Clay nor the second-person narrator is willing to create these connections speaks to the emotionally arrested development of their lives. Trapped in the city, both characters are lost, unable to find themselves or forge connections with the people in their lives. Therefore, I read Ellis’s and McInerney’s novels as strong rebukes of an alienated masculinity that refuses to make meaningful connections with peers.

While I contend that both novels present important cultural critiques of white masculinity in the 1980s, early criticism of the novels did not see much merit in the works. Scholars often lumped Ellis and McInerney together with Tama Janowitz. Grassian contends that “I would not argue the work of Ellis, McInerney, or Janowitz is brilliant or groundbreaking in either content or form” (12) because “their work is narrow minded and reflects only a segment of American culture in the 1980s” (14). Instead, Grassian sees their writing as “an important transition from the previous generation of American Postmodern writers like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover” (12). Annesley, too, draws a comparison between the Generation X writers and

major writers like Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, and Norman Mailer stating that the newer generation prefers “blank, atonal perspectives and fragile, glassy visions” (2). Thus, for Grassian and Annesley, Ellis’s and McInerney’s novels are part of a historical literary movement and not much else. Will Slocombe focuses on the novels as “blank fiction,” which is “silent,” “ambiguous,” and filled with “ambivalence” in passing judgment on the realities of consumer society. For Slocombe, it is not clear whether the blank fiction “condemns” or “revels in” consumerism (142). For these critics, Ellis and McInerney are writers who do not live up to the major American writers before or contemporary with them, failing to meet the standards of what is considered great American fiction. It is not my intention to argue who is a better American writer. Instead, I focus on the indictments that both Generation X novels level at emotionally withdrawn white males who are unable to make sympathetic connections with their peers. In fact, both novels perform important cultural critiques of Generation X masculinity.

Both novels are deeply invested in the argument that environments devoid of emotional honesty create men unable to empathize with each other or their peers. Both protagonists live in cities with failed families and disconnected peer groups that offer little to no sincere connections. Other scholars who are more in line with this conviction focus on the novels’ indictments of 1980s culture and the effects such criticism exerted on Generation X. Reighard argues that “all of Ellis’s novels” are “sharp satirical critiques of what Ellis views to be contemporary culture’s problematic values and the people they produce” (320). Thus, Ellis’s characters are “lost souls desperately seeking meaning in a meaningless world” (Reighard 311). Sobral argues that *Less Than Zero* “has often been identified as paradigmatic of postmodern literature’s success in framing the heavily commercialized, media-saturated, fast-paced culture of the late twentieth-century America” (163). I contend that Ellis’s narrator Clay reflects an emotionally broken white

male trying to find some semblance of meaning in his empty life because he is surrounded by a culture that does not valorize masculine sincerity. Likewise, Graham Caveney focuses on the impact that 1980s culture had Generation X by focusing on *Bright Lights, Big City*. He argues that:

Bright Lights, Big City, with its insistence on how the individual self is constructed through the other (be that family or fiction), suggests the impossibility of separating the psyche from its domestic context. Whoever and wherever we *are* can only be negotiated through the people and places we have come *from*.

Hunter S. Thompson has referred to a “Generation of Swine.” McInerney replaces this with a generation of orphans—illegitimate, de-centered, irrepressibly nomadic.

(55)

McInerney, like Ellis, offers a portrait of a young man so alienated from himself and what he wants to be that he cannot even narrate his own story in the first person. Instead, he has become “you,” emotionally removed from his own life and the people in his alienated life. Therefore, my work in this chapter aligns more with the second group of scholars, who contend that both Ellis and McInerney are offering critical responses to the consumer-driven, media-saturated 1980s that created an emotional identity crisis for young men.

Less Than Zero and *Bright Lights, Big City* are heavily invested in the urban (Los Angeles for Ellis and New York City for McInerney), which reflects an emotionless setting for their lives. Moretti contends that “the best a great city has to offer” is also the “greatest danger” to its subjects because “too many stimuli,” which are “too disparate and too intense,” actually “threatens his well-being” and “his mental health” (124). Both Clay and the second-person narrator roam the cities, engaging in meaningless and destructive behaviors that exacerbate their

alienation from both themselves and their peers. To highlight the destructive impact that the cities have on their lives, I draw attention to Louis Wirth's 1938 essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life" and his creation of the "Urban Personality" or "schizoid," as this description is relevant to my argument centering on emotionally empty men. Wirth argued that cities created a "segmentalization of human relationships" due to "the multiplication of persons in a state of interaction" that renders "contact as full personalities impossible" (99). As Clay and the second-person narrator traverse their cities, they are not able to connect with the people around them in any genuine manner. It is as if they have multiple personalities that relate to the moment they are currently experiencing but are immediately cast off once the situation ends. If either protagonist has any stable personality, it is one of disaffection. Wirth argues that "the reserve, the indifference, and the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships" have become "devices for immunizing themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others" (Wirth 99). In other words, both protagonists' emotionless existences are a coping mechanism to deal with the lack of emotional sincerity they find in the city and its inhabitants. This is not to say that the authors are excusing their male characters' behavior simply because of the environment or the cultural moment. Instead, I read both novels as indictments of a particular type of masculinity that chooses to embrace emotionally empty lives devoid of sympathetic connections.

Male Anxiety and the Nuclear Family

A common theme in Generation X literature is the perceived failure of the nuclear family and its impact on male narrators. Although the nuclear family both authors create is nothing more than a cultural myth, belief in the myth is nevertheless quite strong for the protagonists. Both Clay and the second-person narrator have had their nuclear families ruptured, Clay's by

divorce and the narrator's by death. Since the family is supposed to be the stable foundation of a young person's life, the characters' losses have caused the instability they feel. If the family is not a safe, nurturing entity, then the very base of their lives is unstable. Since the characters feel no stability in their broken families, they feel no connection with others because what is supposed to be the most nurturing foundation of their emotional lives has failed to provide the emotional grounding from which they could forge new connections. Thus, their belief in failed families fuels these characters' lack of faith in the possibility of creating meaningful relationships with people outside of their families. For Ellis and McInerney, the toxicity of their families poisons all potential relationships. I explore this more in the next section, but it is important to understand that the impact of their family lives resonates in their emotionless existences.

For Ellis, the deterioration of Clay's family is a direct cause of his emotionless life. The failure of the nuclear family in the novel serves as a continual reminder that instability in the home creates instability within the child. Therefore, Ellis suggests that Clay's emotional emptiness is not actually his fault (this has disturbing ramifications for his behaviors in the novel). Once Blair drops him off at his house, he callously states that "Nobody's home" (Ellis 10). Obviously, he is referring to the fact that no one is physically in the house. However, I argue that Clay is speaking metaphorically as well, commenting on the fact that since his parents' separation, the house is no longer a home. His family is disconnected and empty, much like his emotional life. The actual scenes in which he interacts with his family are quite disturbing because the conversations are forced, as if obligatory, but no one really says anything of substance. Instead, Ellis's interactions are blank and devoid of emotion, serving as a critique of the failed nuclear family. Clay's mother is often silent or uninvolved when he speaks to her.

While his mother is driving the car, Clay fights with his sisters over the issue of locking his bedroom door to keep the girls out. When forced to explain why he locks his door, Clay lashes out, explaining that it is “Because you both stole a quarter gram of cocaine from me the last time I left my door open. That’s why” (Ellis 25). The fact that their mother never comments or engages with his disturbing answer cannot go unnoticed. She is present physically but unavailable emotionally. Similarly, Clay must meet his father for lunch at a restaurant and explains that “It doesn’t bother me that my father leaves me waiting there for thirty minutes while he’s in some meeting and then asks me why I’m late” (Ellis 41). While Clay may or may not be bothered by his father’s selfish behavior, he has clearly learned that his father values his business life more than his life as a parent. Clay has internalized from both of his parents that family does not consist of strong emotional ties with parents loving and nurturing their children. Therefore, in Ellis’s world, the failed family of the 1980s creates emotionally withdrawn children unable to cope with their emotions. Since his parents have no emotional connection to him, Clay is unable to make connections with others. Ellis’s argument places the blame for Clay’s emptiness on his parents since they failed to live up to the 1950s model of a traditional family. In fact, Clay’s parents “are simply oblivious to his needs, perhaps even his existence, thus seriously amplifying his insecurity” (Sobral 178). To cope with the insecurity that his home life has created, Clay chooses to disregard all emotion and live a shallow life in which the pain cannot directly affect him. What is ironic about this choice is that Ellis creates a struggle in which Clay seems powerless to transcend his parents emotional abuse and yet has the power to choose his emotionally empty life. The major tension therein is that Clay has the agency to be a pitiless person but not to break free of the failed family that Ellis suggests has created him.

For McInerney's second-person narrator, the failed family is much more complicated due to his mother's death, which, I contend, comprises the impetus for his spiral into an emotionless existence. Furthermore, the death of his mother serving as a catalyst for his emotional breakdown underscores McInerney's subtle argument (the death is hidden until late in the novel) that women, particularly a mother, are important in the lives of young men despite the misogynistic treatment of women in the novel. Upon his brother Michael's unannounced visit to the city, the narrator actually confronts his mother's death and begins to open up emotionally, to himself, to Michael, and to Vicky, signaling his albeit stunted emotional evolution. The reunion with Michael, who is "a year younger than you" but "has appropriated the role of elder" (McInerney 157) is angry and violent. Michael attacks the narrator for cutting off their father and seemingly forgetting the anniversary of their mother's death. Michael states that "Tomorrow is the anniversary, in case you've forgotten. One year. We're going to spread the ashes in the lake. Dad wants you do be there" (McInerney 157). Feeling too much emotion, the narrator attempts to escape, which ends in a violent tussle in which Michael punches and knocks out the narrator. When he finally wakes up, the narrator admits to Michael that not only has Amanda divorced him but also "I miss mom" (McInerney 159). This is the first time in the novel that the narrator opens up, either to himself or someone else, and admits that his failed marriage and the death of his mother have weighed heavily on him. For a moment, McInerney allows his second-person narrator to feel and express something true and meaningful: loss.

Once the narrator opens up to his brother, he begins to be more emotionally honest with himself, which underscores McInerney's argument that living an emotionally open life is a means to becoming a better man. Understanding himself better, the narrator confesses repressed emotions of alienation with comments such as "you have made such a point of not dwelling on

your mother's death, almost denying that it was a consideration at all" (McInerney 161) and "after the funeral it seemed as if you were wandering around your own interior looking for signs of life, finding nothing but empty rooms and white walls" (McInerney 162). Clearly, the narrator has been living in denial for the last year, refusing to accept the reality of his mother's death. Instead of accepting the loss, he chose to sublimate his pain by focusing on his wife, Amanda. In a rare moment of clarity, the narrator understands, "You kept waiting for the onset of grief. You are beginning to suspect it arrived nine months later, disguised as your response to Amanda's departure" (McInerney 162). That the narrator is able to see himself more clearly occurs only because he allows himself to be vulnerable and honest with Michael. The narrator's epiphany leads him to actually connect with his father and brothers in his thoughts. He writes, "you and Michael and Peter and Sean and Dad stand against the world. The family has been fucked over, but you're going to tough it out" (McInerney 162). Their shared suffering over the loss of the matriarch of the family and the pain it has caused them appears to be the catalyst for the building of sympathetic connections among them. However, before the moment of bonding can occur, McInerney subverts the connection, demonstrating that sharing emotional pain, even between brothers, is almost impossible for his masculine characters because they cannot embrace the powerlessness their mother's death thrusts upon them. Michael chastises the narrator for not telling the family about his divorce and asks the narrator twice, "What's family for," to which the narrator answers, "I don't know. You want to do a few lines?" (McInerney 163). The fact that the narrator turns his back on his revelation and thwarts the sincere moment with drugs pushes him back into his emotionally alienated existence. The problem is not that the narrator cannot feel the pain of his loss, as he continues to do so internally; the problem is that the narrator cuts his brother off and signals that he still does not understand the importance of what family is actually

supposed to be for people. Instead of pursuing the bond with family, McInerney's narrator retreats inward, isolating himself once again from his family because he is unable to cope with his mother's death. By creating this need to retreat from emotional truths, *Bright Lights, Big City* advances the argument that men who are unable to face their suffering continue to suffer alone in a city filled with emotionally vacant people.

By focusing on the lack of sympathetic connections among family in the novels of Ellis and McInerney, I draw attention to a core critique offered by both novels. Since the family has failed to foster emotionally open lives for both protagonists, the men are unsympathetic and unable to create meaningful bonds. Though their situations are different—divorce and death—both characters are dealing with the same situation as a result. Without a closely-knit-family, they are alone. Wirth argued that the Urban Personality created “the declining social significance of the family” (103). By focusing on Clay and the second-person narrator, it is clear that while they live their lives in Los Angeles and New York City, they are unable to see the value of family life. Instead, family is nothing more than a failed institution that cannot offer them any connections. Therefore, they retreat into their empty lives as urban monads devoid of feeling and bonds.

Masculinity and Friendship: “You feel abandoned. You consider the possibility of conspiracy.”

Since both Ellis's and McInerney's protagonists feel no emotional ties to their families, the novels suggest that they are unable to build sympathetic connections with their peers. For both authors, the failed families create a blueprint for an inability to create meaningful bonds of friendship. It is as if they never learned how to “merge” with the people around them, or else have chosen to forget how to do so. Ellis's Clay spends his entire visit home from college blindly

passing from party to party with “friends” who appear to him as clones mimicking each other and reciting the same phrases and ideas. Certain characters such as Rip, Julian, and Blair appear more often in his life, but there is no sense of connection between them and Clay, who, like his friends, is unable to merge. McInerney’s narrator mentions Tad Allagash as his only friend in the novel. The narrator explains that Tad is “either your best self or your worst self, you’re not sure which” (McInerney 2). This lack of understanding of Tad reflects the narrator’s lack of self-understanding: he is sure neither of his own identity nor that of his friend. That he is unable to discern his own identity from Tad’s reflects a central concern that both novelists confront. The protagonists are caught in self-destructive relationships with their friends because they desire connection while simultaneously being repulsed by the connections. The ambivalence that both male protagonists feel for their peers demonstrates another example of emotionally devoid men unable to build meaningful connections.

One particular moment that highlights alienation among peers occurs early in McInerney’s novel as the second-person narrator is abusing alcohol and drugs while clubbing with Tad. His need for intoxication is nothing more than an attempt to mask the emotional trauma of losing his wife and mother. While meeting two women, Elaine and Theresa, Tad introduces the narrator as the ex of Amanda, a well-known model. This introduction leads the narrator to connect with Elaine, who appears fascinated that the narrator could have married a famous model. As the night progresses, the narrator feels more and more alienated from the group and from Elaine. After the three leave him for a few minutes, he reflects, “You feel abandoned. You consider the possibility of conspiracy” (McInerney 52). In fact, the narrator eventually finds Elaine and Theresa in a bathroom stall having sex increasing the feelings of paranoid abandonment that he suffers with respect to peers is still prevalent in this scene. The

two women abandon him and choose to have public sex in the club's bathroom. McInerney does not invite the narrator into the scene. Instead, the narrator crashes the intimate moment looking "on in wonder and confusion" (McInerney 53) almost like an afterthought for Elaine and Theresa. Moreover, the sex scene has no intimacy or connection. He is a stranger who had just met them, wandering into their sexual encounter. This scene occurs because Tad has disappeared, abandoning the narrator to witness meaningless sex with strangers in a public bathroom. By focusing on the scene, McInerney's characters are unable to connect with their urban peers because they are empty people unable or unwilling to forge meaningful bonds.

Since the narrator confesses that Tad is either his own best or worse self, understanding Tad informs McInerney's conflicted narrator. Tad is a party boy always looking for the next place to be, drug to take, or woman to exploit. The narrator almost celebrates Tad's empty life because:

Tad's mission in life is to have more fun than anyone else in New York City, and this involves a lot of moving around, since there is always the likelihood that where you aren't is more fun than where you are. You are awed by his strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. You want to be like that. (McInerney 3)

By having the narrator fetishize Tad's hedonistic life early in the novel, McInerney underscores the struggle with emotional honesty. If the narrator admits to his pain over the loss of his mother and Amanda, he would have to confront the power that these two women have over his life. By trying to emulate Tad, the narrator is able to fictionalize his identity as a carefree man seeking only carnal pleasures in which emotions have no place. Thus, Tad represents a major tension in the novel for the protagonist. Tad is a part of his schizophrenic personality: he is the tempter luring the narrator into situations in which "you" should not be, and he represents the empty

hedonist lifestyle that has left the narrator unfulfilled. However, Tad does play a necessary role for the narrator. He states of Tad:

Two things you like about Allagash are that he never asks you how you are and he never waits for you to answer his questions. You used to dislike this, but when the news is all bad it's a relief that someone doesn't want to hear it. Just now you want to stay at the surface of things, and Tad is a figure skater who never considers the sharks under the ice. You have friends who actually care about you and speak the language of the inner self. You have avoided them of late. (McInerney 32)

In the deep depression the narrator is in, an empty person such as Tad fills the role of a shallow person to help fill space and waste time. Tad's empty, selfish personality actually benefits the narrator, as he longs to continue his denial of his emotional and psychological problems. Tad performs this function perfectly.

Moreover, McInerney's Tad gives voice to the darkest moment of the novel by citing misogyny and classism while invoking the title of the novel. I read this as a moment of pure insight into the narrator's life that exposes the cultural work of the novel by forcing the reader to witness the true ugliness of white men devoid of sympathy. By assigning to Tad the all-important lines of the novel in which the title of the novel is invoked, indicting Amanda and the vapid culture that she (and ironically, he) represents, McInerney leaves the reader in a difficult position. On the one hand, Tad's indictment of the superficial and decadent New York City of the 1980s resonates as a moment of actual honesty in the novel. Yet, the ugly misogyny and classism assigned to Amanda is so vile that it is almost difficult to read. Yes, this moment sets the stage for the narrator's realization concerning the emptiness of the people in his life—this is

necessary for his epiphany at the end—but there is still something very troubling about Tad’s language. Tad explains that the bar the narrator and Amanda met in was:

Not so dark that she couldn’t see you were her ticket out of Trailer Park Land. Bright lights, big city. If you really wanted to do the happy couple thing you shouldn’t have let her model. A week on Seventh Avenue would warp a nun. Where skin-deep is the mode, your traditional domestic values are not going to take root and flourish. Amanda was trying to get as far from red dirt and four wheel drive as she could. She figured out she could trade on her looks farther than she got with you. (McInerney 116)

For all Tad’s empty hedonism, he captures the precise problem at the heart of the novel, of Generation X trying to find family or friends. This is a culture that lives superficially. Trying to delve any deeper with people leads to destruction because people are a means to an end. Relationships cannot and should not be trusted because they are founded on exploitation. Yet, Tad’s indictment of Amanda as a poor woman trafficking on her looks to buy her way into a higher class not only displays an ignorance of poverty (Tad is old money, money for which he never worked) but a deep and abiding commitment to sexism and misogyny. Tad suggests that had the narrator only controlled his wife, the marriage would have never failed. The fact that McInerney allows Tad, (born rich, white, and male) to cite the name of the novel changes the actual meaning of the novel itself, according to my reading. *Bright Lights, Big City* is not merely an attack on the empty urban world that distorts humanity into surface-dwelling people unable to penetrate their emotions. By having Tad state the title, McInerney makes clear that a major problem with the world is the white men of power who long to oppress the poor and women in a manner much more closely related to that of the early-twentieth-century patriarchy. Since Tad is such a despicable character, it follows that the reader should see the ugliness he represents.

What is most concerning about the scene is that McInerney's narrator does not engage Tad or his comments in this moment; the confrontation occurs later in the novel. Instead, the narrator simply reflects that "For Tad, Amanda's departure was not only not surprising but inevitable. It confirmed his world view. Your heartbreak is just another version of the same old story" (McInerney 116). The narrator simply concedes the argument that poor women are nothing more than scam-artists who use their looks to trap men of means so that they can move up the social ladder. In this moment, Tad is definitely the "worst self" of the narrator, who has embraced Tad's classism and misogyny. However, the narrator does reveal a better version of himself later, near the end of the novel. After his failed confrontation with Amanda, the narrator tells Tad, "I just realized something . . . You and Amanda would make a terrific couple" (McInerney 177-78). While this could be seen as playful banter between friends, it comes after the narrator's breakdown while trying to confront Amanda, during which he finally sees the emptiness of a life connected to people who are equally empty. Removed from the classism and misogyny, the narrator simply sees Amanda as a person caught up in the empty 80s culture. In this moment, Tad and Amanda become directly linked as the symptom of his peer crisis. Girard views this moment as the passing of "the yuppie mantle" to "Amanda and Tad Allagash" because "they are living shallow lives of cartoon yuppies; participating in the commodification of culture," while the narrator is "trying to discover what kind of guy he is" (174-175). It is clear that Tad cannot help the narrator confront his inner turmoil because he offers nothing more than stock classism and sexism. Thus, when family has failed, and friends do not exist, few options are left to help the narrator find a meaningful identity.

While McInerney's protagonist struggles with Tad's (and his own) emptiness, Ellis's Clay faces complete horror in the novel's episodic interactions with his male friends. In a similar

fashion to the second-person narrator, Clay spends his time among people whom he sees as empty or having no value. Often, they are simply faces who enter parties and talk quickly about gossip, movies, music, and other pop culture moments of the 1980s. However, as *Less Than Zero* progresses, his interactions with his friends become more sexually violent and sadistic. In particular, I focus on moments in which Clay confronts the ugly realities surrounding his male friends and himself. By examining these moments, we clearly see exactly who Clay and his closest male friends are, that is, disturbing depictions of early '80s masculinity.

Ellis's Julian represents a broken young man lost in the decadence of Los Angeles with no true friends to support him in his time of need. He is Clay's old "friend" whose drug habit has put him into so much debt that he must hide from everyone whom he owes money while working as a prostitute for Finn to pay off the debt. Julian owes Clay money, so the major reason for Clay to attend the meeting with Finn is to get paid back, suggesting that Clay does not care about his friend: he cares about his money. While in the meeting with Finn, Clay is lured into an appointment that Julian must attend because, as Finn explains, "You bringing your friend here might be a good thing. Guy at the Saint Marquis wants two guys. One just to watch, of course" (Ellis 169). Once they agree to go, Julian and Clay discuss Julian's financial predicament. Clay asks Julian why he didn't tell him about his problems. Julian asks, "Who cares? Do you? Do you really care?," but Clay narrates, "I don't say anything and I realize that I really don't care and suddenly feel foolish, stupid. I also realize that I'll go with Julian" because "I want to see if things like this can actually happen . . . I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst" (Ellis 172). That Ellis's protagonist is excited by the proposition of watching his "friend" be sexually assaulted for money to pay off a drug debt speaks to the absolute ugliness of white masculinity in the novel. It is horrifying enough that Clay willingly

participates in his friend's suffering so as to exact his payment. Clay's admission that his real motivation is to see just how ugly his world can be pushes him to the status of sociopath. When asked about an emotional truth, instead of actually answering Julian, Clay once again chooses silence. Sobral explains that Clay's silence "emphasizes the narrator's inability to express himself" (167). While Clay clearly has an inability to express himself throughout the novel, I read Ellis as exposing the true depths of Clay's (and therefore white masculine) depravity. That Clay is unable to explain to Julian that he wants to watch his friend suffer the horrors of prostitution speaks not necessarily to his inability to express himself but to his inability to feel for his friend. Moreover, once they are at the hotel, Clay realizes that he could simply get up and leave before having to watch Julian's violation. Ellis grants Clay the realization of his agency. However, he states, "the words don't, can't, come out and I sit there and the need to see the worst washes over me, quickly, eagerly" (Ellis 175). Therefore, it is not that Clay cannot communicate his needs; Clay surrenders to his needs and wants to watch his friend be tortured. While watching the sex act begin, Clay reflects on another of the reoccurring phrases in the novel: "wonder if he is for sale" (Ellis 176). Of course, the answer is yes. Yes, Julian is for sale and his sex act is performed to pay back Clay, who does not need any money given the affluent life his parents have provided for him. Instead, Clay simply wants to watch Julian suffer, which underscores that Ellis's Los Angeles is not simply an urban area filled with superficial people, as McInerney's is. Instead, this is a world of cruelty and sexual violence in which people willingly choose to participate in the violence perpetrated on their friends. Thus, Ellis offers a moment of horrific masculinity, underscoring the dangers of emotionally empty men.

The final scene of sexual violence that exemplifies the dangers of Ellis's emotionally empty men that must be explored occurs late in the novel, in which Clay goes to Rip's apartment

with Spin and Trent only to find a twelve-year-old girl who is “naked” and “lying on the mattress” with “her legs spread and tied to the bedposts and her arms tied above her head” (Ellis 188). As if the scene is not gruesome enough, Clay’s friends have “put a lot of make-up on her, clumsily” (Ellis 188), presumably to make her look older, which reflects that on some level they are aware of the crime they are committing but choose to go through with the torture anyway. Clay explains how “Spin kneels by the bed and picks up a syringe and whispers something in her ear” before he “digs the syringe into her arm” (Ellis 188). While Clay was able to watch Julian prostitute himself because the former needs “to see the worst,” he is unable to watch or partake in the gangrape of a child and leaves the bedroom, which causes a verbal altercation with Rip. For the first time in the novel, Clay actually speaks his feelings to a peer about the abuse of the young girl. However, all he can say is, “It’s . . . I don’t think it’s right” (Ellis 189). This weak and ineffectual statement leads to a debate over morality between the two friends. Rip explains his view of 1980s American culture for men, stating, “What’s right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it” (Ellis 189). Rip’s invocation of “rights” suggests that he believes that he possesses a masculine right to abuse and violate anyone he chooses, especially a twelve-year-old-girl, apparently. Clay responds to Rip’s answer by citing the opulence that they both enjoy: “But you don’t need anything. You have everything” (Ellis 189). Rip’s answer to the indictment is simple, as he responds, “I don’t have anything to lose” (Ellis 190). Rip’s answer is a haunting reminder of the power that a young rich white male feels in the 1980s. He believes that no one can take anything from him, and this power allows him to take everything from anyone, even a child. What is most notable from this scene, however, is that despite Clay’s protestation, he leaves and does nothing. Ellis’s protagonist and narrator does not free the girl; he does not call the police. While Rip embodies an

emotionally empty man who is capable of destroying anyone he chooses, Clay embodies an emotionally empty man who chooses to allow the rape of a child. In other words, since both are unable to feel anything, they are capable of participating in horrors. Since Ellis puts this horrifying, climatic moment so late in the novel, it serves as the final confrontation over white masculinity. Two very rich, young, white men do nothing more than stage a surface level debate over the morality of gangraping a twelve-year-old girl. The rape continues; Clay chooses to do nothing to stop the abuse. These two characters serve as brutal representations of white masculinity in *Less Than Zero*, willingly able to participate in sexual violence perpetuated against a child.

In Wirth's essay, he argues that "The distinctive features of the urban mode of life have often been described sociologically as consisting of the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship . . ." (103). Focusing on the relationships that Ellis and McInerney create for their protagonists illuminates the reality of men who view their peers as inconsequential, empty people who reflect their own emptiness. Since there is no connection or bond, they share nothing with each other. McInerney's narrator finally sees through Tad but only after silently agreeing with his classist and misogynistic portrayal of Amanda. Still, he never fills the void with anyone else (beyond attempts to connect with Vicky); he remains alone. The alienation he chooses is a negative portrayal of men unable to produce sympathetic relationships. Ellis's Clay, however, pushes Wirth's concerns far beyond "weakening bonds of kinship." Instead, he participates in the rapes of Julian and a twelve-year-old-girl because he refuses to actually feel anything for anyone. His lack of bonding with anyone allows him to willingly participate in a masculinity that is complicit with sexual violence so abhorrent that it is difficult to even read. Overall, both narrators feel no "bonds of kinship," so they continue their

lives as emotionally empty men, feeling no sympathy for anyone. Because of this, both characters are indictments of the danger emotionally empty men pose to themselves and to the people around them.

Masculinity and Women: “It’s hard to feel sorry for someone who doesn’t care.”

For both novelists, women are minor characters who serve the purpose of highlighting masculine failures in being able to form sympathetic bonds. Moreover, the female characters challenge the narrators in key moments in which they offer the protagonists a chance to confront their own insecurities in their young lives. With the exception of McInerney’s Vicky, both authors’ female characters are versions of Cassandra, who offer the narrators insights that could foster their emotional growth only to be ignored because of sexism and misogyny. While it is clear that Clay and the second-person narrator are unable to form “bonds of kinship” with their masculine friends, they also struggle to form meaningful connections with the women in their lives. Blair is the one woman who continually attempts to connect with Clay throughout Ellis’s novel. While home on Christmas break, Clay is forced to deal with her and their past as a couple. Their interactions highlight that Clay is incapable not only of connecting with his masculine peers but also with a female from the past who longs to reform a bond. McInerney’s relationships with women are far more complex. Besides the women he casually meets in bars, he constantly searches the city for signs of his ex-wife Amanda. He believes himself to be stifled at his job by his female boss, Clara. I argue that both women represent masculine anxiety concerning the cultural power that women were gaining in the 1980s. However, the most complicated relationship that he faces is with Tad’s cousin, Vickie. With this character, McInerney creates the first and only genuine connection that the narrator experiences with a peer in the novel, one in which emotionally open communication takes place. This highlights a major

difference between the novelists because Vicky is another example of a possibility of redemption offered in *Bright Lights, Big City* that is unavailable in *Less Than Zero*. By focusing on the women in these two characters' lives, both novels argue that emotionally stunted men are bound to struggle in their isolation because they cannot form sympathetic bonds with women who offer the potential for positive change.

Blair is the first character whom Clay meets upon returning home from college, and she is the last he talks to before leaving Los Angeles, signaling that much of Clay's struggle is bound up in their failed relationship. The distance he experiences with her and his inability to stop a young girl from being raped are both larger examples of Ellis's portrayal of an emotionally stunted young man. His echo of her indictment throughout the novel—that "people are afraid to merge"—resonates in their failed relationship. Whether at parties, clubs, or out shopping, Blair tries to connect with Clay, vying for his attention. He continually rebuffs her efforts and refuses to "merge" because he is unwilling and unable to offer her any semblance of truth. It is only near the conclusion of the novel, before he returns to college, that Blair finally confronts him and demands answers from Clay. When she pushes him for answers about their relationship, Clay is forced to open up about his emotional emptiness. Blair thus forces Clay to admit that he prefers his shallow existence over the burden of emotional ties. This is a major moment in the novel because Ellis assigns to a minor, female character the power to force Clay to confront the utter emptiness of his life.

After minimal conversation, Blair abruptly gives the moment importance by asking Clay whether he ever actually loved her, which becomes the catalyst for his unmasking of his empty life. After so many of the inane conversations that Ellis's characters have had about music, television, and shopping, seeing two characters actually open up and attempt to express their

deepest feelings is refreshing. Again, this moment of truth comes because Ellis's Blair forces the action despite her minor-character status. After trying to hide behind his typical silence, Clay finally answers in an "almost shout" that "No, I never did" (Ellis 204). Clay cannot help but ask if Blair ever loved him, demonstrating a selfishness that is the root of so many of his problems. The answer that she offers him is more powerful than Clay could have imagined. Blair confesses, "I did once. I mean I really did. Everything was all right for a while. You were kind . . . But it was like you weren't there" (Ellis 204). While Blair openly communicates her emotional pain about Clay's emptiness, he is once again obsessing over a billboard stating, "Disappear Here," which I read as Ellis illustrating Clay's need to repress feelings and hide from emotional conversations, especially those in which women demonstrate power. He does not want to hear her truth because it forces him to speak the truth. He wants to disappear from this honest conversation. Blair asks Clay what makes him happy, but his only answer is: "Nothing. Nothing makes me happy. I like nothing" (Ellis 205). His emotionally vacant answer prods Blair to ask another question, one that is more stayed. Since she knows he never loved her, she wonders if he ever at least cared about her. Clay's answer comprises the most important statement of the novel because he finally confesses that he does not want to care or feel. In other words, Clay chooses not to have emotional connections to people, illustrating his negative use of agency. Clay explains his choice to remain emotionally empty: "I don't want to care. If I care about things, it'll just be worse, it'll just be another thing to worry about. It's less painful if I don't care" (Ellis 205). Clay's choice to ignore emotion, to refuse sympathy for others, reflects his need to deny any pain or trauma that he has suffered. He does not want to face his empty home life, his emotionally-bankrupt friends, or his inability to "merge" with the people in his life. Ellis's protagonist chooses to be an emotionless man because accepting his pain would be to accept the

feelings of powerless that often accompany serious emotion. He would rather “disappear here” than feel for anyone, even Blair. When Blair states, “It’s hard to feel sorry for someone who doesn’t care” (Ellis 204), I contend that she voices a major concern for herself and many readers. It is difficult to feel sympathy for a young man who cares for no one, including himself.

Just as Ellis relies on a female character as the impetus for Clay’s emotional confession, McInerney’s narrator too faces difficult emotional truths because of the women in his life. *Bright Lights, Big City* functions as a broken, unfinished elegy for the narrator’s deceased mother. The first chapter ends with the narrator leaving a bar in which he abused drugs and alcohol, looking for a one-night stand, only to see the morning sun and realize that “the glare is like a mother’s reproach” (McInerney 8). That a mother critiques his empty life is an important reflection of his repressed emotions, specifically those regarding his mother’s death that he is attempting to deny. By the end of the section, McInerney’s narrator misreads his own emotions and turns his focus to his ex-wife Amanda. Throughout the novel, he incorrectly believes that losing Amanda is the cause of all his problems, while in fact, he is actually mourning the loss of his mother. I return to this in the next section, but for now it is important to understand that Amanda is an emotional burden that he has yet to face. Likewise, I draw attention to his boss, Clara, who continually serves as an honest critic of his failure as a worker. He has no emotional connection to her, but I contend that Clara represents a major anxiety experienced by males in the workforce as women began rising to power in the corporate world during the 1980s. Finally, McInerney’s character Vickie, a Generation X woman, allows the emotionless narrator to actually open up and confront the pain he feels in his life. I argue that the ending of the novel casts doubts onto whether this relationship can actually evolve into a meaningful connection, but the fact that Vickie exists as a cathartic release is important for the narrator’s attempt to address his emotionless life. Like

Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* relies on minor female characters to emotionally challenge the male narrators to confront their problems so that the young men can evolve beyond their stagnant lives. That both characters often fail serves to indict men who refuse to acknowledge and understand the power of the women in their lives.

While Tad offers his misogynistic and classist critique of Amanda, it is important to understand what McInerney's narrator thinks of her because it reflects his own problems with women in the novel. There is no doubt that Amanda was a substitution for the loss of family manifested in his mother's death. After finally confessing to his estranged brother that Amanda left him, the narrator reflects on what had led him to marry Amanda. He states:

You were living with Amanda in New York and marriage wasn't high on your list of priorities, although on Amanda's it was. You had your doubts about in sickness and in health till death do us part. Then your mother was diagnosed and everything looked different. Your first love had given notice of departure and Amanda's application was on file. Mom never said it would do her heart good to see you married, but you were so eager to please her you would have walked through fire, given your right and left arms . . . You wanted her to be happy and she wanted you to be happy. And, in the end, you might have confused what she wanted with what Amanda wanted. (McInerney 161)

The language of this passage is quite revealing. It is clear that his marriage was more of a reaction to his mother's illness and an attempt to fill a void that was to follow. The narrator appears to misread both women in his life. He states with certainty that Amanda needed marriage, but this is his limited perspective. He then confesses that he believes marriage is what his mother wanted for him while admitting that this wish was never actually verbalized. In other

words, both examples reflect a man who decides what women want or mean instead of listening to their actual voice, thus serving as examples of misogyny.

The narrator's description of Amanda is more telling. That her "application was on file" suggests that this was not about love but rather resembled a business transaction or the hiring of an employee. Wirth contends that "the city is not conducive to the traditional type of family life, including the rearing of children and the maintenance of the home as the locus of a whole round of vital activities" (103). The destruction of their marriage reflects these problems because his home "died" with his mother. Moreover, Wirth speaks to the inability of the narrator to have a traditional marriage with Amanda. In the 1980s, as women were gaining more power, Amanda functions as a symbol for women who strove to develop their own careers unfettered by the traditional roles held by women in the past. That she chooses to follow her modeling career and divorce the narrator speaks to the mobility that she embraces. Nevertheless, it is important to see what Amanda was to the narrator and what she has become to him over the course of the novel. Her initial introduction came in the first chapter when the narrator leaves the bar. Amanda is nothing more than a memory that he connects with the smell of bread, which leads him to the memory of hopefulness in which the city seemed like a small neighborhood conducive to building a family:

You were just starting out. You had the rent covered, you had your favorite restaurant on MacDougal whether the waitresses knew your name and you could bring your own bottle of wine. Every morning you woke to the smell of bread from the bakery downstairs. You would go out to buy the paper and maybe pick up croissants while Amanda made coffee. This was two years ago, before you were married. (McInerney 9)

For the narrator, this memory of Amanda demonstrates his misguided hope that the city could be

the place to build a family to replace the one that was breaking. Due to his alienated emotions and repressed sexism, he misread the truth about both his intentions and hers, highlighting that men unable to connect with their own and others' emotions are incapable of forging lasting bonds.

In fact, the narrator's lack of connection with Amanda turns into dread, as if Amanda is a ghost haunting his life before McInerney allows her to materialize. At one point, he even asks, "why does she haunt you like this" (McInerney 59). He begins to write her a letter beginning with "Dear Amanda" but realizes that he actually typed "Dead Amanda" (McInerney 42). In both examples, McInerney's narrator confesses a type of horror for Amanda which speaks to the powerlessness she makes him confront. When his "friend" Tad arrives and complains of the dust in the apartment only to explain, "Did you know that ninety percent of your average household dust is composed of epidermal matter? That's skin to you," the narrator states to himself, "Perhaps this explains your sense of Amanda's omnipresence. She has left her skin behind" (McInerney 43). Slowly, Amanda is becoming more than a memory or a ghost; she is beginning to materialize. At work, he sees Amanda in a magazine ad. "There are three women modeling cocktail dresses and one of them is Amanda. You feel dizzy. You sit back on the desk and look at the picture. It's Amanda, all right" (McInerney 59). No longer a memory, a ghost, or dead skins cells, the ex-wife who he believes destroyed his dreams (or illusions) of family life has become a two-dimensional picture. The next incarnation of Amanda arrives in the form of a mannequin in a Saks window. "Inside the window is a mannequin which is a replica of Amanda—your wife, the model You haven't seen her in the flesh since she left for the last trip to Paris, a few days after she did the cast. You stand in front of the window and try to remember if this was how she really looked" (McInerney 68). Girard argues that "the evolution

of Amanda as metaphor, from two-dimensional print ad to department store mannequin, reflects not only the conflation of reality and representation characteristic of the postmodern period . . . but also the reduction of human relationships to exchanges of consumer commodities” (175). In many ways, it appears that Amanda was nothing more than a commodity to the narrator, a stand-in for the mother he was losing. “You saw what she was selling then; you saw what you wanted to see” (McInerney 124). Because of his emotionless life, alienated from the reality of his own needs, the narrator begins to understand that he blindly chose Amanda and thrust his own meanings and desires upon her. This realization demonstrates a fundamental difference between the two authors, because Ellis never allows Clay to truly confront the meanings that he assigns to women. McInerney’s narrator, on the other hand, uses Amanda as a stepping-stone for the narrator to actually embrace his emotional stagnation.

Still, at the moment of crisis when the narrator faces Amanda, he remains unable to embrace the sexist and classist attitudes echoed by Tad. For instance, there is no doubt that the narrator believes that Amanda used him to escape her unhappy life. In his view, she wanted to escape the poverty and boredom of her middle-American life in a trailer park in Kansas, and he represented the first step to upward mobility. “Amanda wanted to live on the Upper East Side, where the other models lived,” and because “she thought your family was rich, and by the standards of her childhood they were,” Amanda “insisted that you buy a starter set of Tiffany sterling” (McInerney 38). While there may be truth to this, McInerney’s narrator never questions whether other truths exist. Maybe Amanda fell out of love with him. Maybe he was a terrible husband. There are many possibilities that could force him to take some responsibility for the failed marriage, but McInerney never allows an actual confrontation to take place between the two characters. I read this as another example of an emotionally stunted man trapped inside his

own masculine worldview that deepens his denial of any responsibility. By the time we finally see Amanda, after a potential sighting on the runway, she may or may not be engaged to Odysseus, who appears to be a prostitute (McInerney 175–177). While our narrator is clearly melting down before her eyes, all Amanda can say to him is “how’s it going” (McInerney 175). In this moment, Amanda finally appears to be just as empty as the memories, dust, pictures, or the mannequin. She is the commodity he attempted to purchase, and he has nothing of value to offer her anymore. “The problem with our hero’s marriage to Amanda was clearly his ‘nonprofit’ status” because “Amanda herself was never the true object of our hero’s desire; what he wanted was what he imagined she represented, and what she wanted was what he gave her—entry into yuppie life, access to the bright lights” (Girard 176). Both the narrator and Amanda used each other to fill voids in their empty lives. Without sentiment, McInerney’s characters in New York City are nothing more than business transactions or stand-ins for what the characters actually desire but are unable to admit to themselves. Thus, the “metropolis is rather more ambiguous” because the “stimuli” offered is “terribly seductive: objects to be owned, products to be consumed . . .” (Moretti 125). When relationships boil down to commodities, everyone is for sale and no one’s feelings matter in *Bright Lights, Big City*. The failure of the narrator’s marriage to Amanda clarifies that bonds are doomed without actual sympathetic connections with people, while underscoring that his misogyny creates a blind spot that he is unable to see when it comes to women.

Another important female character whom McInerney’s narrator faces is his boss, Clara Tillinghast, whom he treats with contempt and misogyny. That McInerney is able to examine the working world affords him the opportunity to explore male anxiety in a way that Ellis cannot. Ellis’s characters are too young and rich to face tension in the workplace. McInerney is able to

use the narrator's job as another site at which traditional masculine values impede emotional growth and bonding with the Other. While anxiety regarding job prospects is a major theme in Generation X literature, McInerney's narrator has a good job, working as a fact checker for an important magazine, but he sabotages his own career due to his emotional alienation. Instead of focusing on his job and doing his work, he comes in hungover, late, and missing deadlines because he spends all of his time running away from his emotional pain. When Clara is forced to reprimand and eventually fire him, he takes very little responsibility. Instead, he continually reads her through the lens of male anxiety regarding female empowerment. His misogyny is important because it reflects the traditional masculinity of the 1980s. As Susan Faludi dramatically illustrated in her aptly-named *Backlash*, the 1980s was a time in which women faced reprisals if they attempted to move upward too rapidly. The narrator describes his boss, Clara Tillinghast, as:

A fourth-grade tyrant, one of those ageless disciplinarians who believes that little boys are evil and girls frivolous, that an idle mind is the devil's playground and that learning is the pounding of facts, like so many nails, into the knotty oak of recalcitrant heads. Ms. Clara Tillinghast, aka Clingfast, aka The Clinger, runs the Department of Factual Verification like a spelling class, and lately you have not accumulated many gold stars.

(McInerney 14)

Clara is neither a colleague nor a mentor helping the young protagonist establish a career that marks his entry into adulthood; he believes that she is a cruel "tyrant" with puritanical values, seeking to crush "children" whom she believes to be wicked from birth. In fact, he goes so far as to enforce nicknames for her as a way to thwart her identity and power as boss. One must wonder whether he would harbor such animosity for a male boss who had to endure his

unprofessional failures. However, the narrator makes clear that is not the case when he decides that her hatred for him is misplaced and is a result of her lack of marriage. Reflecting on her hatred of him, which he refuses to see as stemming from his ineptitude, the narrator questions, “Why does she hate you? She hired you, after all. When did things start to go so wrong? It’s not your fault that she never married” (McInerney 20). The narrator’s contention that all her anger is due to her not fulfilling the traditional female role as a wife reflects his blind misogyny. He is unable to see her as a boss who must run her division. Instead he relies on outdated stereotypes in an effort to diminish her power over him. She is a lonely spinster taking out her frustrations on a young man because she is not married. Moreover, he misreads the situation and believes that he actually has a sympathetic connection with Clara. He confesses that he has wanted to engage her by saying “*Hey, I know what it’s like*” and “*Why don’t you admit you hurt?*” (McInerney 21), as if his divorce from Amanda makes him an authority on her emotional life. The blindness that McInerney’s narrator exhibits concerning Clara highlights that men who are emotionally stunted and unable to see women beyond the traditional roles that in the past confined them are incapable of forming any meaningful sympathetic connections with women, which in turn causes further isolation. Moreover, he denies himself the opportunity to evolve into a more emotionally evolved male.

The final important female character whom the narrator engages in *Bright Lights, Big City* is Tad’s cousin, Vicky, to whom the narrator is unprecedentedly emotionally open. Yes, the narrator does have an emotionally open moment with his brother Michael, but it is quickly shut down as the narrator deflects the honesty by using cocaine with his brother. McInerney’s Vickie, by contrast, actually engages the narrator and listens to him sympathetically, fostering the kind of relationship that he has desperately sought since his mother’s death. From the moment he meets

her, she is a contrast to the seemingly endless, meaningless faces that he has mentioned throughout the novel. She is waiting for him in the bar reading “Spinoza’s *Ethics*” (McInerney 91), and Tad informs the narrator that “Vicky is studying Philosophy at Princeton” (McInerney 92). She is such a departure from the other women, particularly Amanda, that when they leave the bar, the narrator alludes to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, stating, “you think of Plato’s pilgrims climbing out of the cave, from the shadow world of appearances toward things as they really are, and you wonder if it is possible to change in this life. Being with a philosopher makes you think” (McInerney 93). This allusion is quite powerful because it foreshadows the actual change that he encounters at the end of the novel. Because of his connection to Vicky, the narrator actually attempts to exit the cave of his life, seeking the light of honesty and emotional truth. Moreover, that this epiphany is tied to Vicky confirms that emotionally open communication with women and the bonds it creates extend to the narrator the opportunity to create a more meaningful life for himself, one that cannot be found with men like Tad.

After the mild breakthrough with Michael and the realization that both Amanda and Tad are empty people who “would make a great couple,” the narrator calls Vicky from a bar and begins an important emotional confession unlike any in the novel. He confesses that his mother died a year ago and that he is now divorced. In his drunken state, he rambles and struggles to clarify the meaning of his thoughts. He confesses that “I tried to block her out of my mind. But think I owe it to her to remember her” (McInerney 179), but Vicky is confused about the pronoun “her.” He clarifies his point in the most lucid statement of the novel about his emotional life: “My mother. Forget my wife. I’m talking about my mother” (McInerney 179). For the first time, the narrator is able to separate his emotional confusion and see that his true loss is that of his mother. While recounting his mother’s final days to Vickie, he explains that his mother

believed that “when you are dying you had a responsibility to the living” (McInerney 179). His mother was fearful of the trauma that her slow death would place upon her family, which helps her son see that even in death, people should care more about the emotional well-being of others than their own needs. His mother thus teaches him that being selfless is the best way for him to love those in his life. This confession to Vicky leads him to the realization that “we have a responsibility to the dead—the living, I mean. Does this make any sense?” (McInerney 179). While this statement could be read as a drunken confusion, I argue that McInerney’s narrator finally realizes that a truly sympathetic man must be responsible to both the living and the dead. Since he has chosen not to face the unbearable pain of his mother’s death, he has ignored his responsibility to the dead. By ignoring his mother’s death, he has then ignored his responsibility to the living, including himself. The fact that he is able to confess these truths to Vicky, a woman, speaks to the power of emotionally open communication that has eluded him the entire novel. The fact that McInerney’s Vickie is the impetus for this realization is extremely important because it allows the reader to see that emotionally stunted men are the problem. Female minor characters are, in fact, the mirrors holding up truth for the narrator, who finally begins to see his own failures once he confronts his mother’s death while talking to Vicky.

Focusing on the relationships of Clay and the second-person narrator with the women in their lives makes it easy to sympathize with Blair’s indictment that “it’s hard to feel sorry for someone who doesn’t care” (Ellis 204). Even as both protagonists engage the majority of women in their lives, little sympathetic connection is forged. They view most women as mysteries who desire too much of the protagonists’ empty lives. We see them (as readers) as intriguing, powerful figures who hold more potential than these annoyingly blind men. Often, the women are actual antagonists who point out Clay’s and the narrator’s failures, in their lives and in their

lack of connections with others. While Clay chooses to remain distant, refusing to merge, McInerney's narrator forges a bond with Vicky. It is unclear what may or may not come from the late-night phone call; what is important is that Vicky offers the narrator a safe space in which to share emotional pain and truths. Blair offers Clay the same opportunity, and he responds only with his emptiness. McInerney's narrator seizes on the moment and opens up, resulting in a desperately needed catharsis. Focusing on the male characters and their struggles with women in the novels reveals that emotionally honest communication is the only possible means of salvation for alienated males and that women, though minor characters, resonate as the moral center in novels often devoid of clear morality.

Conclusions and Cannibalism: Going Forward Alone

By the end of both novels, the protagonists have confronted the major struggles of their lives. Clay understands that he desires to live his life cut-off from meaningful bonds. In other words, his agency is to have no agency. The second-person narrator, by contrast, realizes that his life has become nothing but a series of shallow interactions absent of meaning because he is trying to repress feelings of loss associated with his mother's death. These new understandings lead both characters to the point of needing change in their lives. Ellis's Clay chooses to run away from his problems in Los Angeles only to confess in the last few lines of the novel that the horrors stay with him for a "long time afterwards" (Ellis 208). McInerney's narrator realizes that he has hit rock bottom in his life and that it is time to be reborn and "learn everything all over again" (182). What is most fascinating about the novels' endings, however, is the theme of cannibalism associated with parents. Ellis and McInerney resolve their novels with the act of consumption, a not too subtle indictment of 1980s culture. Clay's vision is violent and reflects parents destroying their children in a chaotic city. The second-person narrator creates a secular

communion, consuming bread as a symbol of his mother. He acquires the bread by trading the yuppie sunglasses that have blinded him to the truth of his life. While McInerney's conclusion is much more positive than Clay's, I argue that both characters continue to move forward alone, unable to form bonds with the people in their lives, furthering the argument that emotionally empty men are doomed to the very isolation they loathe.

The final section of *Less Than Zero* reinforces the meaningless and emotionally devoid life that Clay confronts. He reflects on a song by the Los Angeles punk band X, entitled "Los Angeles," with lyrics "so harsh and bitter that the song would reverberate in my mind for days" (Ellis 207). Reflecting back on the past, he realizes that the "images" that the song conjures in his mind "were personal and no one I knew shared them . . . I later found out" (Ellis 207). Once again, Clay finds himself alone in his feelings and beliefs. He remains unable to merge. However, it is the horrifying images that the song helps him create that become the final indictment of the novel. Clay explains that "The images I had were of people being driven mad by living in the city. Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children. Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt being blinded by the sun" (Ellis 207–208). What Clay has learned from his college Christmas break is that the parents in his and his peers' lives are empty people who hate their lives so much that they consume their children to fill the void. The children are victims who cannot escape the destruction. While *Less Than Zero* highlights a city full of parents who are rarely present emotionally or physically, all of the blame falls firmly on the parents and the failure of family. Ellis's use of irony is powerful because Clay realizes that people who live empty lives simply consume other people, even their children. Of course, Clay chooses to live a life devoid of sympathetic connections because it is easier than feeling his own pain. Ellis's Clay thus learns

nothing by the end of the novel. He remains emotionally vacant because all he has taken from his experiences are “images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterwards” (Ellis 208). Clay allows himself to be consumed.

McInerney’s second-person narrator chooses a similar path but attempts to embrace a new beginning by consuming bread, the symbol of his mother. That the final scene evokes religious imagery is important because the narrator finally connects to a belief system instead of passively disengaging from the emptiness of his life. The act of communion involves atonement for past sins and the hope of redemption in a new form of life. Instead of running away from his mother’s death, which leads only to unfulfillment, he embraces his loss and the pain that he has repressed. By consuming her as the body of a savior, McInerney’s narrator begins to believe that his mother and what she represents, that is, selfless love, is the means to his redemption. This can be read as a positive expression of an evolved Generation X man finally in touch with his feelings because he celebrates his baby boomer mother and her values. However, I argue that McInerney undercuts this moment at the very end when the narrator chooses to move forward alone instead of actually building sympathetic connections.

The ending of the novel is aesthetically pleasing because the final pages of the novel echo to the ending of Chapter 1, suggesting that this struggle with his mother’s death is the central conflict. In the first chapter, the narrator has left the decadent bar filled with empty people and drugs. Exiting the scene, he compares the morning glare to “a mother’s reproach,” and he “catch[es] the smell of the Italian bakery” (McInerney 8-9). This time, however, the smell of bread makes him think of Amanda and his failed marriage. The ending of the novel occurs after seeing Amanda and after his acceptance that she was never whom he wanted or loved. She is empty like the anonymous girl in Chapter 1. Walking in the city, he catches the smell of bread,

but this time, it reminds him of his mother and her failed attempt to make him bread one morning after a surprise visit home from college. The narrator reminisces that “She had made bread only two other times you could recall. Both times it had burned. You remember being proud of your mother then for never having submitted to the tyranny of the kitchen, for having other things on her mind. She cut you two thick slices of bread anyway. They were charred on the outside but warm and moist inside” (McInerney 181). This memory is extremely important because it embodies much of the narrator’s conflict. His mother was part of a new movement of women casting off the oppressive patriarchal chains that had bound women in the past. Bread is sustenance. Bread also has religious connotations related to the sacrament. In both cases, his mother could never offer him exactly what he wanted because she was living her own life. In other words, she made him bread, but it was often burned. Amanda could never offer him what he wanted because they were both using each other. Tad could never offer him what he wanted because Tad is empty. His job could never really put “food” on the table either. Physically and spiritually, no one could ever offer the narrator anything that could sustain him. The only character who actually helps him understand the importance of bread is Megan who takes him to “the best bread in the city” (134) and reprimands him from not understanding the nutritious qualities he needs for sustenance. When the narrator chooses white bread, Megan makes a very insightful critique of his overall character: “You don’t know what’s good for you” (McInerney 135). That is exactly the reality he has been trying to come to terms with for the entire novel.

In the final scene, the narrator trades his designer sunglasses, something to obscure his vision of the world, for a bag of rolls. The narrator confesses, “You get down on your knees and tear open the bag. The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again”

(McInerney 182). Given that his mother is a symbol for bread and redemption, the narrator's act of cannibalism contrasts dramatically with Clay's. In Ellis's world, parents consume children. McInerney's narrator, however, finally understands that his mother and the independence she represents are exactly what he needs to redeem his empty life. I now return to an earlier scene in the novel in which the narrator is working "the midnight shift" taking care of his mother as she is dying of cancer. His mother tries to illicit meaningful conversation with her son. She asks about him using drugs, his sex life, and his love life with Amanda. Continually he becomes embarrassed and finds it difficult to answer questions. Facing her own mortality, his mother offers him words of wisdom about life: "I wish people wouldn't waste their time being embarrassed. I wish I hadn't" (McInerney 165). The regret she confesses to her son is the ultimate lesson that he has been trying to learn the entire novel. It is more important to be emotionally open and vulnerable than to hide one's true feelings. Hiding one's emotions is a waste of time, and the narrator has wasted the last year of his life trying to avoid the pain of his mother's death. Therefore, by finally facing what he had repressed, he is able to consume her and the lesson that he must forge ahead independently and try to create what he wants and needs himself. He cannot rely on others to help him find completeness in his life. He must learn to sustain himself and consuming her and what she represents is the first step towards that self-sufficient life.

The endings of these two early Generation X novels make clear the choices that the male protagonists make concerning their emotionally empty lives is to remain alone. Clay chooses to blame his parents for his shortcomings, almost exonerating himself from the horrors in which he participates throughout the novel. McInerney's narrator finally realizes that everything he has learned has failed him and that he must embrace his dead mother's existence as an independent

woman who forged her own path (like Megan). He must learn to be more in touch with his emotions and speak of them more freely with people. However, both authors end their novels with two male characters who are alone and who are choosing isolation. Clay runs away and takes his pain with him. The second-person narrator may have forged a bond with Vicky, but his language at the end of the novel speaks of going alone and trying to rebuild his life without connection with anyone. There is no doubt that McInerney's ending is more optimistic than Ellis's, but both nevertheless cast doubt on the characters' abilities to ever create emotionally open connections with people. Both masculine narrators choose a form of isolation, though one is more hopeful. I argue that we should read these endings as cautionary tales of men so emotionally unavailable that they cannot offer any true semblance of community with their peers because they are both still living lives of selfishness that cannot serve those who need them.

Ellis's and McInerney's Contributions

Less Than Zero and *Bright Lights, Big City* serve as a baseline for my engagement with Generation X literature and the development of a sympathetic masculinity capable of fostering community. The protagonists of the novels are reflective of the 1980s culture of greed, consumption, and empty lives. Therefore, I read both novels as indictments of men who are so emotionally arrested that they are unable to connect with themselves and with the people in their lives. Though Clay is a teenager and the second-person narrator is twentysomething, they both struggle with the exact same crisis of masculinity. In "the decade of decadence," how is a man supposed to live an emotionally open life and build sympathetic connections?

Clay chooses to destroy all emotion and move forward feeling nothing so that he can avoid any pain; the second-person narrator chooses to be reborn in a version of his mother's independence. Both characters choose to move forward alone. While the second-person narrator

is at least attempting to change, which is far more optimistic than Clay's decision, both men remain cut off from the world around them, choosing to remain isolated. Refusing to "merge" is not a viable path upon which to create sympathetic bonds. Both novels identify a very serious problem for men in the 1980s, focusing on the masculine inability to be compassionate and sensitive to others. However, neither novel offers any direct resolution to the problem. Yes, both authors surround their narrators with strong and thoughtful women who might hold the key to altering the sensibility of the masculine narrators. However, the solutions Ellis and McInerney propose are embedded in an intricate portrayal of their environment, deeply textual to appear as meaningless noise but (to our eyes) redolent with possibility. While I argue that identifying the problem of failed masculinity for Generation X characters is an important step to finding solutions, Ellis and McInerney do not themselves offer a solution. For that, we must turn to the works of Coupland, Palahniuk, and Eggers and the evolution of masculinity that they propose.

CHAPTER 3

COUPLAND'S *GENERATION X* AND ESCAPING THE COSMOPOLITAN TRAP

In 1991, Canadian author Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* popularized a moniker that defined the generation born after the baby boom of the 1940s and 1950s. Writing as a spokesperson for Generation X, Coupland's Andy states, "We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have it now" (11). Yet, John M. Ulrich questions this emphasis on desired "silence": "The narrative is surprisingly concerned with—even valorizes—the search for depth and meaning" (16). To achieve this depth and meaning, Coupland uses the first-person narrator Andy as the model for a sensitive, educated white man who must convey his fears and anxieties to achieve community with his peers. Coupland's experimental novel is built on the act of storytelling: both invented tales and personal memories are woven into a narrative as a means of therapy to achieve connection with peers. At the same time, a crowded mix of strange cartoons and extended definitions in the margins provides a generational discourse in shorthand phrases that resemble the slogans, cartoons, and diagrams also there. These marginal intrusions represent current obscurations that do "distract" but also supposedly helpful guidelines to the uninitiated. Even as they distract they also underscore the need for the more elaborate constructions in the text. In Coupland's words, these are "tales for an accelerated generation"; accordingly, emotional storytelling takes precedence over the "buzz" of sidebar materials mirroring the pop culture identity of Generation X, giving birth to a new version of white masculinity in tune with white men's emotions and those of his peers.

My focus on storytelling is not an entirely new approach to Coupland's novel. Scholarship often highlights the importance of storytelling for his characters. Focusing on

Microserfs and *Generation X*, Hutchinson argues, “Individualistic assertion and consumerist self-indulgence” forces Coupland’s characters “towards a need for social connection in the form of friendship” and “storytelling” (40). Katerburg contends, “This storytelling habit...is a means to create a small community, one based on shared experiences and mutual trust” because “Coupland’s characters share their fears, confess their personal and familial failures, and articulate their hopes for the future. Whether real or made up, the stories they tell tend to be personal and local” (290). Lainsbury argues the stories are a “kind of therapeutic, oral storytelling regime” in which “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 an existence to be legitimated by reference to a narrative that would make sense of it all.” For each of these scholars, storytelling allows the characters to cope with their dissatisfaction with life while creating a sense of community among peers. While I agree with their respective arguments, I focus on Andy’s storytelling as a catalyst for the creation of community. In other words, Coupland’s Andy is the model for emotionally open communication because his stories not only drive the action of the novel but also become the model inspiring his friends to share their anxieties and fears. Thus, Andy directly opposes the emotionally vacant protagonists of the 1980s *Generation X* novels of Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis. Andy’s need to share stories with the reader and his peers highlights the importance of sharing emotionally uncomfortable truths to create a meaningful community with other *Generation X* members.

Sharing stories with peers has great value for Andy and his friends, who are trapped in malaise about their families, jobs, and futures. Jonathan M. Adler and Dan P. McAdams explain that through storytelling, “people construct stories about their experiences in order to make sense of them. The crafting of one’s personal narrative provides individuals the sense that their lives

possess some degree of unity and purpose” (180). How does Coupland combine lives that exist “on the periphery” and are “marginalized” with acts of storytelling that provide “some degree of unity and purpose”? The novel’s three main characters struggle with the idea that their lives have no unity or purpose because they are clinging to the ideologies of the nuclear family, in which a man must have a traditional job that makes enough money to marry and support a family with children. Thus, through the act of storytelling, the characters are able to understand their suffering by vocalizing their problems. Once they have given voice to their pain, they are able to face where the pain has led them and how to transcend it. Adler and Adams argue, “If crafting a narrative out of personal experiences helps people make meaning out of them, storying psychotherapy helps people to understand the ways in which they have suffered and (hopefully) transcend the distress. Therapy stories help people make sense out of what it was that went wrong in their lives and how they coped with the challenge” (180). I contend that Coupland’s Andy, relying on “therapy stories,” becomes the vehicle for narrative therapy to take place among his peers by becoming the very model of behavior that should exist. Andy’s sensitive and expressive nature demonstrates storytelling that casts off older models of masculinity like “the strong, silent type” in favor of a white man embracing his fears and anxieties. Furthermore, sharing these emotional struggles opens up the possibility of creating a community with others who also share and hide similar struggles. Coupland’s novel uses three key moments of storytelling to allow his three central characters to move beyond silent suffering and into a community of open communication: In Part One, Andy, Dag, and Claire invent fantastical stories that are thinly-veiled representations of their thwarted struggles. In Part Two, under the influence of another character (Elvissa) who demands authentic stories, the characters begin to share their trauma over their lack of identity. Finally, in Part Three, Andy and Claire return home for

Christmas and realize that the past must be set aside, and they must move on from their adolescence to form their own future, together with Dag, building on their experiences by caring for each other. In *Generation X*, then, Coupland sketches a movement towards a new kind of community that can only be built through genuine communication and best represented by the white male narrator who becomes a symbol for a new white masculinity at the turn of the century.

The novel revolves around the struggles of three twentysomethings lost and hiding in Palm Springs, California, with all three settled into low-paying jobs and distanced from their families—and dissatisfied with both circumstances. Coupland presents Andy, Claire, and Dag (along with other minor characters like Tobias and Elvissa) as they tell stories that reflect on and explore their dislocation. As the novel progresses, their stories become increasingly autobiographical until the final movement of Coupland's work shows the three main characters ready to relocate to Mexico in hopes of changing their lives. Their storytelling has evolved into a complex set of relationships that Coupland proposes as the basis for a fresh social organization in which very different people learn to adjust to, play with, and support one another. Most importantly, Andy becomes the new model for masculinity that embraces Claire as a strong, independent woman who is far more than a love interest or sexual object while simultaneously accepting Dag's erratic, sometimes angry behavior and repressed gay desires. Beyond the traditional stereotypes of a white man that would see Claire and Dag as inferiors or threats, Andy is the "new" white man armed with sensitivity and compassion as his tools to create true and lasting bonds among his peers.

There is no clearly defined leader in this group despite the fact that Andy is the narrator. The shared bonds that unite the three individuals in their communal life are improvisational, in

everyday events. Coupland's characters are both endearing and flawed as they struggle to find, through their shared pain and fears, an ability to move beyond failed models such as the nuclear family and meaningless labor, establishing a new basis for social sharing through confessional, first-person narration. Primarily, the model that Coupland seeks to rupture is that of traditional white men living a life of repressed emotional struggles in an effort to live up to outdated representations of white masculinity.

As much as Coupland's novel is a study of the relationships among three unlikely twentysomethings, it is equally important to see that Coupland has, using an unusual-size paper in all editions of *Generation X*, introduced puzzling, semi-helpful, multi-modal creations into his work. Coupland's experimental use of cartoons, slogans, and definitions that litter the margins of the pages complicates serious reading. In fact, before the novel proper begins, a cartoon (one of many Roy Lichtenstein signifiers) appears of a young woman drinking coffee stating, "don't worry, mother...if the **marriage** doesn't work out, we can always get **divorced**" [bold in original]. While humorous, the cartoon also speaks directly to a major tension in the novel between the romanticized family of the 1950s and the fragmented households of the 1970s; thus, it appears as a serious addition to the overall text. Other examples include the definition of "McJobs" and the slogan "Reinvent the Middle Class" (Coupland 112), which is a clear longing the novel possesses. All too often, the additions feel like sarcastic jokes or inside references that may or may not speak to the reader—for instance, a cartoon with a young woman looking into a mirror stating, "Hang on, Brad...My hair doesn't look **1940s** enough" (Coupland 89) [bold in original] and the definition of "tele-parablizing" ("morals used in everyday life that derive from sitcom plots: 'That's just like the episode where Jan lost her glasses!'"") (Coupland 120). These examples read as too jokey and unserious, and their use is often more distracting than

enlightening, seeming to undercut Coupland's serious work as a writer diagnosing and trying to help his Generation X audience. It is possible this is meta-commentary on the reality that amidst the seriousness of life, Generation X is caught up in a multimedia world that emphasizes quick, unimportant information that is easily digestible over the harsh realities deserving real work. The reader becomes like the characters: trying to find the truth among a multitude of distractions.

Finally, it is imperative to understand the novel's setting and futurity it longs to create. Written in 1991, the novel opens with Andy in a flashback to "the late 1970s, when I was fifteen years old" (Coupland 3), creating a sense of longing for the past only to move directly into the present: "one and a half decades later my feelings are just as ambivalent" (Coupland 3-4). This conflict between past and present is a seminal moment of setting for Andy because it demonstrates that he is torn between them since both are unfulfilling to Andy's needs. Moreover, the time-jump moves the novel from 1991 to 1999, where Part Three picks up, in the Christmas season moving into the final chapter, "Jan. 01, 2000." Thus, the novel is set in the future, giving further evidence for Coupland's argument that storytelling that allows open communication is the best model for the new white man at the turn of the century and millennium. I argue *Generation X* postulates a new identity in which its members can share their emotional burdens and fears through storytelling that increasingly moves from fiction to autobiography. Far beyond the blank affect of Ellis and McInerney, Andy and his friends evolve to share more sensitive and direct communication that fosters healthy community instead of alienation.

Andy is the narrator and major protagonist of the novel, and he is constantly returning to the past to try and understand what went wrong in his life, contradicting his ambivalence. Andy is a storyteller, which he picked up while a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, a group in which "[you] spill your guts—really drudge up those rotted baskets of fermented kittens and murder

implements that lie at the bottoms of all our personal lakes” (Coupland 13). Through the shared tales, it becomes clear that Andy is a sentimental man more in tune with his inner world than the outer world of alienated family and “McJobs” (which Coupland defines in the margin as “a low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one” (Coupland 5)). Andy’s emotional need to deal with the past, using stories as a means of therapy and unification, drives the action of the novel and Coupland’s creation of a communal group. Moreover, Coupland’s choice to create a protagonist who valorizes probing the internal world, suggests a need for power to be in the hands of the sensitive and not of the unemotional and callous (typical of leaders associated with white masculinity).

Claire is the central female character of the novel and the most openly emotional member of Coupland’s group. She struggles with the past, family, and relationships while working her “McJob” at a perfume counter. As Andy describes her, “Claire is dressed today in bubble gum capri pants, sleeveless blouse, scarf, and sunglasses: starlet manqué. She likes retro looks, and she also once told us that if she has kids, ‘I’m going to give them utterly retro names like Madge or Verna or Ralph. Names like people have at diners’” (Coupland 15). While this may seem like superficial character description, I contend it illuminates a major struggle Claire has throughout the novel: the past. Her appearance is an attempt at reclaiming the past, and her apartment is furnished with “heaps of familial loot snagged in between her mother’s and father’s plentiful Brentwood divorces” (Coupland 75). She longs for something more stable than her current reality, so she is constantly seeking out men to date and “complete” her life but constantly failing. This is best encapsulated in her attempt to find a connection with Tobias, a wannabe-yuppie and womanizer cheating on Claire with her friend Elvissa late in the novel. It would be

too easy to read this as a stereotype of the “emotional woman” archetype. Instead, Claire is a strong-willed woman most at home in her platonic relationships with Andy and Dag. The problem is that she is still hailed by the ideology of traditional family and marriage while battling the pull of expanded options for women that began in the 1970s—thus, she struggles to reconcile her emotional needs and strong will.

Dag is the group’s most confusing and opaque character, known for acts of vandalism against Baby Boomers and a repressed sexuality. Dag once worked “in advertising (marketing actually)” (Coupland 18) but quits his job after railing against his Boomer boss, Martin, for having all of the opportunity and money that Generation X never had or will have. Dag often takes the easy way out, so it is no surprise when Coupland inserts a definition in the margins on the same page for “Boomer Envy”: “Envy of material wealth and long-range material security, accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of their fortunate births” (Coupland 21). This discourse is the simple branding that Coupland works against; it refers to “envy,” but Dag acts out as a vandal. This complicates the first act of vandalism Andy shares, when after working an eight-hour shift as bartenders, Dag leaves their conversation to vandalize a car’s windshield with a rock because it had a “bumper sticker saying WE’RE SPENDING OUR CHILD’S INHERITANCE” (Coupland 5). The fact that he felt the need to vandalize the car speaks volumes about Dag’s volatile relationship with his parents’ generation and their successes, but it does not demonstrate envy. It is never made clear whether his parents are still married, only his anger and disconnect. Furthermore, his internal world is confused because he is attracted to Elvissa and yet later kisses Andy on the lips, demonstrating his vulnerability in a moment of crisis. Dag is the least clear character in his motives and desires, but he is an essential

member of the group because he is another representation of complex characters that are extremely different and yet bound tightly to Andy and Claire.

Though the three characters reflect realities that Generation X readers would identify with, like job problems and failed families, the characters have individual nuances, with their differences bound by a search for their ideal: authenticity. Philip Lewin and J. Patrick Williams explain that process in “The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture”:

“Individuals celebrate authenticity in order to balance the extreme dislocation that characterizes life in the postmodern world, in which traditional concepts of self, community, and space have collapsed” leading to “widespread internalization of doubt and an obsession with distinguishing the real from the fake” (66). Each character is embedded in a struggle to find “the real” in his or her life, and Coupland creates a pathway to find some semblance of this goal through first-person storytelling. Andy seeks a family that breaks free from the chains of the past. Claire needs to find relationships that allow her to be herself and not hampered by the ideology of traditional marriage. Dag needs to confront his own anger and sexual confusion. The struggles the characters face emerge through stories about failed family models, failed job opportunities, and failed relationships. Coupland’s characters struggle with ideological realities that limit them while simultaneously communicating the need for attention. The locus of this storytelling is Andy, the white male narrator who challenges the stereotypes of masculinity by being sensitive, honest, and open to serious bonds with a woman and a potentially bisexual man—supposed threats to his illusionary culture power.

Outside the Urban: Attempting to Open Up in Open Space

After the opening few pages of the novel, the remainder of Part One is spent outside the confines of Palm Springs and the urban environment, telling stories. Affectionately, the

characters call their picnic spot “Hell.” Andy explains:

Hell is a town of West Palm Springs Village—a bleached and defoliated Flintstones color cartoon of a failed housing development from the 1950s. The town lies on a chokingly hot hill a few miles up the valley, and it overlooks the shimmering aluminum necklace of Interstate 10, whose double strands stretch from San Bernardino in the west, to Blythe and Phoenix in the east. (Coupland 14)

The setting for their picnic and the stories they share offer direct insight into the struggles they face. The ruined housing development from the 1950s is an important symbol of the failed nuclear family motif. Greenberg argues, “The vacant ghost suburb symbolizes the lost promise of the post-war 50s, when every returning GI would have a housewife in every kitchen fitted with an oven and refrigerator and a car in every garage” but for Andy and his friends it “is symbolic of the failure of the industrial dream and the decline of modernist economy, after which there is only a blank, guideless space” (Greenberg 75). This “blank, guideless space” reflects the nuclear family myth, in which a white man is capable of making enough money at his job to provide for a stay-at-home wife/mother to raise their children. We still see this myth in modern culture, but the realities and myth were particularly disjointed in the early ’90s. Coupland’s characters have witnessed the reality of the postmodern world, in which family is fractured by divorce for Claire and potentially Dag. Andy’s large family with seven children leans more toward the myth but also was tied to the economic reality that both parents were forced to work to cope with late-capitalist realities. In short, the ruined development in “Hell” is a stark contrast to the myth; the shell of the development is the shell of the nuclear family, and that the “homes” still exist, empty and falling apart in a veritable wasteland, reflects all the myth could not live up to in reality. As Benjamin argues, “The trick by which the world of things is mastered—it is

more proper to speak of a trick than a method—consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past” (230). Coupland’s characters are embracing a political view while picnicking in West Palm Springs Village; they are mastering the “world of things” by embracing the emptiness to transcend its ideological hold. More directly, Andy and his friends choose the ruined suburban development for their picnic because it allows them to confront the myth of the nuclear family in a manner more reflective of their experiences.

Beyond the setting, what is most important in this early scene is the process Coupland begins with storytelling. From this point, storytelling is the driving force behind the characters’ evolution and ideological positions, demonstrating Coupland’s creation of the sensitive, emotionally communicative white man. This early scene relies heavily on “fictional” stories that Claire, Andy, and Dag share, tales that function on two levels: First, embedded in the stories are reflections of the fears and trauma each possesses. Thus, storytelling is an attempt at catharsis. Second, the stories cannot truly offer pure catharsis because they simultaneously serve as a shield. Though they share similar anxieties about the past with their families while fearing for their future economic well-being, it all lies beneath the surface of stories. Adler and McAdams discuss a group of therapy patients that are “low in ego development and low in well-being,” and “the narrators of the stories seem unable or unwilling to construct a clear ‘me’...it is simultaneously distancing and disturbing to read these accounts, as they feel eerily detached in their recounting of difficult experiences, for these vivid examples read like stories about no one” (195). Based on this insight, these early stories may seem like a failure in terms of building a lasting community. However, it is quite strategic, allowing Coupland to demonstrate just how difficult it is for the characters to trust and connect with one another in the beginning.

Coupland introduces us to the characters’ “Texlahoma” stories:

Texlahoma is a mythic world we created in which to set many of our stories. It's a sad everyplace, where citizens are always getting fired from the jobs at 7-Eleven and where the kids do drugs and practice the latest dance crazes at the local lake, where they also fantasize about being adult and pulling welfare-check scams as they inspect each other's skin for chemical burns from the lake water. Texlahomans shoplift cheap imitation perfumes from dime stores and shoot each other over Thanksgiving dinners every year. And about the only good thing that happens there is the cultivation of cold, unglamorous wheat in which Texlahomans take a justifiable pride; by law, all citizens must put bumper stickers on their cars saying: NO FARMERS: NO FOOD. Life is boring there, but there are some thrills to be had: all the adults keep large quantities of cheaply sewn scarlet sex garments in the chests of drawers. These are panties and ticklers rocketed from Korea—and I say rocketed in because Texlahoma is an asteroid orbiting the 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. The atmosphere contains oxygen, wheat chaff, and A.M. radio transmissions. It's a fun place to spend one day, and then you want to get the hell out of there. (Coupland 39-40)

The fictional setting is mix of Texas and Oklahoma, an almost Bible-Belt creation rife with overtones of family and anti-urban sensibilities. The citizens are poor, steal from and fight with one another, and repress their sexuality (sold to them from Korea by an exploited labor force, indicative of late capitalism). Farming, the antithesis of the urban, is the main commodity the inhabitants must offer, as they are completely isolated from Earth on a lonely asteroid stuck in 1974 as the dawn of late capitalism commodifies everything in a postmodern void. The beauty of the manufactured setting is that it lays bare the competing realities and ideologies the characters

struggle with throughout the novel. The Bible Belt is a symbol for family and “down-to-earth” values stereotypically not embodied on the urban coasts. This is the “flyover America” that should be filled with the hard work and family values, but it is instead an isolated void with people who shoot each other on a family day of thanks and have no jobs (reflected by the mention of 1974). Texlahoma is not a utopian paradise created in shared fictions; it reflects the wasted moment for middle-class, suburban America that is all too real for the middle-class characters.

Coupland’s choice to have Andy, a white middle-class man, tell a true story is vastly important in this early section because it reveals the power of open communication as a means of sharing genuine anxiety that can foster community. In the chapter “Enter Hyperspace,” Andy shares a true story from his time living in Japan and working for Mr. Takamichi, “the *kacho*, the Grand Poobah of the company, an Americaphile renowned for bragging about his golf scores in Parisian brothels and for jogging through Tasmanian gaming houses with an L.A. blonde on each arm” (Coupland 55). Andy describes a female worker named Miss Ueno who “wasn’t stressed but angry...because no matter how hard she worked she was more or less stuck at her little desk forever—a cramped cluster of desks being the Japanese equivalent of the veal fattening pen” (Coupland 55). She explains to Andy that being a woman and Japanese gives her great ambition to rise and succeed in the business world, stating, “In any other country I could rise, but here I sit. I murder my ambition” (Coupland 55). It is at this moment that Mr. Takamichi singles Andy out and takes him to his office to show him his most prized possession. “It was a photo of Marilyn Monroe getting into a Checker cab, lifting up her dress, no underwear, and smooching at the photographer, presumably Mr. Takamichi in his stringer days. It was an unabashedly sexual frontal photo (get your minds out of the gutter—black as the ace of spades if you must know)

and very taunting” (Coupland 58). The commodity—a picture of Marilyn Monroe, a sex symbol and simultaneous symbol of objectification—repulses Andy. “Poor Japanese people. Poor Miss Ueno. She was right—they’re just so trapped wherever they are—frozen on this awful boring ladder” (Coupland 56). Andy cannot help but see the late-capitalist world of global economics signified in Takamichi and the oppression of Miss Ueno. One must wonder if Claire feels a connection to this story due to her position in the workforce and her failing traditional relationship with Tobias. Andy’s choice to include Miss Ueno should be viewed as him expressing concern and understanding of the obstacles women face in business and personal relationships. Andy demonstrates that he is sensitive to Miss Ueno’s, and by extension Claire’s, struggle as women in the late-twentieth century. This is yet another example of Coupland casting Andy as the model for a new masculinity to build community.

While considering Miss Ueno’s lack of mobility, Andy digresses to the realization that Generation X is a global phenomenon, the pinnacle of the novel’s early section and its central problem. While being called in to see the Marilyn Monroe picture, Andy states:

I felt like 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 the same name—an X generation—purposely hiding itself. There’s more space here to hide in—to get lost in—to use as camouflage. You’re not allowed to disappear in Japan. (56).

Hiding or camouflaging is exactly what Andy, Dag, and Claire are doing together in Palm Springs. They are hiding in the desert trying to escape the reality of being trapped in a global economic system controlled by men that oppress them and stifle their ambition, as embodied by

Miss Ueno. But more importantly, this realization demonstrates the power of sharing true stories. Instead of hiding behind fictional characters, Andy expresses what Generation X is: new human beings, given that name by people who do not understand the group, and these new human beings are hiding because they lack a place. Andy, Dag, and Claire are hiding in Palm Springs away from their families, they are hiding in “McJobs,” and they are hiding their real anxieties beyond stories. They lack a name, a purpose, and a place.

While looking at Mr. Takamichi’s photo, Andy has an epiphany about the “new human being” and the ramifications of hiding as he and his friends have been. Though together, each of the characters is lost in their struggles from the past. Instead of living for themselves and their ideals, they are beholden to a past that never worked for them, and if they continue on this path, they will end up empty like Takamichi. Andy begins to have a panic attack while “the words of Rilke, the poet, entered my brain—his notion that we are all born with a letter inside us, and that only if we are true to ourselves may we be allowed to read it before we die” (Coupland 58). Rilke’s letter is exactly what Andy believes the “new human being,” or Generation X, must find. He, Claire, and Dag are all searching for the letter without even realizing it. Takamichi has gotten his letter wrong, thinking it is his Marilyn Monroe picture, and Andy realizes the gravity of the situation. He fears that “I, myself was in peril of making some sort of similar mistake” (Coupland 58). Andy fears that a genuine identity can easily be replaced by commodities if a Generation X member like himself is not careful.

For Andy to ignore or hide his letter inside is to deny his existence. By telling this real story to his friends, Andy is trying to find his letter and is indirectly calling on his friends to do the same, demonstrating Coupland’s argument that white masculinity must evolve, becoming more sensitive to himself and those around him. Andy concludes the chapter and his story by

admitting, “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” (Coupland 59). He shares the desire for less, for minimalism, with Claire and Dag as an explanation and validation for their lives on the fringes of American culture. Andy’s story and his search for “the letter inside” embody the desire to create something new from the ashes of the past, like the 1950s failed housing development they are visiting. What exactly this new creation is for Andy is not clear at this point in the novel; in the moment, the awakening is all that he can grasp. He knows that the materialism and sexism of Mr. Takamichi, another baby boomer stand-in like Dag’s former boss, Martin, will not fulfill this new and unnamed generation.

Andy then shares a private story with readers that symbolizes his hopes and wishes for his life once he finds “the letter inside.” That this story remains private from Claire and Dag demonstrates how difficult it is to create a new masculinity. The chapter, entitled “Reconstruct,” builds visually as the three syllables sitting atop each other. Andy confesses, “I’ll tell you a secret story, a story I won’t even tell Dag and Claire today out here on our desert picnic” (Coupland 47). This “you” echoes McInerney’s narrator, again demonstrating an inability to open up and share the pain and fears within himself; thus, the reader is given a private tale. It is the story of “Edward” who “thought that he was very smart guy in some ways. He had been to school, and he knew a great number of words” and “Edward imagined that he was using these words to create his own private world—a magic and handsome room in proportion of a double cube, as defined by the British architect Adam...in this room he has spent ten endless years” (Coupland 48-49). After ten years of seclusion, Edward left his room to find “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,” and “Edward had to acknowledge that he was a country bumpkin in this Big City” (Coupland 50-51). Out of time and space, thrust into a giant city he cannot understand, Edward decides he must come to understand the city and make a place for himself.

The postmodern city Andy creates for Edward defines the very struggle Andy and his friends are finding in the world as “new human beings.” The “endless New York” is:

Shaped of lipsticks, artillery shells, wedding cakes, and folded shirt cardboards; a city built of iron, papier-mâché and playing cards; an ugly/lovely world surfaced with carbon and icicles and bougainvillea vines. Its boulevards were patternless, helter-skelter, and cuckoo. Everywhere there were booby traps of mousetraps, Triffids, and black holes. And yet in spite of this city’s transfixing madness, Edward noticed that its multitude of inhabitants moved about with ease, unconcerned that around any corner might lurk a clown-tossed marshmallow cream pie, a *Brigada Rosa* kneecapping, or a kiss from the lovely film star Sophia Loren. And directions were impossible. But 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. (Coupland 50-51)

Edward’s struggle with the postmodern city in this passage reflects Lefebvre’s argument that “the mental cannot separate itself from the social and never had been except for (ideological) representations...today, the mental and the social find themselves in practice in *conceived and lived space*” (196). The city Edward finds is one in which he must negotiate the lived space of infinite commodities that seems to have no rhyme or reason. Socially, he cannot find anyone to give him a map to help navigate the space literally or mentally. Far from failing to create

meaning, Coupland uses this moment to foster his real argument: that Generation X members must create meaning for themselves, just as Andy does throughout the novel.

By the end of the chapter, Andy's Edward decides he will "build the largest tower of them all. This silver tower would be a beacon to all voyagers who, like himself, arrived in the city late in life" (Coupland 51). At the top of the tower, Edward wants to set up a bar to sell drinks, play music, and to sell "(among other things) maps" (Coupland 51). This desire to sell maps to lost souls in the streets is an important moment in the text. Jameson contends, "The alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves" (51). Edward, and by extension Andy, desires to create a tower, a beacon, so that lost souls can find him and purchase maps with which to understand their place in the maddening chaos of the urban landscape. This act becomes one of subverting power because, as Barton and Barton point out, "ultimately, the map in particular and, by implication, visual representations in general are seen as complicit with social-control mechanisms inextricably linked to power and authority" (53). Edward and Andy desire to subvert urban oppression by selling maps to outsiders, moving them from excluded to included and empowering them to find themselves in the urban both literally and metaphorically. Thus, Coupland offers his theory directly: a sensitive white man in the late-capitalist era must be willing to open up emotionally so that he can help create new communities revolving around sharing and not competition or oppression. However, the irony must not be overlooked—this is a private fiction that Andy shares with the reader, and Coupland thus offers the reader a fiction within a fiction that is clearly Andy's real feelings he struggles to confess.

Andy, Dag, and Claire are all struggling throughout their visit to West Palm Springs Village to share painful truths, trying to create maps to navigate a postmodern urban world in

which the past offers no guidance since family and work have mutated into something less stable. Since the old maps are obsolete, it is time for them to create a new one, for themselves, as a community of peers. Andy's revelation of the "new human being" and "the letter inside" that he shares with his friends through an honest narrative is the essential step that opens the door for development and, ultimately, healing. Coupland offers this moment to demonstrate that only a new, evolved version of white masculinity fostered through open, emotional storytelling can help fight worn-out ideological paths. Andy's story offers his friends a chance to tell their stories.

Claire's fictional creation, Astronaut Buck and his forced landing in the Monroe family's "suburban backyard" (Coupland 40), is a tale of women's oppression like that she faces. Miss Monroe works from home selling products that seem to be a thinly-veiled reference to Avon and its pyramid-scheme system, while daughters Arleen, Darleen, and Serena work "McJobs" in a 7-Eleven, perfume sales, and another "small job" (Coupland 43-44), which they all lose. Buck wants to escape throughout the story and tries to con each girl into helping him off the asteroid, which will lead to the sister's death, promising to revive them once he is free and healthy. When one sister finally helps him escape, the other two discuss the situation: "'You realize,' said Arleen, 'that the whole business of Buck being able to bring us back to life was total horseshit.' 'Oh I knew *that*,' said Darleen. 'But it doesn't change the fact that I feel so jealous.' 'No, it doesn't, does it?'" (Coupland 45).

What is fascinating about Claire's story is that three female protagonists are so desperate to escape their life of menial jobs and diminished opportunities that they are willing to let a man take advantage of them and lead them to their deaths. One sister achieves the dream—she escapes through death, and her sisters are jealous. One would think Claire's fiction would be one of hope and a better life unavailable to her, but her story instead reflects the struggles Generation

X women face. Clearly, Claire fears her gender leaves her with few options. She can follow the traditional path of finding a man to build a life, which may destroy her individuality, or she can stay where she is in a “McJob” and retain her individuality. This fictitious story goes to the heart of her struggles in the novel—although, of course, she cannot say this to Andy and Dag, perhaps due to a fear of gender-blindness (two white men may not be able to relate to her fears) or perhaps because Claire is not yet willing to admit her dilemma even to herself. What is clear, though, is that Coupland’s use of storytelling demonstrates just how isolated and fearful Claire is even among her friends.

Dag’s story, the chapter “December 31, 1999,” appears much more straightforward on the surface, reflecting repressed desires and the late-capitalist world of commodity consumption as a means of existence. Also, this is the first story set closer to the present moment of the novel, allowing Coupland to demonstrate how frustrating and isolating homosexual identity is beyond 1991, near the end of the millennium. Dag confesses, “I’ve got an end of the world story,” to which Andy states, “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 a deadpan voice” (Coupland 62). The story involves two male friends in a supermarket when a bomb is dropped ending the world, a quintessential Generation X fear at the end of the Cold War. While everyone enters a frenzy and steals food or runs away to a “parking lot [that] is now about as civilized as a theme park’s bumper cars” (Coupland 64), a fat man chooses to pay for his groceries to keep his dignity intact. As the destruction begins, “Your best friend cranes his neck, lurching over to where you lie, and kisses you on the mouth, after which he says to you, ‘I’ve always wanted to do that,’” to which Dag concludes: “And that’s that. In the silent rush of hot wind, like the opening of a trillion oven doors that you’ve been imagining since you were six,

it's all over: kind of scary, kind of sexy, and tainted by regret. A lot like life, wouldn't you say?" (Coupland 64).

Dag's story points to his anger and fear of alienation from the trappings of global capitalism, which Andy reports when Dag quit his job. Dag's protagonist and his friend are trapped in a supermarket of commodities, with people buying everywhere as if this is their life, to consume. When "the end" comes, a common fear for Generation X, being trapped in this space reflects being trapped in a consumer-driven culture. The people are not home with loved ones or in a park enjoying the world; they are in a monument to consumerism, and the final moment is a man kissing his male friend, a homoerotic moment strongly symbolizing repression. Andy informs us that "Dag says he's a lesbian trapped inside a man's body" (Coupland 17) early in the novel. This gesture towards homosexuality adds complexity to Dag's story because the climax is a man kissing his male best friend when facing the end of the world—only with the world about to end can one friend be open with the other and express his true feelings. Like Claire, Dag cannot confess his feelings, sexual or otherwise, to his two friends. He must hide behind his story because he fears judgment from Andy and Claire and/or may not be willing to admit this reality to himself.²

² It is only late in the novel, when Dag is facing potential jail time for the car he accidentally destroyed by fire and after Andy shares a true story from his past, that Dag asks Andy to lean into him: "I comply, whereupon he kisses me, triggering films in my mind of liquefied supermarket ceilings cascading upward towards heaven" (Coupland 168). Dag states, "There, I've always wanted to do that" (Coupland 168). However, in this earlier moment of fictional storytelling, Dag is not ready and must use his story to help deal with feelings on some

By focusing on the narratives of Texlahoma, it becomes clear that the three characters are coming to terms with the postmodern world they inhabit together. The moment they live in is a terrifying space filled with uncertainty and anxiety. The map they have been given, based on past ideologies, no longer applies—while it is all-too-familiar and safe, it is no guide to the future. While the void of West Palm Springs Village should be something that could consume and destroy the characters, Coupland uses the space to create narratives that not only reflect their realistic struggles but also bond them in the beginnings of a new and sensitive community, while they are still afraid to open up completely with each other and themselves. Thus, Greenberg’s “blank, guideless space” no longer imposes an unemotional worldview on characters as it did for Ellis and McNerney. The blank space becomes an empty page where Coupland’s characters begin to share the fears and anxieties that haunt and oppress them.

Opening Up by the Communal Pool: “Purchased Experiences Don’t Count”

While “Texlahoma” introduces fictional stories to express “the letter inside” for the “new human being,” Coupland’s chapter “Purchased Experiences Don’t Count” expounds on the power of telling biographical stories like Andy’s from Japan. Unlike previous section’s failed-suburb setting in which the three main characters are alone, this chapter is set “in the demilitarized zone of the kidney-shaped swimming pool central to the bungalows” (Coupland 87). Andy is referring to the “battle” taking place between Dag and Claire over spilled “radioactive” material, a description essential to understanding that the characters are in a shared space with friends Tobias and—most importantly—Elvissa, who Coupland uses to drive the next

level while protecting the deeper, more complex reality in which white masculinity cannot or must not be defined through bisexuality or homosexuality.

two major chapters. Here in their “home” setting, the characters begin to open to each other, finally, emerging from behind their masks of pain and fear. Adler and McAdams help illuminate Coupland’s second mode of storytelling, describing how “individuals showing high stages of ego development but low levels of well-being” actually “see themselves as deep, complex people who have been emotionally down for a long time,” so their stories “begin by stretching far into their past, but without identifying a particular moment when their struggles began” because “for these individuals, life’s problems have existed for so long that they have become routine, a part of their everyday lives” (Adler and McAdams 190). Their confessions of pain and sorrow from the past are the second step in the powerful storytelling Coupland relies upon to create sensitive, emotionally open characters trying to find a more hopeful future.

Elvissa is a minor but complicated character. It is difficult to grasp her and her motives. Andy explains, “Her real name is Catherine. *Elvissa* was my creation, a name that stuck from the very first time I ever used it (much to her pleasure) when Claire brought her home months ago” (Coupland 88). Thus, “Elvissa” is a fictional character of Andy’s creation. He explains, “Claire and Elvissa share a common denominator—both are headstrong, both have a healthy curiosity, but most important, both left their old lives behind them and set forth to make new lives for themselves in the name of adventure” (Coupland 88). Andy’s description sounds positive and in line with the “new human being” motif until he offers further insight. Andy feels like Elvissa possesses “information and secrets being withheld from you” (Coupland 88), although this, too, resembles the other characters. “As for how Elvissa makes her living, none of us are quite sure, and none of us are sure we want to even *know*. She is living proof of Claire’s theory that anyone who lives in a resort town under the age of thirty is on the make” (Coupland 89). Thus, putting together Andy’s descriptions, Elvissa is a mysterious person who seems untrustworthy,

potentially reflecting more normative views of white masculine sexism that Coupland feels compelled to push his characters beyond.

It is noteworthy that Elvissa and not Andy is the driving force pushing the characters to share biographical stories instead of fictional ones, an act confirming the need for white men to share power. While focusing on Tobias, Elvissa demands:

I want you to tell me something first: after you're dead and buried and floating around whatever place we go to, what's going to be your best memory of earth?

What one moment for you defines what it's like to be alive on this planet.

What's your *takeaway*?

Fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on, like white water rafting or elephant rides in Thailand don't count. I want to hear some small moment from your life that *proves you're really alive.*" (Coupland 91) [italics in original]

Elvissa's statement has clear ramifications: money does not create or buy identity. She is seeking a real, authentic moment that proves a person is "alive" or genuine, demanding not only authenticity itself but also authenticity shared with the group. Fascinatingly, Coupland gives a white woman the power in the novel to move the characters beyond their fictions. Andy, and by extension Coupland, demonstrates that giving power to a woman can positively affect members of their community. That Andy cites Elvissa as the locus of this moment furthers the argument that sharing and sensitivity beyond white masculine power is essential for new, necessary forms of community. Thus, both author and protagonist cede power, which fosters the community.

By giving the power of first-person narration to Elvissa, Andy and Coupland signal the importance of her story. Though it is the longest and shared last, Elvissa's story about Curtis

serves to crystalize all of the others. It is a true tale of innocence lost in the horrors of the adult world that all of the characters struggle to accept, focusing on the desire to turn back time to the illusion of innocence before it is shattered by the reality of adulthood. Turning to her early teen years, her first love and the loss of her virginity are romanticized against the current reality of “a few months ago” when Elvissa and Curtis were reunited (Coupland 98). Turning to the past, Elvissa shares that after moving to Tallahassee, Florida, living in a “subdivision...a development that somehow never got fully built,” Curtis and her brother would play “war inside the tract houses that had been reclaimed by palm trees and mangroves and small animals that had started to make their homes there, too” (Coupland 97). While focusing on her youth, Elvissa indirectly paints a picture of failing economies and empty subdivisions, alluding to the economic problems that began during Generation X members’ childhood and that were reflected in West Palm Springs Village. That subdivisions depicted by Coupland are failed only deepens the notion of failed families because these subdivisions were where these families were supposed to thrive. Among the wasted buildings, “a decaying master bedroom deep within the Forgotten Subdivision was our mobile hospital” (Coupland 98) and the site where she lost her virginity to Curtis before his family moved away. He was never heard from again until recently.

The recent meeting swells with tragedy and loss, as Elvissa continues that Curtis tells his true story to her; he has become a man that is scarred from “fighting for pay in wars down there” somewhere in Central America (Coupland 101). As Elvissa astutely states, “This was obviously not the same little boy from Tallahassee” (Coupland 100). After Curtis passes out, Elvissa explains her attempt to heal her broken former lover by climbing onto his body and sharing her strength. She explains:

And I tried to empty the contents of my soul into his. I imagined my strength—my soul— was a white laser beam shooting from my heart into his, like those light pulses in glass wires that can pump a million books to the moon in one second. This beam was cutting through his chest like a beam of cutting through a sheet of steel. Curtis could take or leave this strength that he obviously lacked—but I just wanted it to be there in reserve. I would give my *life* for that man, and all I was able to donate that night was whatever remained of my youth. No regrets. (Coupland 103)

Suddenly, Elvissa transcends Andy's early skepticism of her. The authentic story she offers to the group demonstrates not only the depths of her pain but also the extreme compassion she feels for another human being's suffering. Looking beyond her strange haircut and clothes and her shady job, she exists as a full person with depth and compassion. Thus, she becomes the perfect example of the open, emotional storyteller that Coupland believes Andy and other white men should be to unify with the "Others" who are not threats to their power but individuals who can help exorcise emotional demons from the past that haunt the present.

While the other characters do not have stories so full of tragedy, their confessions are loaded with longing for a past that can never be reclaimed. The characters begin to share actual memories instead of the fictional characters and narratives they had been typically using to explain their inner struggles. Claire shares a moment from age twelve after her parents' divorce when snow began to fall while she walked with her brother (Coupland 93-94). Dag shares a memory of getting gas with his father only to have it spill all over him; his father did not yell at him, and they instead shared a moment (Coupland 94). Andy tells the story of his nine family members sharing a breakfast without fighting, realizing, "I knew even then that this was the only such morning our family would ever be given—a morning where we would all be normal and

kind to each other and know that we liked each other without any strings attached—and that soon enough (and we did) we would all become batty and distant the way families invariably do as they get along in years” (95). Even the outsider of the group, Tobias, shares the story of the short-wave radio he shared with his father that led to his parents dancing as he watched: “I had my suddenly young parents all to myself—they and this faint music that sounded like heaven” (95-96).

Common to all these biographical stories of “authentic” moments is the presence of family. The characters all open to reveal that their dearest moments are memories of their families. The stories illustrate examples of familial bonds offering solace and connection. The isolation that dominates the characters’ current lives fades for the briefest of moments in these reflections, and we see the complexity, ambivalence, and power of sharing personal stories. Though the novel’s characters are often repulsed and let down by family and parents, they cling to moments with them as their most sacred memories. Much of their criticisms echo the early-Generation X indictments leveled by Ellis and McInerney, but instead of dealing with their loss in isolation and unable to share their pain, Coupland’s characters, using first-person narration, begin bonding and finding connection in their families’ failings. In moments of sharing, their desperate need to break free from the residual dominant ideologies of family that have failed, they are unwittingly creating their own emergent community through shared stories that could not be purchased, only lived. The key to this creation is a white male narrator willing to both share power with others and open up himself to bond with his peers.

Going Forward in Reverse: The Ghost of Christmas Past

After the revelations in the ruined 1950s suburb and the biographical stories shared at Elvissa’s behest, one would think Coupland’s characters would be ready to transcend the

emotional boundaries trapping them. Yet, ideology is tricky—if it is doing its job, people do not know it exists. In this vein, Andy and Claire must return home for the holidays and engage their past to confront their struggles with the ideological construction of the nuclear family. For Andy, the tension exists in what he needs from “family,” staged in the novel by comparing his actual family and the created community with Claire and Dag. Claire’s return home signals a confrontation between what she has learned is an unfulfilling relationship with men and her bonds with Dag and Andy. Dag, who disappeared into the desert after the picnic, announces he is not attending Christmas with his family and he is staying in the desert, where he belongs. Dag has always been the more aggressive character, fighting his Boomer boss before quitting and committing random acts of vandalism against Boomers in the city, and he appears to be beyond the trappings of the “family” ideology and moving towards creating community before Andy and Claire. As Andy notes, “I ask if Dag is going to go visit his somewhat estranged parents in Toronto this Christmas. ‘Spare me, Andrew. *This* funster’s having a cactus Christmas. Look,’ he says, changing the subject, ‘—*chase that dust bunny*’” (Coupland 85) [italics in original]. While it may seem like avoidance or a joke, I contend that Dag’s choice to remain in the desert city takes him away from the trappings of family ideologies that no longer work. Andy and Claire are not there yet and must return to the Christmas homes of their past to understand they require new and meaningful connections.

Continuing their conversation, Andy confesses to Dag his dread of returning home. “You should see my parents’ place, Dag. It’s like a museum of fifteen years ago. Nothing ever changes there; they’re terrified of the future. Have you ever wanted to set your parents’ house on fire just to get them out of their rut? Just so they had *some* change in their lives?” (Coupland 85). Andy’s fault lies in his expectations. He wants to change his parents, and he also wants to

change the ideological conception of “family.” However, he has yet to realize the only changes he can make are to his living situation and the people he surrounds himself with in that private space. Dag tries to articulate his position on family by explaining to Andy: “Eat them [parents]. Accept them as part of getting you here, and get on with life. Write them off as a business expense” (Coupland 85). The layers of meaning in this passage are deep. First, Coupland has shifted the reoccurring Generation X literature motif of cannibalism from Ellis and aligns more with McInerney. Instead of parents consuming children, Dag suggests the opposite: consume parents, take what “nutrients” can be absorbed, and release the rest as waste. Beyond that, the use of “business expense” exposes the family’s position in the late-capitalist era as another commodity that is simply part of a transaction. Dag may seem cynical, but his indictment rings true for the novel’s characters. Andy and Claire have not caught up yet.

An important moment encapsulating their struggles with the past and being a “new human being” occurs on Christmas Day, when Andy creates the candle scene in an attempt to possess an authentic moment that cannot be purchased, per Elvissa’s request. “I’ve been placing candles on every flat surface available...candles are everywhere” (Coupland 145). Andy is attempting to be the open, emotionally present white man he has learned through his storytelling with his peer group. This creation is a “surprise” he wants to share with the three immediate family members (his parents and youngest brother) that are present to celebrate. Once the family comes to see the creation, there is a moment of shared beauty. His mother is stunned and proclaims, “Oh, *my*...It’s like a dream everyone gets sometimes—the one where you’re in your house and you suddenly discover a new room that you never knew was there...” (Coupland 146-47). His father declares, “It’s like Paris...” (Coupland 146). Tyler, the youngest Generation X member raised on MTV, states, “It’s a video, Andy...a total *video*” (Coupland 147). For an

instant, Andy has used the candles to create a scene like Elvissa demanded, a moment that proves a person is alive—it cannot be bought and must be lived. Before the beauty can truly be experienced, though, Andy declares, “But there is a problem. Later on life reverts to normal. The candles slowly snuff themselves out and normal morning life resumes” (Coupland 147). Clearly, just like the candles illuminating the moment Andy sought to create, it must fade. The genuine cannot last no matter how much Andy tries to hold onto it, and the past can neither be resurrected nor relived. Moments are fleeting no matter how much Andy has tried to recapture the past, and he confesses, “I get this feeling—It is a feeling that our emotions, while wonderful, are transpiring in a vacuum, and I think it boils down to the fact we’re middle class” where “history will ignore you,” “history can never champion your causes,” and “history will never feel sorry for you” (Coupland 147). He ends in the epiphany that all memory, “any small moments of intense, flaring beauty such as this morning’s will be utterly forgotten, dissolved by time like a super-8 film left out in the rain” (Coupland 147). What Andy finds beautiful and meaningful is not what his middle-class family desires. His search for authenticity is impeded by the reality that his family cannot experience the moment as he does. While he wants a moment that can last forever or, like Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” become a guidepost for the future, his family sees no potential or are unable to embrace it. Andy’s attempt at authenticity with his family is futile. His openness and desire to share his internal world are thwarted by his family, who cannot relate to his needs.

Claire’s confrontation with the past centers on her return home to New York to see her mother for Christmas and to chase Tobias. It is important to note that Claire’s mother has had several divorces and is currently with her “new husband Armand” who “is just loaded” (Coupland 153). Pursuing a relationship with Tobias is nothing more than a carbon copy of her

mother's relationships because, as she confesses over the phone to Andy, "We both knew there was nothing" and it was "so futile pretending there was" (Coupland 156). The awareness she finds is quite important because it signals that Claire refuses to follow the traditional path learned from her mother. Instead of engaging in relationships with men simply to not be alone, Claire begins to understand that she wants authenticity in her love life. The realization culminates when Claire finds Elvissa's unique nail polish in Tobias's apartment, revealing a secret affair. Claire relays to Andy her confession to Tobias that she is going to the desert to search for water and "I'll find someone else out there dowsing for water, too. And I don't know who that someone will be, but *that's* who I am going to fall in love with. Someone who's dowsing for water, just like me" (Coupland 158) [italics in original]. Instead of seeking out doomed relationships like her mother, Claire realizes she will seek a partner that truly understands her and has similar goals and needs. Unfettered from the past ideology that a woman must settle to fulfill her role in the nuclear family, Claire has an epiphany, as she tells Andy: "I couldn't believe what a brain-dead glutton I'd been—for sex, for humiliation, for pseudodrama...And I planned right there never to repeat this sort of experience again" (Coupland 160). That Claire condemns her own desires as those of a "glutton" speaks to the characters' anxiety that the postmodern world has made them empty consumers even in terms of relationships. When Claire chooses to walk away from her mother's path, which leads only to men like Tobias, she embraces a new internal emotional sincerity. Moreover, she confesses this to Andy because she knows he is a sympathetic man able to empathize with her awakening.

It is notable that both Andy and Claire find awakenings connected to their mothers upon their return home. Claire realizes she desires to become a new woman, unbound to the past. For Andy, his realization that he cannot find true connection with his family is embodied in his

mother's confession that for each of her children, "I just had to give up caring what any of you do with your lives. I hope you don't mind, but it's made my life *that much* easier" (Coupland 139). What is left for Andy to hold onto? Late in the night on Christmas Eve, Andy confesses:

This was not a good idea coming home for Christmas. I'm too old. Years ago coming back from schools on trips, I always expected some sort of new perspective or fresh insight about the family on returning. That doesn't happen any more—the days of revelation about my parents, at least, are over. I'm left with two nice people mind you, more than most people get, but it's time to move on, I think we'd all appreciate that.

(Coupland 144)

The irony of this passage is palpable. Andy has indeed attained a revelation during his visit to the past, but it is that he has no need for the strong connection he once yearned for with his parents or siblings. The family are relics hanging in the "museum of fifteen years ago," representing an ideology that no longer works. Andy declares after Christmas, "Time to escape. I want my real life back with all of its funny smells, pockets of loneliness, and long, clear car rides. I want my friends and my dopey job dispensing cocktails to leftovers" (Coupland 149). Andy wants the community built on storytelling in which he and his friends no longer need to hide their fears and desires. He wants to become the new white man Coupland is creating throughout his text.

Once all of these dichotomies are exposed by Christmas, it is time for the group to create their own "family." Through their final act of storytelling with one another, Andy and Claire are finally free from the past. Adler and McAdams argue, "At more advanced stages of ego development, people espouse greater tolerance for ambiguity and the complexity of human interactions, as they come to understand themselves and the world around them in less egocentric, less conventional, and more differentiated terms" (182). Through storytelling,

Coupland's characters learn to embrace the ambiguity and complexity of their lives. Instead of hiding their dissatisfaction and anxiety, they share their pain with one another and thus are able to cope with the frustrations in healthy ways. Moreover, they have created sympathetic networks of feeling. The characters finally realize that they are beyond the bounds of a culture they do not understand and that they are not Tobias, and maybe not Elvissa. Instead, they are something else; they are the "X," and they must set out together to explore and create a definition for that together. Andy, the white male leader of the group, becomes the sensitive man in touch with his feelings and the beauty of diversity so that his group can create a new beginning at the turn of the millennium.

New Year's Day: The Birth of a Sympathetic Community

The chapter "Await Lighting" begins with Andy stating, "New Years Day. I can already smell the methane of Mexico, a stone's throw away, while I bake in Calexico, California traffic jam, waiting to cross the border while embroiled in wavering emphysemic mirages of diesel spew" (Coupland 169). The border to Mexico is far more than a simple geographical demarcation just like New Year's Day on January 1, 2000 is more than a simple chronological boundary. These "borders" represent the literal and metaphorical poison of traffic jams and pollution and the ideological oppression exemplified in a future world, the new millennium, Coupland creates. In the following chapter, Andy describes Calexico as a place of life among the lifeless void of the desert. "After the harsh barrenness of the desert, this region's startling fecundity—its numberless fields of sheep and spinach and dalmation-skinned cows—feels biologically surreal. *Everything* secretes food here" (Coupland 175) [italics in original]. This agrarian wonderland represents the future Andy, Dag, and Claire run towards outside of late-

capitalist urban America, in a future Coupland longs to have exist. It is Dag who plants the first seeds of the dream.

Late in Part Two, Dag comes back from his disappearance in the desert with a new confession to share with his peers. “I want to own a hotel down in Baja California. And I think I’m closer than you think to actually doing so” (Coupland 116). At first, this seems like nothing more than a “pipe dream” or even a method to escape “McJobs” and embrace ownership of a business and, by extension, workers—making one think that Dag is finally selling out. However, Dag explains his visions for Andy:

I want to open a place down in San Felipe. It’s on the east side of the Baja needles. It’s a tiny shrimping village surround by nothing but sand, abandoned uranium mines, and pelicans. I’d open up a small place for **friends and eccentrics** [emphasis added], and for staff I’d only hire elderly Mexican women and stunningly beautiful surfer and hippie type boys and girls who have had their brains swiss-cheesed from too much dope.

There’d be a bar there, where everyone staples their business cards and money to the walls and ceiling, and the only light would be from ten watt bulbs hidden behind cactus skeletons on the ceiling. We’d spend nights washing zinc salves from each other’s noses, drinking rum drinks, and telling stories. People who told good stories could stay for free.

You wouldn’t be allowed to use the bathroom unless you felt-penned a funny joke on the wall. And all the rooms would be knotty pine wood, and as a souvenir, everyone would receive just a little bar of soap. (Coupland 116)

While Dag’s descriptive dream is reminiscent of the fictional stories told throughout the novel, it represents a clear desire to flee the literal bounds of the urban and also its ideologies. That people could barter for their stay with stories, which are of actual value to Dag, points to a move beyond

late capitalism. His desire to populate this hotel with “friends and eccentrics” suggests the sympathetic community built on emotional storytelling as well.

Through a note written by both Claire and Dag and an answering machine message, the plan is revealed to Andy. Claire writes, “we’re off to san felipe! mexico beckons. dag and I talked over the holidays and he convinced me now’s the time, so we’re going to buy a little hotel...why not join us? I mean, what else were we going to do?” (Coupland 170). Claire’s message signals the characters’ new beginning. First, they must go together; second, what other options do they have? They have no place in urban America or in past notions of family. It is time to move on and start their lives together as “new human beings” with a “family business.” Andy immediately envisions their new lives: “Once I cross the border, for example, automobile models will mysteriously end around the decidedly Texlahoman year of 1974, the years after which engine technologies became overcomplex and nontinkerable—*uncannibalizable*...where my—*our*—hotel may some day exist” in San Felipe (171). Their collective vision of a place where people can cannibalize cars is a major indictment of the late-capitalist urban moment the novel struggles against. No longer do they want to be individuals struggling like Tobias to win a game or to be prevented from repairing cars because automotive companies made them too complex for a person to work on alone with his or her own ingenuity. The characters are designing community out of bounds, born in the void of the desert free from the urban entrapments, where their utopian ideals have a chance to grow outside the postmodern void of urban clutter and commodity. This new reality comes with the need for Andy to move beyond the past and also to give up control. As a white man, he slips into old modes of thinking by claiming ownership of the hotel with the singular possessive “my” only to correct himself with the plural possessive “our.” This moment should be read closely because it demonstrates the core

of my argument about Coupland's narrator. Andy no longer wants to be bound to the dominant figure of a white man who fears difference as a threat to his power. Instead, Andy corrects himself and extends communal power to the group, which includes a woman and a bisexual or gay man. Andy becomes the very example Coupland argues for the new white man at the turn of the millennium: open with his emotions so that he can build a new, communal life of shared emotions, experiences, and property.

To demonstrate his new understanding, Coupland positions Andy in a strange scene in which he must cede control of his emotions and pain to the embrace of a collective. Driving to his new family, Andy witnesses a mushroom cloud that makes him fear the end of the world since he has not seen the source of the smoke (farmers burning their fields). Pulling over and getting out of his car on the side of the road, he sees the source of smoke and is then joined by “a dozen or so mentally retarded young teenagers, male and female, gregarious and noisy, in high spirits and good moods with an assortment of flailing limbs and happy shouts of ‘hello!’ to me” (Coupland 177). Andy is then attacked by an Egret that slashes his head open. “I bowed down on my knees before [one of the teenagers] while she inspected my talon cut, hitting it gently with an optimistic and healing staccato caress—it was the faith-healing gesture of a child consoling a doll that had been dropped” (Coupland 178-79). This strange scene is a progression beyond the ending of *Bright Lights, Big City*, in which the nameless narrator drops to his knees and trades sunglasses for bread after finally admitting his life was devastated by the death of his mother. While he realizes he must learn everything alone to develop the faith of the sacrament, Andy kneels before a girl with developmental disabilities as she tries to faith-heal him. It is at this moment the final scene of the novel takes place. Andy states:

Then, from behind me I felt another pair of hands as one of her friends joined in. Then another pair. Suddenly I was dog-piled by an instant family, in the adoring, healing, uncritical embrace, each member wanting to show their affection more than the other. They began to hug me—too hard—as though I *were* a doll, unaware of the strength they exerted. I was being winded—crushed—pinched and trampled.

The man with the beard came over to yank them away. But how could I explain to him, this well-intentioned gentleman, that all this discomfort, no this *pain*, I was experiencing was no problem at all, that in fact, this crush of love was unlike anything I had ever known (Coupland 179).

This scene is important because Andy immediately sees these strangers as family, a family not made of blood but of humanity. The developmentally disabled teenagers, unbound to the ideologies of a world that might make them keep away from a wounded stranger, reach out to comfort and heal the stranger's pain. Their compassion allows them to see someone hurt and in need of help without worrying how this help would be received or if it would be proper. This is the community that Andy has always sought but could not find among his large traditional family. Andrew Tate argues, "The ending returns to the sense of revelation that informs the novels opening narrative but replaces the isolation of observing an eclipse with a new sense of inclusion in a wider world of human activity" (331). I contend that to achieve this "inclusion," Andy must become a sensitive white man unafraid to express his emotional needs and desires. Andy does not have to suffer alone or barter for his sustenance like McInerney's narrator does. Andy accepts this embrace because he is emotionally available to receive affection from strangers. That this happens as he is on his way to Claire and Dag, his new community, is a positive sign in an often-bleak novel. Together, the "new human beings" can try to find "the

letter inside” and make their lives their own if they openly communicate their anxieties and hopes with a group of equals.

Coupland’s Contribution

I argue that moving out of the isolation and horror of McNerney’s and Ellis’s white male narrators, Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* and his first-person narrator Andy should be read as a Generation X novel exposing the same concerns as his predecessors but offering a solution to these complaints. While the early Generation X authors are bound to a postmodern meaninglessness represented in Los Angeles and New York City with no hope for connection or community, Coupland seems to offer a blueprint for addressing problems. A sensitive, emotionally mature white male narrator must get away from the larger cities and find a place, the desert, that is devoid of cultural artifacts of control. In this space, it is possible to think more freely, dream, and create one’s own view of the world. Once a person can do this, he needs to find others who share the same losses in terms of family and work and who also want to think and create. Using emotionally honest stories, he can unite with these people over the stories of loss and hope, creating fictions and finally exposing truths that are almost like the shared experiences of a biological family. Out of these bonds, they can hold fast to one another and let go of the past. Coupland’s characters do not hold the anger and rage that dominates the early Generation X protagonists. They understand that being trapped in the past, in outdated ideologies, will not and cannot be a path forward. The myth of the nuclear family is dead and evolving into an emergent ideology of an egalitarian community, a path that subsequent writers grapple with in their novels. Coupland’s novel is much like his characters, who tell stories to exorcise their demons or communicate their hopes. As Andy confesses, “We know that is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert—to tell stories and to make

our own lives worthwhile in the process” (Coupland 8). By using Andy as the model for a new white masculinity, Coupland postulates that white men do not need to be threatened by their emotions or the emotional needs of the “Other.” In fact, by connecting with more diverse people, they may just be able to find themselves and a community that understands them.

CHAPTER 4

PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*: MASCULINE RAGE AS RESIDUAL IDEOLOGY

Early in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, the nameless narrator goes to see his doctor because of his insomnia. "Insomnia," says the narrator, echoing the language of the doctor, "is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong. Listen to your body" (19). In part, the doctor's advice is sound: the narrator clearly has something "actually wrong" (19), manifesting as insomnia. However, the doctor's insistence that the narrator's insomnia is really a physical problem negates the narrator's emotional and psychological suffering. What is staged here is, then, a fundamental miscommunication, as the narrator explains: "My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on Tuesday night. See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone diseases. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by" (19). While the doctor is trying to offer the narrator perspective on his struggle with insomnia, the narrator takes the advice as a literal indictment of his suffering. This scene is a turning point in the novel because it underlines Palahniuk's negation of communication and feeling for the male characters. Palahniuk's novel suggests that the narrator needs to locate "something larger" that is plaguing him, as the doctor suggests. Yet, at the same time, the novel makes clear the doctor is wrong because the narrator is experiencing "real pain" that cannot be healed by observing the more medically defined suffering of others. The struggle between the narrator's suffering and his faith in the doctor's prescription demonstrates a central conflict Palahniuk's novel offers between one's emotional and physical suffering. By focusing on characters, I argue that styles of masculinity privileging physical pain while negating emotional pain are doomed to fail as demonstrated the novel *Fight Club* and as literary representations of Generation X masculinity, in general.

In suggesting that *Fight Club* serves as a critique of a particular style of masculinity—a style of masculinity which is, according to the novel, a response to the socio-economic conditions faced by Generation X men, I weigh in on the question of whether we should read *Fight Club* as “conservative” or “progressive” in effect (if not intent). There is evidence that a conservative reading is possible, a reading in which the reader sees the narrator and Tyler Durden as victims of their cultural and economic “moment” trying to reclaim an identity that has been stripped from them. However, the novel is more complex, with more at stake than simply men trying to reclaim a former “glory” no longer accessible to them. In fact, *Fight Club* is a direct criticism of a retrospective masculinity no longer viable in the changing economic and cultural politics of the 1990s. Economically, the loss of blue-collar jobs due to outsourcing and downsizing denied men the traditional masculinity that the narrator and Tyler both strive to achieve. Culturally, the reign of white masculinity was beginning to crack as the expansion of multiculturalism began to take hold in the late twentieth century. Therefore, I read Palahniuk’s novel as a progressive attack on outdated notions of masculinity. Instead of celebrating characters relying on physical prowess to achieve a stable identity within the socio-political moment, the novel demonstrates that such attitudes are doomed to fail for the characters, and for Generation X readers. Thus, *Fight Club* is a direct challenge to failed notions of patriarchal masculinity and its dominance.

This line of argument is not new. Indeed, scholarship on the novel often focuses on the novel’s representation of masculinity and particularly on the relationship between the novel’s representation of masculinity and cultural and economic developments, specifically in terms of the ramifications for gender identity and politics in the late twentieth century. For some critics, the novel depicts oppressed white men struggling to free themselves from the economic and

cultural era; these critics tend to focus more on the characters instead of the novel as a whole. Alex Tuss views Tyler Durden as a “spokesman for White Rage and the disenfranchised male” during the “boom era of the 1990s” (94). Thus, Tyler Durden represents a critique of the cultural era of his creation, when white men began to feel the crunch of outsourcing and downsizing. Olivia Burgess contends that in the novel, “the body becomes a potential site for exploring differences and creates both an alternative to and critique of the distorted narrative of dominant society...creating a revolutionary utopia where bodies are liberated—not silenced—through violence and pain” (265, 268). This focus on the body, again, privileges the characters in the novel as representations of oppression that must physically fight for liberation, which downplays the failure of the novel’s violent characters. Justin Garrison reads the novel as “a powerful aesthetic expression of metaphysical rebellion” in which “the desire to save the world that is at the heart of metaphysical rebellion imparts the belief that all things are permissible for those who carry the fire of resistance, including murder” (81, 94). This argument suggests a conservative reading of the novel and its characters, with the violent ends justifying the means in terms of escaping oppression. Each scholar’s cultural work offers readings that attempt to understand and justify the violent actions of desperate men feeling the weight of their era, possibly benefitting the culture at large, as well.

Yet, for other scholars, the novel uses characters to represent a negative regression into outdated examples of masculinity. Vafa and Talif argue that in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk “depicts such nostalgic efforts through hypermasculine reactions like violence so that the narrator can empower his emasculated sense of manhood” (449), which is a clear criticism of the characters and their motives; this suggests *Fight Club* is a progressive novel attacking this regression view. This nostalgia specifically represents a desire to return to the Fordism (mass production and mass

consumption), which Mathias Nilges contends, “becomes not merely the idealized locus of pleasurable subjectivity as a result of its Oedipal structure but the locus of masculinity” (61). For these scholars, the characters present a type of delusional motivation in seeking an identity that is no longer possible, therefore portraying the novel as critical of the characters’ actions. I argue that Palahniuk’s novel is more in line with the second group of critics arguing the cultural work of the novel is to directly criticize the characters’ violent masculinity, representative of early-twentieth-century patriarchy in which the physical is the locus of reality, as a negative example of gender identity for Generation X that should not be celebrated and is not celebrated in the novel. Quite the contrary: *Fight Club* is a direct attack on these failed common-sense notions of masculinity.

In fact, *Fight Club* performs complementary cultural work with Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* despite their tonal differences. Coupland’s characters develop throughout *Generation X*, slowly using emotionally open storytelling as a basis to create genuine connections. Their movement to emotionally driven personal narratives creates the bonds for a new community hoping to foster meaning among very different people. Palahniuk’s novel is both a staging and takedown of what could be called an emotionlessness or blasé affective posture assumed by the disaffected Gen X-er, using a delusional first-person narration to demonstrate the impossibility of healthy masculine community built on a lack of sympathy and inequality. Palahniuk’s nameless narrator is emotionless from the beginning of the novel; he connects with no one except Tyler, an extension of himself offering wish fulfillment for his outdated masculine desire for power and prestige. This chapter focuses on Palahniuk’s novel as a progressive critique of selfish, emotionally empty men who long to return to the early-twentieth-century status in which white masculinity equaled superiority. Thus, *Fight Club* is an

extension of *Generation X* because the narrator/Tyler Durden becomes the antithesis of *Generation X*'s Andy, who uses storytelling to unite with characters unlike himself. In fact, Dag appears to be a foreshadowing of Durden as a white man that longs to create his own support group. But where Dag has sincere connections with Andy and Claire allowing the creation of “club Mex”, Tyler recoils from shared experiences and creates a parody support group comprised of helpless helpers to further his own agenda. Moreover, Palahniuk's characters demonstrate that Generation X men, privileging the physical while negating the emotional, determined to reclaim their illusion of power, are doomed to fail because they rely on violence, coercion, and exploitation instead of sympathetic networks of genuine connection with their peers.

Masculinity and Support Groups: Denying Emotional Connections

Taking the misinterpreted advice from his doctor, *Fight Club*'s nameless narrator begins frequenting support groups in an effort to gain perspective on his physical pain. Beginning with support groups allows Palahniuk to confront the doomed masculinity that privileges the physical over the emotional because the narrator does not engage honestly with the group members, who are actually suffering from actual physical illnesses. At the support group, “Remaining Men Together, the testicular cancer support group” (Palahniuk 18), the narrator begins a “relationship” with Bob. Their doomed relationship yields payoffs for my reading because the two men represent a form of masculinity more concerned with their physical limitations than their emotional pain. The narrator introduces Bob by explaining that, “every week for two years,” they connect physically when “Bob wraps his arms around me, and I cry” (Palahniuk 17). It would seem that the narrator is getting in touch with his emotional suffering and learning to communicate his pain in a manner reflective of Coupland's characters, who learn to share their grief—thus continuing the argument that sympathetic connections are the way forward for

Generation X men. However, the narrator and Bob's connection is almost purely physical; Bob hugs the narrator so that he can cry in Bob's arms. This introduction to their relationship may seem trivial, but I contend it foreshadows the degree to which both men ultimately privilege the physical body over emotional sincerity. Moreover, the lack of emotional connection is overt because the narrator is lying to Bob, and everyone at the support group, about his identity. Callously, the narrator admits that the relationship with Bob is based on a lie; Bob "loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too" (Palahniuk 17). That their false relationship is built around the loss of testicles speaks to their anxiety that manhood is physical—simply put, that if a man does not possess testicles, he is not a man. Neither man can conceive of a world in which masculinity is emotional and sincere. Instead, for the two men, manhood is physically possessing complete genitalia. Since the narrator still possesses his, he must lie to Bob so that they can share their physical suffering through physical embrace. This lie is essential to understanding *Fight Club* because the narrator's duplicity is a prime example of selfish masculinity that privileges its own needs over the needs of others, including other men.

Palahniuk further indicts failed masculinity celebrating the physical by focusing on Bob and his representation of traditional masculinity, which the narrator fetishizes. The narrator echoes Bob's explanation that his testicular cancer results from abusing steroids like "Dianabol" and "the racehorse steroid, Winstrol," which made him "totally shredded with body fat down to around two percent" (Palahniuk 21). For both men, manhood is celebrated here by its corporeal representation. "Shredded" is a violent description of a body removed of all fat, projecting pure muscle; muscle signifies strength, and a man with nothing but muscle is hypermasculine. But Bob is no longer that man, possessing "bitch tits" from "shooting too much testosterone" (Palahniuk 21). Without his shredded physique or testicles, and now possessing "bitch tits," Bob

no longer represents the physical embodiment of manhood that Palahniuk's narrator associates with traditional masculinity. Yet, there is more to Bob's failed masculinity than his lack of physicality. The narrator seems to believe that a traditional man is not only physically strong but also a provider for himself and his family—a breadwinner. When Bob was an incredible physical specimen, he projected masculinity by owning “his own gym” and being “married three times” (21). I read these two elements of Bob's life as another celebration of hypermasculinity. Instead of having to work as an employee, Bob owned his own business and was thus his own boss. Moreover, while having three failed marriages sounds negative, it in fact celebrates the virility of a man who could have multiple relationships with women. In terms of a traditional masculine ideology, the failed marriages do not represent failure so much as they represent his power and potency. Bob, before he lost his “manhood” and ended up “bankrupt” with “two grown kids who wouldn't return his calls” (Palahniuk 22), is a symbol of traditional male identity that is physically strong and economically self-sufficient, both traits that the narrator and Tyler fetishize throughout the novel.

Yet, Palahniuk's “physically incomplete” Bob represents an emotionally open male member of a support group, which complicates his role for the narrator. First, Bob is a carbon copy of the narrator's father because, like Bob's estranged children, the narrator has no connection with his father. I will return to this relationship more explicitly in the next section; for now, I argue that their connection demonstrates that people often seek the same relationships that failed them in the first place, which in *Fight Club* foreshadows the creation of Tyler Durden. Returning to Bob, he confesses the brutal reality of his current situation as “divorce, divorce, divorce” (Palahniuk 21) during his own sincere description of life as a failed breadwinner. Bob, like the narrator's estranged father, has used marriage and family like a “franchise,” as the

narrator later confesses to Tyler Durden, and created a situation in which the children want no connection with him. Additionally, he lost his business and is bankrupt. In this moment, Palahniuk appears to propose that men need to be able to share their emotional struggles so that they can come to terms with their failures in the late twentieth century, an argument embodied in Coupland's narrator Andy. However, this is not the case. The narrator cannot see masculinity as anything beyond physical representations of the body or of economic power, and Bob has lost both due to his own failures. In other words, Bob's emotional honesty cannot help the narrator with his fictional identity because the narrator does not value emotion or sincerity. "Pseudo-connecting" with Bob in meetings offers a temporary relief for the narrator's isolation from humanity, but this insincere connection cannot help him meaningfully in the long term because he denies the significance of emotional pain. Thus, Palahniuk's novel functions as a critique of men who cannot express themselves emotionally or accept the emotional expressions of others.

Initially, Bob appears as a positive role model for the nameless narrator because Bob has suffered the loss of his illusions about traditional definitions of masculinity, which the narrator clearly struggles with comprehending. Moreover, the fact that the narrator can now shed tears over masculine suffering is a major move forward from his repressed emotions, which happens during Bob's confessions. Therefore, if we read Bob as an archetype, he represents, "the sensitive 'new man'" of "the mid 1990s" that is "deprived of 'his substance'" making him a "soft, effeminized and castrated version of the traditional working class 'breadwinner' archetype inherited from the 1950s" (Lizardo 222). While Lizardo's argument is valid, I contend that Palahniuk's Bob at the support group is a baby boomer role model that represents the sensitive male that Generation X authors are trying to create and celebrate. Acutely aware of his failures, embodied in outdated notions of masculinity, Bob is emotionally in tune with himself and the

suffering of those around him. Instead of lying about his identity, Bob offers emotional truth and sincerity. The narrator, confused and struggling with his masculinity, makes a mild connection with Bob on the level of human suffering or even the level of similar suffering as masculine “copies of copies” that do not live up to the “1950s” patriarchal ideal. Yet, Palahniuk undercuts this positive representation of emotionally aware masculinity because both Bob and the narrator abandon the support group and each other. Instead of continuing with their emotional work, they turn to the brutal physicality of fight club. The narrator creates the club with his hypermasculine alter ego Tyler Durden, and Bob happily joins. The two characters reunite at Remaining Men Together after an undisclosed amount of time has passed but Bob explains, “the group has been disbanded” but there is “good news” (Palahniuk 100) because fight club has taken its place. For both men in this scene, there is no emotional reunion; their physical masculinity is more significant. They do not share an emotional hug as once before. Instead, the first description the narrator offers of Bob is that his “arms come out of his T-shirt sleeves quilted with muscle and so hard they shine” (Palahniuk 100). The narrator is not interested in seeing his old “friend”; he is in awe of the man’s muscles. Bob is not a person with feelings and emotions, but instead, he is a powerful man with muscular arms. Simply put: Bob is a physically strong man again, and that is his identifying characteristic for the narrator. This macho support-group takes the weaknesses that had underwritten the real support group and retrofits it as a strength.

By focusing on the narrator and Bob with regards to their support group, I argue that Palahniuk sharply criticizes masculinity that celebrates a traditional, physically dominant man as the epitome of manhood. In fact, the novel rebukes these men for failing themselves and each other. If, for a moment, we ignore the narrator’s false identity at the support group, it becomes apparent that the act of confessing grief is cathartic for both men; Bob is able to confront his

failures as a man and breadwinner, and the narrator gets to experience “real pain” as his doctor prescribed. Yet, the emotional pain shared is not real enough. Both men fail themselves and each other, turning their backs on emotional sincerity in search of a support group that makes them feel more physically male. Since neither man privileges emotionally open lives in the manner of Coupland’s Andy, both lose the very connection they need. Therefore, the failure Palahniuk stages during the male support group directly attacks men who cannot embrace sincerity and sympathy. The cost is severe for both men. Bob is killed in a mission the narrator orders once the two become members of the ultraviolent group Project Mayhem. Palahniuk’s rebuke is strong: by not privileging the emotional, both men face physical suffering. However, before Project Mayhem can exist, the narrator and Tyler Durden must create fight club.

Building Community, Take Two: “Fight Club isn’t about Words”

Although support groups failed to grant the narrator access to the “real pain” he is struggling to understand in his life, Palahniuk does not abandon his critique of men unable to connect emotionally with other men. In fact, during the creation of fight club, the reader is exposed directly to the anxieties of both the narrator and his hypermasculine doppelgänger, Tyler Durden. The men confess to each two major masculine struggles: absentee fathers and a diminished breadwinner status manifested in exploitative labor. That the two men are able to share their past pains and current anxieties about the future should signal that the two friends are on the correct path to becoming more sensitive and sympathetic men, like Coupland’s Andy. However, Palahniuk undercuts the relationship. The narrator and Tyler are not two individuals sharing their stories of grief. Instead, one alienated man is opening up to himself. For a moment, we may be tempted to consider a man getting in touch with his own emotions as a positive step toward becoming more emotionally evolved. For instance, Coupland’s Andy began his evolution

by telling his private stories to the reader. The problem with this reading is that Palahniuk's characters may share their emotional pain, but they celebrate the physical pain of fight club as a means of redemption. Though they express their suffering to one another, they do not value the discourse. Both the narrator and Tyler Durden see their creation of the violent fight club as their great salvation, demonstrating once again how Palahniuk is indicting men who believe masculinity is synonymous with physicality.

A key moment of emotional connection demonstrating a developing bond between the narrator and Tyler occurs just after the creation of fight club, in which both men discuss the perceived failure of their fathers and mothers. First, I focus on the men's toxic relationships with their fathers, which directly ties to the failure of men to connect with men. Both the narrator and Tyler endure absentee fathers. "Tyler never knew his father," the narrator explains, only to confess, "Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a new franchise" (Palahniuk 50). The narrator's story is much more complex than Tyler's because he portrays his father as a capitalist enterprise creating new "businesses" in each town. It is not the simple estrangement that Bob has with his children; the narrator's father is portrayed as willfully creating new business in different markets, with no emotional connection or attachment to his abandoned son. We should remember that the narrator creates a bond at the support group with Bob, who, like his own father, has had several marriages and strained relationships with his children. Through these relationships, Palahniuk draws attention to masculine representation. The men are all alienated from each other as fathers and sons, and they have no emotional ties whatsoever. These failed bonds, I contend, create emotionally destitute men unable to create sympathetic networks of support for themselves or each other. Because of

this failure, they do not know what it means to be a man in the late twentieth century. Of course, the paternal struggles the characters face is grounded in a cultural crisis during their childhood. In the 1970s, when both the narrator and Tyler would have been young boys, “approximately 855,000 preschoolers were living in fatherless families” and “one out of every six children were living in a family where the father was either absent, unemployed, or out of the labor force” (Zaretsky 11). That both men endured this reality of absentee fathers speaks to their struggle with masculine identity. Simply put, the characters seem to believe it is difficult to become a man if a boy has no stable male role model. More directly, we can see that “the formation of heterosexual masculinity” for young boys without fathers present “led to certain predicaments in the gender of men” (Vafa and Talif 449). Being men who value sympathetic lives is the most profound crisis the characters face. Because of the historic failure of their fathers, the novel’s two major characters believe family has become nothing more than a stand-in for the late capitalist realities of franchises. Nilges explains that in post-Fordist culture, “the schizo” is “angrily roaming the world ...[as] an orphaned, involuntary nomad in search of his lost father” (30–31). Thus, Palahniuk’s two alienated men, actually a man with schizophrenia, begin to share their pain over absentee fathers they long to possess relationships with even as adults. Here, the power of emotional honesty is celebrated because their shared pain offers a real moment of potential connection—one truth offers the possibility of another truth.

Yet, the narrator and Tyler must displace emotional truth because they do not value sympathetic connections. After such negative depictions of their fathers, one would think the characters would be angrier with their failed fathers. For instance, after the narrator and Tyler get into their first fight outside the bar, Tyler confesses that he imagined he was fighting his father (Palahniuk 53), which leads the narrator to ruminate, “Maybe we didn’t need a father to

complete ourselves” (Palahniuk 54). That Tyler is able to express this private feeling is important because it represents the opportunity for catharsis through communication, which leads the narrator to his own emotional discovery. However, Palahniuk subverts the moment when we realize that Tyler and the narrator displace their emotional pain through violence. Moreover, this fight is the literal beginning of fight club, in which participating men discard all emotion and favor physical violence as the redemptive representation of manhood. Emotional suffering is ignored or repressed, only to be expressed as physical violence. Thus, emotionally open existence is thwarted, allowing the narrator and Tyler to shift blame, ironically, to their mothers for their failed masculinity. I contend that blaming their mothers, or women in general, for their suffering reflects their belief in the superiority of traditional masculinity. If the narrator or Tyler condemned their failed fathers, it would destroy the very traditional masculinity they are trying to create for themselves. Therefore, when the narrator bluntly states, “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 50), I argue he does so in triumph—as if Fight Club is the apotheosis of masculine power, freed from the emotional weakness taught by their mothers. Instead of seeing themselves as a generation of men abandoned by their fathers, creating their identity crisis, they blame their mothers and, I contend, women in general. More directly, the narrator and Tyler demonstrate a “regressive desire to bring ‘back the father’ who rules a society of men” (Nilges 61). Palahniuk’s masculine characters demonstrate a pattern in which they confess a problem with traditional masculinity (which they refuse to accept) and resort to violence against men to express their dissatisfaction while locating the problem’s source somewhere else—their mothers. By focusing on the perceived failure of their mothers, Palahniuk is rebuking men who see women and emotionally sincere lives as the problem. These emotionally empty men need to embrace their internal struggles and share them with one another

instead of fists of rage. However, for the novel's characters that valorize masculinity as physicality, painful emotions about ruptures in the family are displaced as soon as they are expressed. In fact, these ruptures to their nuclear family lead to the characters' alienation, isolation, anger, and eventual violence. Trapped in a state of arrested development, the men lash out and seek to reclaim traditional masculine identities or bring back the father they never had. Even though the narrator and Tyler open up to share their suffering and dissatisfaction as abandoned sons, they refuse the possibility of emotionally honest lives by displacing their grief.

After expressing their grief over the failed relationships with their fathers, the narrator and Tyler begin to explore their frustration as alienated workers. Palahniuk's characters are representatives of both white-collar (the narrator) and blue-collar (Tyler) men who are devalued in their jobs. The narrator is a "recall campaign coordinator" (Palahniuk 31) for an automotive company, calculating the benefits of recalling failed automotive parts versus the costs of lawsuits and/or insurance claims in the event of injury or death. His work, though not physically demanding, is psychologically traumatizing because the value of human life is measured using a formula designed only to save his company money. Tyler, on the other hand, works two jobs: as a "banquet waiter" for a prestigious hotel and as "a projectionist with the projector operator's union" (Palahniuk 27). The fact that he must work two jobs reflects the lack of opportunity for blue-collar workers. For instance, in the early twentieth century, being in a union would have yielded Tyler a job with good pay and benefits. By contrast, Tyler is reduced to a part-time union laborer that must supplement his income. This struggle with their labor identity is a recurring theme that both McInerney and Coupland explore in their novels; both authors' characters are either fired or quit and run from the lack of fulfillment their jobs offer. What distinguishes Palahniuk from his predecessors is that his characters use violence against themselves (as

discussed later in this section) to exploit the employers that have exploited them and that the money they gain is used to create and expand their new emotionless support group: Fight Club.

Before turning to the narrator and Tyler's struggles with labor, it is important to understand the historical context for male workers. During the cultural era in which the novel was published (1996), wages were not conducive for a traditional breadwinner. Focusing on the minimum wage, the United States Department of Labor reports:

The 1996 amendments increased the minimum wage to \$4.75 an hour on October 1, 1996, and to \$5.15 an hour on September 1, 1997. The amendments also established a youth sub minimum wage of \$4.25 an hour for newly hired employees under age 20 during their first 90 consecutive calendar days after being hired by their employer; revised the tip credit provisions to allow employers to pay qualifying tipped employees no less than \$2.13 per hour if they received the remainder of the statutory minimum wage in tips; set the hourly compensation test for qualifying computer related professional employees at \$27.63 an hour; and amended the Portal-to-Portal Act to allow employers and employees to agree on the use of employer provided vehicles for commuting to and from work, at the beginning and end of the work day, without counting the commuting time as compensable working time if certain conditions are met. President Bill Clinton hailed these labor law changes as a victory for American workers, saying they extended an overdue boost to struggling workers. While the increase did help workers in a very limited capacity, it was only a Band-Aid on the growing chasm between the "haves" and the "have-nots." As Marc Oxoby writes:

The economic gap between labor and management increased considerably by the nineties. A study released in August 2000 showed that the pay rate for corporate

executives bloated uncontrollably during the decade, increasing an average of 535 percent. Meanwhile, the stock market grew at a lesser rate, with the Standard & Poor's 500 growing only 297 percent, a fact that would come under increasing scrutiny with the corporate scandal revelations of the early years of the twenty-first century. Even more shocking is that during this period, the average pay for workers increased a mere 27 percent, just over the inflation rate, which put corporate CEO's pay at approximately 475 times workers' pay. (5-6)

Generation X workers stuck in "McJobs" found little relief in the minimum wage raise and the overall economic climate. Furthermore, raising the minimum wage did not create a living wage for the very workers it sought to help; many still relied on assistance programs to make ends meet. This raise in minimum wage helped to make clear that workers and their labor remained devalued, and Palahniuk's characters exist in a cultural moment in which workers were forced to face their lack of value. Many men "were insecure and alienated because they could no longer perform their traditional roles as family providers and as useful members of society" (Sobral 217). For characters like the narrator and Tyler, who both define masculinity in terms of a paycheck like their fathers and grandfathers, it is no wonder that anger and revolution become the means to reclaim a former glory that white men enjoyed for generations in America. The narrator's comment that "all we were left was the shit and trash of the world" (Palahniuk 165) captures the lack of power he feels in the novel. While this economic struggle allows the reader to feel sympathetic to the characters' plight, Palahniuk's novel demonstrates clearly that white masculinity built on outdated motifs of masculinity in which "the strong silent type" earns a breadwinner paycheck is doomed to fail. Moreover, creating a club in which oppressed workers, void of sympathy, beat each is not a community based on sympathetic connections. In other

words, though the men may admit their emotional frustrations, they do not value the rhetoric and refuse to explore their emotional pain. Instead, they exploit their bodies to exact violent ends.

Since the narrator and Tyler represent different classes of labor, it is important that Palahniuk places the two workers together at the Pressman Hotel to allow the narrator to experience Tyler's blue-collar suffering directly. Once the narrator starts working with Tyler at the hotel, he experiences the gross mistreatment of unskilled labor; according to Tyler, the narrator explains, this "will stoke your class hatred" (Palahniuk 65). For a moment, it appears the narrator is trying to understand the anger of his blue-collar brethren. While on the job, the narrator offers a story of class politics focusing on the brutal hierarchy of the "haves" versus the "have-nots." The narrator's shift downward into the labor force allows his class hatred to take hold because he is forced to experience the abuse directly. Therefore, Palahniuk's narrator begins to sympathetically align with the blue-collar workers. Using the language of "giants" and "cockroaches," the narrator explains that jobs not only involve suffering economically but also psychologically and emotionally as a "cockroach," a pest or vermin that must be destroyed. "From here at cockroach level," the workers serve "titans and their gigantic wives" who "drink barrels of champagne" while "wearing diamonds bigger than I feel" (Palahniuk 80). The narrator's expression "I feel" is important, because blue-collar class politics are now personal. It is not simply his struggle; it is the struggle of everyone working at the Pressman who faces the degradation of minimum-wage existence. Far from the white-collar world of his automotive company, Palahniuk's narrator finally begins to see the "real pain" (as his doctor prescribed) of workers struggling in jobs that exploit them financially and emotionally. The narrator continues, "The giants, they'll send something back to the kitchen for no reason at all. They just want to see you run around for their money. A dinner like this, these banquet parties, they know the tip is

already included in the bill so they treat you like dirt” (Palahniuk 80). In the narrator’s realization, there is real potential to create solidarity among oppressed workers when financially impotent men align over their exploitation. But instead of turning their pain into open communication about the horrors of their jobs, the narrator proclaims, “Tyler and me, we’ve turned into the guerrilla terrorists of the food service industry. Dinner party saboteurs” (Palahniuk 81). Urinating, defecating, and ejaculating into the food of the oppressors foreshadows the beginnings of Project Mayhem. However, these childish, subversive acts do nothing to thwart the actual problem of devalued jobs for exploitative pay. The emotional connection they have created is more juvenile, stereotypical “frat-boy antics,” than actually challenging oppressive economic realities. Palahniuk’s characters once again fail when they are offered a chance to align sympathetically over their diminished labor identities. Instead of expressing the struggle of being failed breadwinners stuck in jobs that harm them emotionally, they use their bodies to contaminate the wealthy patrons’ food, signaling another example of Palahniuk’s criticism that men devoid of sympathy are doomed to fail because they deny the emotional bonds necessary to foster meaningful connections with one another.

In fact, Palahniuk’s criticism of their behavior becomes more apparent when the two men incite violence against themselves to exploit the union and the hotel for paychecks so they can fund fight club full time. Ironically, the men “stayed up late and traded stories after everything was over” (Palahniuk 113) of their physical abuse as exploited laborers against the men they believe oppressed them. For Coupland’s characters, sharing stories allows Andy and his friends to express their grief and build sympathetic connections. Palahniuk’s men are uninterested in their emotional suffering and instead focus on the violent abuse of their bodies as proof of success. The narrator explains that during a meeting with the union president, Tyler is informed

that “with more self-threading and rewinding projectors, the union didn’t need Tyler anymore” (Palahniuk 113). The narrator explains: “Don’t think of this as rejection. Think of this as downsizing” (Palahniuk 113). Tyler then demands checks to keep coming from the union “as early retirement, with pension” (Palahniuk 113) in exchange for his silence about the pornography Tyler spliced into children’s movies. The union president beats Tyler into a bloody pulp, and Tyler refuses to fight back. The narrator explains the situation as if he is Tyler: “You have too much to lose. I have nothing. You have everything,” while according to the narrator, Tyler yells, “You don’t care where I live or how I feel, or what I eat or how I feed my kids or how I pay the doctor or if I get sick, and yes I am stupid and bored and weak, but I am still your responsibility” (Palahniuk 114-115). Focusing on the men’s language, we see both express their emotional grief over being devalued workers harboring feelings of worthlessness because they cannot live up to the traditional masculine role of breadwinner. Tyler even echoes the language of early-twentieth-century union labor by demanding a pension. There is a powerful sincerity in this expression of emotional turmoil, and it sparks the narrator to visit the Pressman Hotel manager and make similar demands—stating, “basically, I said the same stuff Tyler said” (Palahniuk 115). That the narrator confesses to using Tyler’s words to confront his boss should not be overlooked. While the narrator often quotes Tyler or recounts what he says, this is a moment in which the narrator evokes the language of suffering. The narrator repeats his indictment of Tyler’s situation with the union by telling the manager, “You have so much, and I have nothing” (Palahniuk 117). But whereas the union president beats Tyler brutally, the narrator’s boss cannot offer the same punishment. The narrator takes matters into his own hands, literally, by beating himself to create the appearance of abuse: “I punch myself, again. It just looks good, all the blood, but I throw myself back against the wall to make a terrible noise and

break the painting that hangs there” (Palahniuk 116). These two scenes demonstrate a powerful indictment of the narrator and Tyler because both men refuse to embrace their emotional suffering. While they commiserate through storytelling over the beatings their physical bodies endure, they never engage or discuss the emotional trauma serving as the impetus for their meetings. Instead of emotionally aligning over their failed breadwinner status, they champion their bodies’ beatings as the epitome of their manhood. Moreover, they use the money blackmailed from their employers to “start a fight club every night of the week” with their ranks swelling into “twenty-three fight clubs, and Tyler wanted more” (Palahniuk 117). Tyler wants more men beating men to displace the emotional suffering they refuse to embrace as exploited workers and failed breadwinners. By focusing on the sympathetic connection the characters eschew, I argue, Palahniuk continues to indict the characters as retrograde men more interested in returning to a past model of masculinity no longer viable.

We should remember that the two characters create fight club simultaneously while admitting to their failed relationships with their fathers and their failed status as breadwinners. Palahniuk’s characters express their pain to each another, which gives them the opportunity to connect emotionally, but they can never embrace their shared suffering sympathetically. Instead, they resort to physical violence to cope with their frustrations. In a description of what fight club is, the narrator confesses that the club is deeply invested in the physical existence of men instead of the confessional. He explains:

Fight club isn’t about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn’t about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything. There’s grunting and noise at fight

club like at the gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved. (Palahniuk 51)

For the narrator, fight club is not interested in verbal communication. I read this as his indictment of communication because "words" lead to the language of sympathy and feeling. There is no value in emotional bonds because fight club is physical and remakes the male body so male participants can "handle anything." More directly, the means to achieve control over their lives is to deny their emotional suffering by creating hypermasculine bodies capable of inflicting and receiving physical pain.

Fight club allows dissatisfied men to create a community needed to reshape their bodies so that they can fight the oppressive forces of the late capitalist era. Garrison argues, "Wherever it exists, fight club is a community, equipped with dogmas, scriptures, and rituals, devoted to obtaining the truth about existence through acts of violence and self-destruction" (80). But Palahniuk makes clear that the only way this "truth" can exist is through destroying all emotions beyond anger. The men must become almost primitive in their existence, seeking nothing more than physicality. They want to reclaim their bodies, their identities, and their lost masculinity, but they refuse to embrace any emotion beyond pure anger. Palahniuk deploys irony to critique this version of community because it is built on anger and dishonesty. The men at fight club are not emotionally open to one another and even hide their true identities, just as the narrator did in support groups. Instead of discussing their struggles, they silently beat one another in a bizarre form of alienated workers abusing other alienated workers. Therefore, fight club unites angry white men with the ideology that the only recourse to their angst is repressing their emotion and turning their anger into violence. I argue Palahniuk condemns the narrator and

Tyler, who are devoid of sympathy or connection beyond primal anger, because they refuse to offer the men any constructive options in their new support group beyond the destructive. Fight club is a necessary creation only because the emotionally alienated creators refuse to create a community in which suffering and difference are celebrated and embraced. Generation X men, feeling the crunch of history and an economy that has taken away their nuclear family and breadwinner status, engage in violent politics hoping to reclaim the residual ideological status they believe to be more valuable. Instead of being emotionally vulnerable like Bob at the support groups, these men want to express and embrace physical pain. The fact that fight club does not last and or lead to true community is another reflection of Palahniuk's attack on his characters' failed, archaic notions of white masculinity. This failure leads to the creation of the terrorist organization Project Mayhem.

Community and Project Mayhem: Destroy Everything

If fight club serves the purpose of creating a community of rage for alienated men feeling anxiety in the late capitalist society, Project Mayhem is the next articulation of that dissatisfaction. More specifically, Project Mayhem allows Tyler and his followers to expedite the misinterpreted advice from the narrator's doctor. Through Project Mayhem, the men can see "real pain" by directly inflicting it on others outside their community. The narrator explains that when Tyler created Project Mayhem, it "had nothing to do with other people" because Tyler "didn't care if other people got hurt"; instead "the goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history" (Palahniuk 122). In other words, Project Mayhem aims to give its male members the opportunity to "turn back the clock," returning to an early-twentieth-century articulation of white masculine patriarchal control. More directly, the narrator explains that Tyler believes the project's true goal is "the complete and right-away destruction of

civilization” (Palahniuk 125). Of course, to destroy the world, the men must possess no emotional connection to it. It is not a place they love and want to fix; it is a place they hate that must be destroyed. What Palahniuk stages in the creation of Project Mayhem is the final critique of emotionally empty men who subscribe to the belief that masculine strength can only exist in violence and domination. Ironically, to achieve a collective return to the men’s desired traditional masculinity, they must relinquish all individual power and control to their patriarchal ruler, Tyler Durden. After all, the narrator explains, “The first rule of Project Mayhem is you don’t ask questions about Project Mayhem” (Palahniuk 119). Palahniuk deepens the irony of his criticism when we realize that Project Mayhem is populated by the alienated workers from fight club blindly accepting new roles as “trained monkeys” that “pull a lever” or “push a button” as if in a soap factory that is “wet on the inside from so many people sweating and breathing” (Palahniuk 130, 133). By focusing on the exploitative labor, we see, “Project Mayhem is not an anarchist collective” but, in fact, “a nostalgic desire to return to Fordism” in which “Tyler Durden functions as father/Ford/God, complete with divisions of labor and Fordist alienation” (Nilges 51). That these men willingly accept a new version of the labor model they previously indicted reflects the foolishness of their desire to return to the past. Ironically, the men of Project Mayhem are destitute of any connection to themselves or each other, becoming ghost-like versions of themselves working the very factories of exploitation that damaged their grandfathers and fathers.

Moreover, Project Mayhem is principally a Generation X-specific group, which allows Palahniuk to directly criticize the belief that physical representations of masculinity are superior to emotionally open men like Coupland’s Andy. The fight club mechanic, in particular, is a direct juxtaposition. As usual, the narrator’s description is physical: “The mechanic is tall and all

bones with shoulders that remind you of a telephone pole crossbar” (Palahniuk 139). The only other description offered is that “it’s one scary fuck to see guys like our mechanic at fight club” (Palahniuk 139). From the narrator’s perspective, the mechanic is nothing more than a physical being, likened to an inanimate object with a terrifying presence—a glorification of his masculine power. With his power, the mechanic voices the frustrations and anxieties of a generation.

According to the narrator, he proclaims, “We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, have a great war of the spirit” in which “the great depression is our lives,” creating a “spiritual depression” (Palahniuk 149). For a moment, it appears that the mechanic is offering a sincere instance of emotional frustration. Though in more militant language, the mechanic appears to be like Andy expressing to his friends his concerns over their struggles with their families and jobs. Once again, Palahniuk offers a glimpse of emotionally open men, more like Andy. However, this possibility is short-lived once the mechanic returns to the rhetoric of oppression, as the narrator echoes: “We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them and show them courage by frightening them” (Palahniuk 149). Immediately, for the men of Project Mayhem, their true goals are unmasked by a patriarchal leader: men and women (with women appearing as nothing more than a footnote) need to experience “real pain” to make their lives more meaningful. To directly explore this argument, I turn to two examples that underscore Project Mayhem’s need to inflict real pain, Raymond Kessel and Robert Paulson.

A direct example of Project Mayhem’s goal of offering freedom and courage to Generation X members through enslavement and fear occurs when the narrator tells the story of Raymond Kessel. In a break from the narrative structure, Palahniuk’s narrator shares the story with the reader in a letter-like form in which Raymond is addressed as “you” throughout the short chapter. While it may be somewhat jarring at first, I argue that Palahniuk’s choice allows

the reader to see the direct failure to save Raymond because only the reader is allowed access to the reasoning behind the narrator's actions. By refusing to communicate his motivations with Raymond, the narrator does nothing more than brutalize and terrorize a young convenience store employee wasting away in a minimum-wage job, which the narrator should sympathize with after his stint as a waiter at the Pressman Hotel. But since the narrator and the men of Project Mayhem do not value emotional openness, the narrator violently overpowers Raymond to "empower" him. The narrator describes the horrifying scene: "Raymond didn't say anything" and "probably thought I was after his money, his minimum wage, his fourteen dollars in his wallet" when "you started crying, tears rolling down the barrel of my gun pressed against your temple" (Palahniuk 152). Through a coerced confession, Raymond admits that he had studied biology at community college to become a veterinarian but dropped out (Palahniuk 154). Pressing the gun harder against Raymond's head, the narrator orders Raymond to "go back to school" because if "you aren't back in school on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead" (Palahniuk 154).

The narrator never addresses that Raymond is given no choice because there is no emotional connection between the two men. Burgess argues, "Project Mayhem directs violence outward to nonconsenting others and justifies its actions by the promise of liberation in the future" (268). I contend that Project Mayhem's goal may be future liberation, but its motivation is built on a lack of sympathy allowing for violence and coercion. It is possible that Raymond hated college, needed a break, or—even more likely—could not afford to attend. The narrator does not care; his goal is to inflict pain on Raymond to motivate him to succeed. The only explanation the narrator offers Raymond is hidden in the direct order: "Get out of here, and do your little life, but remember I'm watching you" because "I'd rather kill you than see you

working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television” (Palahniuk 155). Focusing on the last part of the statement, the narrator appears like a father figure wanting more for his “son” than wasting away in a dead-end "McJob" offering no opportunity. The narrator appears to actually care about Raymond and want a better life for him. Yet, we cannot ignore the violence. This resembles an earlier scene in the novel in which the narrator confesses he sought the counsel of his absentee father while feeling lost and seeking guidance for his life. He explains, “My father never went to college so it was really important that I go to college” (Palahniuk 50–51). After graduation, the narrator asked his dad what he should do with his life. “My dad didn’t know,” he explains. When asked what to do after getting his first job, the narrator says, “My dad didn’t know, so he said, get married” (Palahniuk 51). By connecting these two scenes, I argue that Palahniuk critiques fathers who have no emotional connection with their sons. The narrator’s dad never talks to his son about his fears or anxieties, instead, advising him to follow the traditional path to becoming a patriarchal breadwinner. The narrator repeats the mistake by simply advising Raymond to follow the traditional path for Generation X men: attending college as a means to becoming a traditional breadwinner. But, as a Project Mayhem “father,” this advice is given without request and while wielding a gun under the threat of murder. I perceive that the narrator has become a much more disturbing version of patriarchal masculinity as a Project Mayhem member because inflicting violence to elicit “real pain” is seen as the answer to any problem. The narrator ends the chapter by callously musing, “Raymond K. Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you’ve ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life” (Palahniuk 155). The narrator refuses to take responsibility for the emotional trauma he inflicted on a 23-year-old man. Instead, he vicariously imagines the physical pleasure of Raymond’s next meal and “beautiful” tomorrow,

demonstrating that for the men of Project Mayhem, there are no emotional ties to human beings. Inflicting pain on others provides their only satisfaction.

The narrator's "assignment" with Raymond Kessel, conducted at gunpoint, is the signal that Project Mayhem has moved beyond simple violence by workers against workers to becoming the ultimate expression of physical pain through death and murder. While Raymond was only threatened with death, Bob's execution by the police during a Project Mayhem assignment serves as the catalyst for the group to embrace murder as the ultimate expression of white masculine rage. Once Bob becomes a corpse, ironically, he becomes an actual person in the Project Mayhem community. The narrator explains, "His name is Robert Paulson and he is forty-eight years old. His name is Robert Paulson, and Robert Paulson will be forty-eight years old, forever" (Palahniuk 176). The narrator's repetition of the Bob's full name is jarring because it is the first time, it appears, that Bob is "real" to him. At a local fight club, the members are shouting the same words in solidarity for their fellow member. The narrator explains that a disembodied voice yelling, "Only in death will we have our own names" because "in death we are no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes" (Palahniuk 178). That Bob's death makes him Robert Paulson and a hero conveys the complete lack of sympathy embraced by the men of Project Mayhem. There are no tears or mourning because, simply put, Bob was no one in their community, just like they are no one. To achieve an identity, one must lose their physical existence, becoming a martyr for the cause. One would think Bob's death would serve as a brutal critique of the men's beliefs and actions, and the narrator momentarily narrator offers a rebuke to the men stating, "a man is dead" so "this game is over" because "it's not for fun anymore" (Palahniuk 178). Yet, his protest is laughable at best. Instead of invoking emotions or feelings for the dead, he sounds like a child who is no longer enjoying the game he created with his friends.

However, Project Mayhem is not a game, and the emotionless robots that the narrator has helped create turn on him for trying to change the rules that he developed. Therefore, Bob's death demonstrates that once Palahniuk's masculine characters create Project Mayhem, they have fully embraced a reality in which emotions are not only unimportant but in fact no longer exist. When the men of Project Mayhem have no feeling toward human life, they are capable of becoming murderers who feel only rage.

After the death of Robert Paulson, the narrator/Tyler Durden kill two more men, the narrator's boss in an office explosion and Patrick Madden at the Pressman Hotel during a murder mystery dinner. I contend that their murders are the final, violent expression of white alienated workers devoid of emotion. Killing the narrator's boss directly correlates to the disgust and oppression that the narrator felt in his white-collar job, but the murder of Patrick Madden is more complex. Invoking the language of Robert Paulson's death, the narrator explains, "His name was Patrick Madden, and he was the mayor's special envoy on recycling. His name is Patrick Madden, and he was an enemy of Project Mayhem" because he "was compiling a list of bars where fight clubs met" (Palahniuk 198). What is compelling about the location of this murder is that Tyler and the narrator return to the site of their oppressive blue-collar jobs to exact the ultimate revenge against a man trying to arrest their agenda. Furthermore, by committing the murder at the business that oppressed them, they are attacking not only the establishment but also the wealthy patrons who abused them. Through these two murders, the oppressed men reach the zenith of their rebellion as emotionless men. Since they only privilege the physical, committing murder is the ultimate act of inflicting "real pain" on their perceived oppressors. Once the murders are complete, the narrator finally embraces his somnambulist split-personality, walking into the bar to meet his fellow members, explaining "to everyone there, I am Tyler Durden the

Great and Powerful. God and father” (Palahniuk 199). Fully aware of his identity, the narrator becomes both God and father as the ultimate expression of traditional masculine dominance unfettered by the burden of emotional awareness.

Before focusing on the end of the novel, it is imperative to turn back and explore the only prominent female character in the novel, Marla, because she serves as a symbol of the necessary power of women in a novel that almost completely negates their existence. During the Project Mayhem section that ends Palahniuk’s novel, it is Marla who helps the narrator unmask his schizophrenic identity as both the unnamed narrator and Tyler Durden. After the narrator visits a series of bars only to be greeted as Tyler Durden by the men he meets, he finally calls Marla, seeking her support and guidance. Fascinatingly, the narrator does not trust the men to speak truth to him; he instead seeks Marla for truth. The phone call centers around whether or not they have had sex, which is yet another example of men privileging the physical over the emotional manifestations of manhood. Finally, the narrator asks Marla what his name is, and she responds, “Tyler Durden. Your name is Tyler Butt-Wipe-for-Brains Durden. You live at 5123 NE Paper Street which is currently teeming with your little disciples shaving their heads and burning their skin off with lye” (Palahniuk 160). While this may seem like a simple moment of plot development, I contend that Palahniuk makes a much bigger point by giving Marla, a woman, the power to expose the truth to the misguided narrator. Like Ellis’s and McInerney’s female characters, who have a deeper understanding of reality of their male narrators, so too does Palahniuk’s Marla. She is the ignored voice of both reason and empathy. In a novel dominated by the tunnel vision of men celebrating primitive masculinity, Palahniuk’s Marla is the voice of truth throughout the entire novel. The fact that her wisdom is ignored by the narrator for the

entirety of the novel furthers the argument that men unable to embrace the power of emotional truth are doomed to destroy themselves and those around them.

From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator confronts the important role that Marla plays in his struggle with Tyler, which simultaneously underscores the power Palahniuk gives her that the narrator refuses to embrace. Chapter 1 actually begins the novel on top of the Parker-Morris Building when Tyler is about to kill the narrator. The narrator admits that everything that has led to this moment, “the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla” because “we have a sort of triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me” (Palahniuk 14). It is telling that the narrator refuses to use the adjective “love” before the word “triangle,” signaling that he is unable to process or embrace love. He even states that “This isn’t about *love* as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*” (Palahniuk 14). This distinction, offered by the protagonist, introduces one of the most central conflicts in the novel. *Fight Club* manifests a conflict in which men who are unable or unwilling to embrace their emotions rely on outdated patriarchal beliefs according to which love is weakness and women are property to own. However, Palahniuk continually subverts this archaic worldview, using Marla as a disturber of such an obsolete belief system.

The first instance of Marla challenging the narrator’s distorted identity occurs at the support groups in which he pretends to be someone else so that he can experience the pain of others as vicarious suffering. Marla attends the meetings because “here, you have a real experience of death” unlike the funeral home she worked at which on supplied “abstract ceremony” (Palahniuk 38). Marla wants to experience the expressing of pain and emotions where the narrator simply wants to view them voyeuristically. The juxtaposition between the two characters’ identities is established quickly as the narrator confesses that “I never give my real

name,” while the narrator cites Marla’s introduction as, “Well, hi, I’m Marla Singer” (Palahniuk 23). The fact that he refuses to state his identity while Marla asserts hers establishes the absolute difference between them. The narrator is so alienated from himself and his emotional pain that he cannot live his own life. He must pretend to be someone else so as to avoid the truth of his life. However, Marla is fully aware of her identity and embraces herself, contradictions and all. She does not run from her pain or the suffering of others because she embraces her emotional life. Because of her honesty, the narrator is confronted with his own inability to confront himself. The narrator describes the struggle Marla creates for him, confessing, “with her watching, I’m a liar” because “Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all this truth” (Palahniuk 23). The irony of the situation is powerful because the narrator must rely on his dishonesty so he can experience the emotional truth of others. To cope with the powerlessness that Marla makes him feel, he imagines physically assaulting her to assert his will: “I’ll grab the little bitch” and say “Marla, you big fake, get out. This is the one real thing in my life, and you’re wrecking it” (Palahniuk 24). That violence and domination is the only means by which the narrator can imagine taking back the power that Marla steals from him is a damning indictment of Palahniuk’s protagonist, and this sets the stage for the action of the novel. The narrator erroneously thinks that the false world he has created at the support groups is the only “real thing” in his life. Moreover, that a woman, Marla, can wrest it from him speaks directly to the anxiety he feels as a man losing power in the late-twentieth century. Marla’s ability to challenge his lies offers him a chance to confront his actual emotional trauma. That he cannot accept the power and truth she represents is another indictment by Palahniuk of emotionally empty men who refuse to accept the power of women.

Another example of Marla challenging the narrator's false identity occurs during the fight club section of the novel, in which her presence at the Paper Street home provides for the narrator an attempt to confront his unstable childhood. While the narrator does confess his estrangement from his father to Tyler earlier in the novel, it is the addition of Marla to the men's domestic sphere that directly challenges Palahniuk's narrator. Once Marla and Tyler begin a sexual affair (privileging of physical masculinity), she begins spending time at the Paper Street house, which creates a tension for the narrator that reminds him of the powerlessness he felt as a child before his parents divorced. The narrator reflects on the symmetry of his experiences, stating that "Except for their humping, Marla and Tyler are never in the same room. If Tyler's around, Marla ignores him. This is familiar ground. This is exactly how my parents were invisible to each other. Then my father went off to start another franchise" (Palahniuk 65-66). That the relationship between Tyler and Marla evokes his anxiety about his parents' failed marriage speaks directly to the narrator's fear of abandonment. He fears that Marla's presence will steal Tyler from him or make Tyler disappear like his father did once the marriage failed. In a rare moment of clarity, the narrator actually confesses, "Long story short, now Marla's out to ruin another part of my life. Ever since college, I make friends. They get married. I lose friends" (Palahniuk 62). In this statement, he is concerned that the relationship between the two characters could actually blossom, causing him to be forgotten, cast aside. The irony that Palahniuk presents at the Paper Street home is that the narrator is, in fact, Tyler who is having the sexual relationship with Marla devoid of emotion just like the failed relationship the narrator witnessed in his home. In other words, *Fight Club* presents an indictment that the narrator's insistence on refusing to embrace his emotional pain in fact causes him to recreate the very pain he seeks to repress. By recreating the failed relationship of his parents, the narrator deepens his

own alienation from himself and Marla. She is present in his life and wants to emotionally connect with him, but he is unwilling and can only offer her the hypermasculine patriarchy of Tyler Durden. Instead of working with Marla to embrace emotional truth, he denies her true power as a catalyst of emotional sincerity.

By focusing on Marla, I draw attention to Palahniuk's subtle critique of men who refuse to embrace the necessary power of women, a critique also offered by Ellis and McInerney. I refer to Palahniuk's as a subtle critique because so much of the action of the novel revolves around the struggles of men attempting to recreate an outdated version of patriarchal masculinity.

Palahniuk's choice to almost "hide" Marla in the narration serves as an illustration of the blindness of his protagonist. The reader, like the narrator, is so caught up in the chaotic narrative that represses truth that it is easy to overlook the power given to Marla in *Fight Club*. From the beginning of the novel, she is the one challenger to the lies and deceit of the schizophrenic narrator. Marla continually works to remove the narrator's mask in an effort to awaken both the reader and the narrator to the truth. Despite the fact that the narrator refuses to embrace the truth that she offers him, her power is present nonetheless. In fact, Palahniuk's Marla even attempts to save the narrator at the end of the novel. That he refuses to listen to her and the truth she offers serves as a final indictment of the narrator's refusal to accept that Marla is a source of redemption that he desperately needs because she represents the power of emotional sincerity.

Returning to the end of the novel, Palahniuk destroys his white male patriarch, subverting the paradigm of traditional white masculinity that Project Mayhem represents, deepening his progressive criticism of men who choose to celebrate the physical life while annihilating their emotions. Standing atop the Parker-Morris building with Tyler's (his own) gun in his mouth, the two characters square off for control of their existence and of Project Mayhem. In other words,

violence is the only means of settling their dispute. However, in the final scene, Marla appears on top of the building leading members of the support groups to confront Palahniuk's characters. The narrator echoes Marla who is yelling, "We followed you" and "you don't have to do this. Put the gun down" (Palahniuk 204). The narrator explains, "Behind Marla, all the bowel cancers, the brain parasites, the melanoma people, the tuberculosis people are walking, limping, wheelchairs toward me" while yelling "wait," "stop," "we can help you," and "let us help you" (Palahniuk 204). I contend that Palahniuk has Marla bring back the characters from the support groups at this crucial moment speaks directly to the major argument of the novel. Even though the narrator lied to her and to the group about his identity and his "real pain," Marla and the support group members are still willing to help the narrator in his moment of crisis. They see a man who is suffering "real pain," manifested by his gun in his own mouth. The members of the support groups, whom he comically names by their afflictions, have suffered tremendously, and that experience has allowed them to experience genuine sympathy for the suffering of others. They do not lash out with violence and destruction to cope with their pain; instead, they form sympathetic networks of feeling and compassion. Thus, at the end of the novel, the support group led by Marla stands in direct opposition to Project Mayhem. Since "Project Mayhem is directed outward toward a world that may or may not want to accept Tyler's beliefs," it becomes the "very type of oppressive system it means to overthrow" (Burgess 268). The support group's return to its betrayer signals that its members have no need for revenge or oppression. They are the sympathetic community, empathetic to someone suffering. Having Marla lead this group towards a moment of redemption places true power in her hands, the power of sympathy. Yet, while Palahniuk celebrates these people and their sensitivity, he reminds us that the narrator is

not that man. Instead of learning from Marla and the support group members, he pulls the trigger and resorts, again, to violence to solve his emotional problem.

Palahniuk ends the novel in a dream-like state in which the narrator invokes the Bible, stating that “In my father’s house are many mansions” (206). This furthers Palahniuk’s criticism that the narrator has learned nothing. The biblical reference casts himself as Jesus, a male savior to the world. Furthermore, he remains devoid of emotion when he recounts that shooting himself was the only option open to him, stating that “With the police helicopters thundering toward us, and Marla and all the support group people who couldn’t save themselves, with all of them trying to save me, I had to pull the trigger” (Palahniuk 206). If we consider what Marla and the support groups represent, that is, people invested in dealing with their “real pain” by communicating their fears and anxieties with one another, the narrator must refuse their help and pull the trigger. To accept their help, he must admit that he has “real pain” that manifests as a split personality that resorts to violence to express the impotence he feels as an abandoned son, alienated worker, and failed model of traditional masculinity. To heal himself, he must get in touch with these awful feelings of loss and powerlessness and express them in healthy ways by connecting emotionally with people like Marla. That he refuses this choice underscores the novel’s main critique, that Generation X men who seek to return to the past and attempt to reclaim the former glory of white patriarchal rule are not only dangerous to themselves but to the world at large.

Palahniuk’s Contribution

Palahniuk’s subversive novel *Fight Club* is a companion piece to Coupland’s experimental novel *Generation X* when they are read as critiques of emotionally stunted men. Whereas Coupland offers the positive role model Andy, who evolves, Palahniuk’s masculine

characters are repressed, violent men who engage with the world devoid of all sympathy. Focusing on support groups, fight club, and Project Mayhem, *Fight Club* argues that men who refuse to embrace their emotional needs are doomed, unable to create the stability they need in the late capitalist era. In each of these groups, masculine characters are allowed moments in which they begin to express themselves freely to others only to reject these discourses, so they can express their frustrations through violence and, eventually, murder.

The narrator, lost at the beginning of the novel, turns to his doctor for support only to be turned away towards a quest to find “real pain.” Ironically, his journey sends him further from his pain and instead makes him more prone to inflict it on others because he refuses to connect emotionally with the men in his life. When the narrator’s quest fails, and he is stuck inside a mental institution surrounded by the violent men whom he created, Palahniuk is clearly arguing that men who privilege violence and repress their emotions are dangerous not only to themselves but the world at large. Therefore, like Coupland, Palahniuk should be read as indicting emotionally stunted men. Yet, Palahniuk extends this critique by arguing that the desire to return to a time at which men dominated American culture is not merely impossible but rooted in a misunderstanding of masculinity itself. Instead of trying to return to the past by destroying all emotions, men must embrace their feelings of powerlessness and loss to heal and participate in a more progressive culture. Dave Eggers makes this argument clearly in his novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which the next chapter focuses on. For now, I argue that Palahniuk’s novel sets up the evolution that Eggers goes on to demand that men embrace.

CHAPTER 5

EGGERS'S *A HEARTBREAKING WORK OF STRAGGRING GENIUS*: THE CREATION OF THE SENTIMENTAL GENERATION X MALE

In the previous chapters, I have argued that we can read Gen X novels such as *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, *Less Than Zero*, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, and *Fight Club* as attempts to represent, on the one hand, the shortcomings of a dominant form of masculinity rooted in repressed emotions and stifled sympathy and to imagine, on the other, a new, more progressive ideal of masculinity. In this chapter, my goal is to position Dave Eggers's postmodern novel, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* [AHWOSG], as a culmination of this Gen X literary engagement with the meaning of manhood in the late twentieth century. Indeed, I argue that Eggers's novel depicts masculinity in flux, masculinity trying to break free of the patriarchal norms to become more progressive. However, change is not easy or linear. The protagonist of this autobiographical novel, Dave, struggles with his own evolution, failing and succeeding at various moments that climax in the progressive, hopeful ending of the novel. The novel illustrates how moving from selfish individualism to a more emotionally open and inclusive masculinity is both difficult and necessary.

That Eggers in his first work was invested not only in imagining a new form of masculinity, but also wagering that a new form of masculinity is precisely what U.S. society needs coming out of the '90s, is suggested by how Eggers himself later conceived of why the '90s went wrong. In a 2013 article he wrote for *Vanity Fair* and aptly—if awkwardly—titled “Dave Eggers on the 1990s, the Decade that Began with Hope and Ended Just Before the Fall,” Eggers does indeed look back on the hope and promise that began the decade. He cites the release of Nelson Mandela, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the election of Bill Clinton as

“miracles” that seemed to augur progressive change and thus generated optimism for young Americans at the decade’s outset. But this optimism among young, progressive-minded Americans would, Eggers tells us, collapse as a result of a series of major political—and geopolitical—“failures.” As he tells it, the genocide in Somalia and Rwanda that became visible to the US only foreshadowed Clinton “getting a blowjob,” and the echoes of the first Gulf War that resonated in the minds of two rich men, George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden. All three men represent toxic masculinity where violence is sanctioned. “In a few years,” Eggers writes, “after a dubious U.S. election, after the attacks of 9/11, after the global economic collapse, after two wars without clear motives and exit strategies, we would look back on the 90s as the halcyon days, a bright and prosperous time, that too soon, would seem too long ago.” Eggers, a Generation X white male writing about the 1990s when Generation X rose to prominence, indicts men of power for causing so much of the problems that arise in the following decade. Abusing their power over the “Other” (women, people of different cultures, nationalities, and religions), these men used their positions to exploit and attack those unlike themselves. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Bin Laden become the locus of world-shaping decisions that still haunt the current moment. Through sexual or violent power plays, men misused their positions, setting off a firestorm of world-changing events. Thus, I read this article as an indictment of toxic masculinity, a failure with devastating repercussions for the nation and the world.

This assessment of the decade and its mistakes become reflective of his most famous and critically acclaimed novel published thirteen years prior, as the novel, too, expresses concerns about masculinity at the turn of the century. The novel critiques manhood that blindly oppresses the powerless embodied in failures like Clinton’s sexual misconduct with a subordinate female and the wars of Bush and Bin Laden where toxic masculinity abuses the power it wields.

Eggers's novel critiques these abuses indirectly by providing Dave's life as an exploration of transcending these outdated notions. It is a postmodern novel not only remarkable for its metatextual apparatuses (about which I will have a bit to say shortly), but because it confronts what it means to be a Generation X male, offering its protagonist as model for a masculinity that privileges an emotionally open existence. By embracing this sincere masculinity, the novel attempts to eradicate the patriarchal failures that dominated the twentieth century. Eggers's novel is a progressive work that offers a progressive narrator trying to explode common-sense notions of masculinity.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius moves beyond a simple critique of toxic masculinity, though it does that as well, to depict the necessity of evolving beyond the strictures of the past where men were the locus of power and privilege. An example of traditional masculinity the novel pushes back against is the father who rules the home where the mother is secondary to his dominance. Similarly, there is the man who works as a boss where he is, again, in control, outside the home. While it is notable that the protagonist Dave struggles with negative components of traditional masculinity like sexism and racism, the novel functions as a guide, navigating the way through the outdated maze so that Dave emerges as a sincerer and more progressive male in the end. Therefore, I contend that the novel is invested in undoing patriarchy by focusing on examples where Dave succeeds and fails as he grapples with white masculinity. Dave's most progressive moments are best manifested in the celebration of his mother and attempts to align with single mothers. His successes should be followed; his failures should be overcome. For all the difficulties Dave has, he is constantly trying to embrace the cultural, economic, and political realities of the historical moment. He knows he must be both mother and father to his brother Toph. However, Dave chooses to privilege his baby boomer mother (and

mothers in general) as the model of parenting for his brother. He knows he must have a job to support his family, but Dave ultimately refuses to accept a career that does not reflect his values. In other words, Dave values his morality over money. Lastly, he learns that the world is a complex network of multicultural existence beyond white masculinity. Dave chooses to embrace diversity instead of fighting against it. Therefore, I argue that Eggers's novel needs to be read as the story of a middle-class, white male learning to create and embrace a masculinity that eagerly encounters the complicated diversity of modern America. Unlike protagonists of earlier Gen X novels, who fall into nihilism or embrace violence as ways of coping with economic insecurity and the demise of the so-called nuclear family, Dave chooses to embrace the cultural moment. The novel proposes that trial-and-error evolution is not only a means for personal salvation but also the most viable choice for white men to help participate in a more progressive society. Therefore, this work is a direct example of both a model of and an argument for the necessity of an evolved sense of Generation X masculinity.

In terms of content and form, scholarship on Eggers's novel largely focuses on its postmodern elements. To understand how the novel functions as a postmodern text, one major group of scholars focus on the novel's hybrid form and ironic content. Since the work is critically viewed as both a novel and a memoir, Eggers and his protagonist Dave are difficult to separate. Similarly, there is a tension between the ironic qualities and intense emotional thrust of the novel. Consider the name of the work, for example: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* aptly demonstrates the novel is full of emotion ("heartbreaking") and yet is making fun of itself ("work of staggering genius") at the same time. Ruth Mackay, for instance, argues that the novel "condenses metatextual discourse into unconventional forms" and "becomes a primary method of making various kinds of destabilizations manifest, both in its form and in its verbal

nature” (69, 71). Merja Polvinen likewise contends the novel is a “practical example of a text in which the combination of affect and artifice is particularly acute, but also one in which the effects of that combination on readers draw on the processes of joint attention” (176). Wolfgang Funk offers a negotiation between MacKay and Polvinen by arguing for the need to read Eggers’s “extensive use of metareference as a gesture of humility, which results in a suspension of interpretative authority and an exhortation to the readers to accept or at least judge for themselves the truthfulness of the experience communicated” (136). For these critics, important attention should be paid to the form of the metafictional work that challenges both the author and the reader to decipher reality and fiction in a single work. And while this focus on form is essential to studying Eggers, my reading prioritizes his novel’s content, grappling with masculinity. This focus on white masculinity is especially important as I put Eggers in conversation with other Generation X authors from the 1980s and 1990s struggling with the same anxieties. While tension between irony and emotion is important in the novel’s form, my goal is to focus more on the content that highlights the struggle to fashion a new form of alternative masculinity.

While Mackay, Polvinen, and Funk have argued that Eggers’s novel works to problematize representation itself in a postmodern fashion, another group of scholars have suggested that this is a novel that does not revel in the limits of representation so much as it takes seriously, and asks its readers to take seriously, the difficulty of representing—and making sense of—both physical and psychological suffering. Jennifer Sinor contends that “Eggers literally has to make his past” because memory and language cannot “fabricate a stability to our lived experience” (24–25). Sarah Savitt contends that Eggers’s autobiography represents “suffering (physical and otherwise)” that is “transformed into authority, into isolation and inaccessibility,

and finally into (fictional) text. Storytelling is a kind of retrograde control, a striking back at suffering by taming it into narrative” (344). Elise Miller argues that memoir can be a mechanism to relieve suffering, noting that “in Eggers’s world, pain and loss are not necessarily private, discrete, internal experiences, but rather, fluid states, that can leak and overflow onto or into other people, including readers, who are enlisted to witness what the narrator cannot bear” (987). Put differently, for Savitt and Miller, Eggers’s novel functions not to call into question whether experiences of suffering can be faithfully represented and communicated to others, but rather stages something nearly the opposite—namely, the power of fiction to make suffering visible and to document how pain circulates among and between individuals, including between readers of novels and fictional (or semi-fictional) characters. The reading of this text that I’ll offer in the pages to follow is in keeping with this second way of understanding Eggers’s novel. Indeed, on my reading, the narrative the novel unfolds is marked by a principle of “leakage,” whereby emotions “overflow” the individuals who feel them. But I also argue that this principle of emotional leakage is a form of progressive politics; the reader is exposed to Dave’s leakage of emotional successes and failures as he grapples with the creation of a new form of American manhood that celebrates sympathy and sincerity over hostility and indifference toward the Other, and in the process, privileges a particular kind of subjectivity for men.

The sympathetic and sincere masculine subjectivity my reading of Eggers’s novel privileges depends heavily on the necessity of belief in Dave’s sincerity in the face of Eggers’s excessive irony. Irony is “a toxic by-product of postmodernity” (Konstantinou 42) and often becomes an impediment for readers to embrace the sincerity of artwork. However, Konstantinou aligns Eggers with David Foster Wallace and David and Diana Wilson as examples of artists who want to create “the believer” that stands opposed to the “mean reader” that postmodern

irony creates (41–42). In terms of Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, there is a tension between irony, on the one hand, and sincerity, on the other. I argue, as does Konstantinou, that the reader must believe in the sincerity of Dave’s struggles with toxic masculinity as a positive example of “a postironic ethos that might help one endure and overcome the negative effects of contemporary irony” (Konstantinou 42). My reading of novel’s “postironic ethos” demonstrates, through form and content, that embracing overflowing emotions creates a path to a more open, sympathetic, and sincere existence for Dave and for the readers simultaneously. By portraying his struggles with masculinity, Eggers not only comes to terms with his failures but also instructs the audience through his grief, suffering, and eventually successes along his journey. Eggers’s genre-defying novel enacts the breaking down of barriers on the level of form (Mackay, Polvinen, and Funk), but also on the level of content (Sinor, Savitt, and Miller), insofar as it explicitly shows the reader how Dave sincerely wants to be a more progressive male. To achieve this evolution, the narrator Dave must learn to accept the loss of his family and innocence, but at the same time, he must accept the loss of a self-centered masculinity that refuses to celebrate sensitivity and sincerity. Thus, the reader is allowed to witness the indictments and proposed answers to becoming a more emotionally evolved male in the twenty-first century’s long-overdue movement toward diversity.

By focusing on Eggers’s novel last, I argue that his Generation X novel extends the criticism made by previous authors Coupland and Palahniuk. But where Coupland begins the depiction of a particular masculinity more suited to the shifting cultural and economic landscape in the narrator Andy, Palahniuk uses his nameless narrator and Tyler Durden to offer the anti-Andy as negative representation of Generation X masculinity. Eggers’s novel pushes the boundaries of both form and content by using memoir, fiction, drama, and poetry to establish the

necessity for a new, evolved masculinity moving beyond the limits of the twentieth century's violent, patriarchal, breadwinning male doomed to fail in creating lasting community. In fact, I contend the novel demonstrates the most progressive path forward for Generation X men becoming emotionally open to a world progressing toward multiculturalism and women's advancement.

Eggers's focus on the identity politics of white masculinity actually aligns with similar concerns posed by his contemporaries. Gen X writers like Elizabeth Wurtzel and Sherman Alexie created works that explored their own struggles with identity in the late twentieth century. In 1998, Wurtzel published *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, another memoir following *Prozac Nation* (1994). Likewise, Generation X writer Sherman Alexie published a book of poetry, *One Stick Long*, and a collection of short stories entitled *The Toughest Indian in the World* in 2000. For both Wurtzel and Alexie, writing was the tool to explore their minority status in a world still dominated by white, masculine ideologies. Wurtzel's memoir explores the struggle of strong women in the late twentieth century. Alexie (who dealt with sexual harassment complaints in 2018) explores what it means to be a Native American male in America at the turn of the century. Thus, Eggers's examination of what it means to be a white, middle-class male aligns with the theme of identity politics explored by his peers. What is most fascinating about Eggers's novel is that he also writes about the struggles of minorities in direct relation to his white masculinity. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* grapples at crucial moments and in extended passages with his own failings and successes in terms of the new masculinity Dave attempts to create. I argue that putting Eggers's novel in this historical moment with Gen X writers like Wurtzel and Alexie is important because we can see Eggers, too, is concerned about the status of the Other in his novel.

But in returning to the Generation X writers in this project, it becomes evident that instead of bristling against progressive masculinity like Palahniuk's characters, Dave is an extension of Coupland's Andy seeking to find the Rilkean "letter inside," which can only be done by accepting the death of his parents, embracing his role as both mother and father to his brother Toph, and finding employment that sustains him not only physically but, more importantly, emotionally as a progressive member of society. This is not to say that Dave is the perfect model of Generation X masculinity. In fact, Dave struggles and fails along the way by falling into various traps of sexism and racism. Instead of viewing these moments as direct assaults on the evolution of Generation X masculinity, I read these moments and the novel at large as the struggle to break free from ideological comforts that belong to a time long past. In the final pages, Eggers echoes Walt Whitman's argument for a freer society for all Americans, so that both authors' work demonstrates the beliefs that literature can be an instrument for progressive change. I will return to this argument later in the chapter, but for now it is imperative to understand how this experimental novel imagines progressive change and how it insists upon something like male self-reformation as a motor of progressive change.

"She would run right over you": Eggers's Elegy for His Mother

Though Eggers's novel revisits a number of concerns and themes in earlier Gen X fiction, this novel's representation of motherhood and of mothers signals a departure from—a fundamental break with—earlier Gen X fiction. Thus, it is a massive step forward in the portrayal of motherhood in relation to manhood. In the 1980s novels of Ellis and McInerney, mothers are empty or uninvolved with their children. The mothers that populate Ellis's *Less Than Zero* are drunk, absent, or uncaring. For the entirety of McInerney's *Bright Lights*, the second-person narrator represses his mother's death, refusing to mourn or grieve her. In fact, the

narrator obsesses on his failed marriage with Amanda as a distraction from the loss of his mother. And in the 1990s, Coupland's *Generation X* continues what we might call a hostile representation of mothers. Once again, we have a novel that gives voice to the idea of the "failed mother": Andy's mom has "given up" on her children, and the novel suggests that the yuppie stand-in Tobias is who he is—obsessed with money and sex—precisely because his mother *trained* him to be so empty. Finally, Palahniuk's nameless narrator exhibits forms of outright misogyny, lamenting, for instance, "a generation of men raised by women" (50).³ Earlier Gen X novels are marked by articulations of decided animosity toward women, especially toward mothers. Eggers's novel, in contrast, functions as an elegy for its author's—its protagonist's—dead mother. As such, it pushes back against earlier depictions by Gen X writers of baby boomer mothers and motherhood (and of baby boomer parents in general). In fact, this novel can be read as a celebration of a "baby boomer" mother. It is a novel wherein the Gen X male does not blame his mother but instead tries to become a version of her.⁴ The novel works to teach its readers, I'd suggest, that the way forward for the Gen X man has everything to do with following a path set by a version of the "baby boomer" woman.

To be clear: Eggers does not fall into the trap of portraying women as solely mothers or of suggesting that a "good" woman is a woman who is a "good" mother. Even so, it is important to focus on depictions of mothers in the novel and the respect he gives his mother when choosing the type of parent he wants to be for Toph. It would be very easy for a young male to simply rely

³ As I've suggested, *Fight Club* works to ironize its narrator's misogyny. Even so, the novel fails to articulate positive form of anti-misogyny, especially when it comes to mother figures.

⁴ That Eggers named his magazine McSweeney's—after his mother's 'maiden name'—is, I think, evidence my reading of Eggers's first novel as a form of elegy for his mother. I return to this issue below.

on the cultural notions of masculinity and be a father figure like his own father. But Dave comes to believe that to be a true parent to his orphaned brother, he has to be both parents, mom and dad, and he privileges his mother at all turns in the novel, suggesting that her version of parenting (including her version of tough love) is the model of parenting he should adopt. With so much animosity toward women as mothers in other Generation X novels, Eggers's choice to spend 400 pages coming to terms with his mother's death not only serves to celebrate her and her particular version of womanhood but also makes the point, as it were, that Gen X men have much to gain by tarrying with feelings of loss and powerlessness (as opposed to trying to banish these feelings).

The first feelings of powerlessness Dave experiences occur while watching his mother's mortality threatened by a simple bloody nose. Normally, a bloody nose is a minor problem that does not warrant a hospital visit. However, his mother's cancer is so dire that this ailment could lead to the hospital and death due to blood loss. While watching his mother's health fail, manifested in her very serious bloody nose, Dave remembers her strength: "As strong as she was physically, most of the power was in her eyes, small and blue, and when she squinted, she would squint with a murderous intensity that meant, unmistakably, that, if pushed, she would deliver on her stare's implied threat, that to protect what she cared about, she would not stop, that she would run right over you" (Eggers 15–16). "Murderous intensity" and "run right over you" "to protect what she cared about" illustrates a powerful, willful motherhood who will stop at nothing to shelter what she loves most. This portrayal is the exact antithesis of the baby boomer mothers in the Generation X literature I have explored until now. Here, motherhood is determined, loyal, and selfless. This is what Dave learns to celebrate and hopes to emulate throughout the novel. Therefore, by participating in the grieving process throughout the book, Eggers valorizes his

mother and womanhood while demonstrating the need for emotionally open and available Generation X men who are able to acknowledge female strength.

As noted, the book functions as an elegy for his mother; she is present in the entire novel, both directly and indirectly (I will return to this shortly), making her and her death the vehicle for Dave's evolution. The novel opens on her failing body and graphic suffering, and she appears off and on throughout the book as Dave struggles to embrace his new role of parent to his younger brother. Along his journey to understanding, the novel allows Dave to deal with his fears of being a man, a parent to Toph, a grieving son full of guilt, and an angry mourner who realizes his mother never received the recognition she deserved. But before Dave can confront these emotional tensions, he must face her physical demise. His mother's physical suffering is graphic, and in moment-to-moment detail. Dave bluntly explains her bodily failure by informing the reader that "they took my mother's stomach out about six months ago" and now she is spitting out "green fluid" that "smelled awful, much more pungent an aroma than one might expect" (Eggers 3). His mother's presence remains physical and graphic until Dave is in her hospital room worrying about the lack of flowers: "She stirs and opens her eyes. She looks at me. I get up off the chair and stand by the bed. I touch her arm. It is hot. 'Happy birthday,' I whisper, smiling, looking down on her. She does not answer. She is looking at me. She is not awake" (Eggers 45). The sharp, pointed sentences signal the intense reality of the moment. Dave's words are spoken in the present tense as he watches her die.

However, Dave does not really confront her actual death until at the close of the novel when he realizes: "It's her fucking birthday. I cannot believe that this happened again. Why do I not connect these things? Why do I know her birthday is approaching but do not remember on the actual day, not remember until I am on this jetty in the lake with her—" (396). Eggers is

referring to his comic and yet tragic failed attempt at spreading her recently recovered ashes in a dignified manner. With “dust everywhere” and struggling to make the memorial beautiful, Dave concludes, “I am a monster. My poor mother” (400). This is a son’s guilt. This is a son trying to honor a mother he so clearly admires. From the very opening pages until the very end, Dave’s mother is the catalyst for the progressive changes he attempts to make for himself and for the reader. It is openness--Whitman-like, I’d say--that distinguishes these passages from other authors we’ve read.

In her death, Dave’s mother becomes a symbol for the lack of respect and dignity women are given in American culture. And this epiphany allows him to finally evolve beyond the patriarchal ideology of his Gen X predecessors. Upon leaving the failed scattering of her ashes, Dave goes to the church where her funeral took place, and there in the church, we see a son’s rage at the disrespect his mother endured in her lifetime. Remembering himself standing before the funeral service preparing to give his eulogy, he takes the reader to the scene: “Where are all the people? It was not a crowd. It was a scattered thing, a few here, a few there. Everyone loved her; where were they? Everyone of course knew my mother, everyone, where were they? This could not be, would not do, a life and then this, this forty people” (Eggers 405). Dave’s repressed anger, which he has held in check throughout the novel, “leaks” in this moment as he faces what he has been struggling with all along: his mother never got the credit for the lives she touched and nurtured before her tragic death. Dave looks for her beautician, volleyball players, family members, parents of former students, etc., but they are not there. He finally expresses his deepest feelings: “This is the crowd that was at my *father*’s. It should not be the same crowd, the same number! They were not the same, these two lives ... All she put in, all she gave for you people, she gave everything for you people and this is—She fought for so long for all you people, she

fought every day, she fought everything...” (Eggers 406). Embedded in this passage is a startling revelation that has huge payoffs for my reading. Dave defends and celebrates a baby boomer woman who is community-oriented and civic-minded and who “fights” for the good of others. Dave is enraged that his selfless mother is getting the same treatment that his father received at his funeral. Directly, this is a moment where Dave compares two lives and sees that his mother, the teacher who actively engaged in her community, should have been celebrated far more by far more people. In fact, Dave is confused by the lack of gratitude she is given due to his belief that “kids loved her” because she “would take in kids who were going through divorces” and “was not shy about hugging any of them, especially the shy ones” (Eggers 15). But beyond her compassion for needy children, Dave recognizes his mother possessed a sincerity and sympathy so powerful that she simply did what was needed without thought from her community. He describes her empathy as “effortless” and lacking “doubt,” which “put people at ease” (Eggers 15). But moreover, his mother was unique in her actions, “so unlike some of the mothers, so brittle and unsure” (Eggers 15). His mother’s strength and confidence in her actions becomes a moment of celebration for Dave that further reflects his dissatisfaction with her lack of recognition from the community. A woman who worked so hard for her community is denied her due recognition only to be given the same treatment as a man that did not earn it at a commensurate rate.

His mother’s (and women in general) lack of respect afforded to her by their community is not the only lesson Dave learns from embracing his repressed pain over her tragic death. In the next section of the chapter, I explore Dave’s realization that workers, too, are denied the respect and dignity they deserve for their labor. He learns this lesson in his realization that his mother’s labor was not valued by her community. But for now, his mother is not being mourned properly,

insofar as the full extent of what her death means—insofar as the extent of her loss is not fully registered—at her funeral. Simply put: in her death, Dave’s mother is a victim of the second-class citizenship forced upon women and the value of their labor. By making such a damning indictment of the people that did not attend the funeral to mourn his mother, Eggers is indicting a culture that still privileges men over women and certain kinds of professions over others, something the novel fights against not only in this scene but in the depiction of Dave’s own struggles. Eggers argues that women need to be celebrated for their actual achievements and not an arbitrary alignment (or demotion) with traditional masculinity. By doing so, Eggers is demonstrating the behavior he wants to see: men who are sensitive to the quality of others outside of their gender.

Yet it is imperative to understand that Dave must struggle throughout the novel to arrive at his epiphany at the empty church. Though at the end of the novel Dave is able to acknowledge the meaning of his mother’s life (and death) in this way—is able not only to feel the loss of his mother but also to recognize and to celebrate her contributions to a circle wider than his own family—Dave is not always this capable of identifying sympathetically with mothers. Throughout the novel, Dave has key moments where his beliefs about motherhood are tested. There are moments where his progressive beliefs succeed, moving closer to the culturally evolved male Eggers offers the reader at the end of the novel. In other instances, he fails miserably, falling back into outdated roles of patriarchal bias. What is so compelling about these moments is that they offer insight into the difficulty for men of embracing progressive values, especially in terms of motherhood. By viewing key moments of crisis that occur before his epiphany, we can more fully appreciate Dave and his progressive identity at the end of the novel.

One failure occurs very early in the novel, long before the church epiphany, where Dave must interact with mothers at little league. This crucial scene allows the reader to witness how Dave perceives/understands his own struggles with being a single parent and with relating to mothers in particular. Sitting with the other mothers, watching their children at practice, Dave states, “I watch, and the mothers watch. I do not know how to interact with the mothers. *Am I them?* They occasionally try to include me in a conversation, but it’s clear they don’t know what to make of me” (Eggers 57) [italics in original]. Sitting among the other “mothers,” Dave is confronted by a cultural reality, or so he thinks through his own projection, that society is not ready for a male who takes on duties or moments of motherhood, despite the fact that he understands the necessity for such responsibilities to be a good parent to his brother, Toph. It is difficult to imagine other Generation X males, even Coupland’s Andy, embracing a role that is depicted in the sphere of mothers so easily or gracefully. This scene shows Dave authoring his manhood in terms of motherhood; being a man means embracing whatever parental duties are needed to support Toph, even if that means Dave must place himself in a situation where he is aligned with a group of mothers. He fully embraces because Toph needs to have love and support added to his chaotic young life. Dave could easily have chosen to drop Toph off or even sit in the car from a distance. But he chooses to confront the awkward situation because it is best for his brother/ “son.” He does not hide behind an outdated masculinity where the sphere of femininity is not broached because it would be degrading to the male ego. Instead, he embraces the situation without truly understanding what this means for his identity. Commenting on the scene, Dave states, “I am still apart, something else, and no one is sure what I am” (Eggers 57). While neither Dave nor other characters can imagine or understand exactly what he is, I read this moment as a direct example of the evolved Generation X masculinity the novel argues in favor

of over the failed past. The “something else” is a sympathetic male who puts the needs of his brother over the foolish bravado associated with patriarchal males. In this scene, Dave takes on the role relegated to women as mothers (think of the soccer mom motif) despite how alienated he feels. Instead of his own needs, Dave focuses on Toph’s.

But before we might see this as a positive representation in which a Gen X male celebrates motherhood, Dave unleashes a volatile, ugly rendition of white male patriarchal anger. Dave feels he is being treated negatively by the other mothers: “They don’t want to invest their time in the brother sent to pick up Toph while his mother cooks dinner or is stuck at work or in traffic. To them I’m a temp. A cousin maybe. The young boyfriend of a divorcee? They don’t care” (Eggers 57). Though we never actually know what the women are thinking, Dave’s resentful projection speaks to the very struggles of becoming a new progressive version of masculinity. Dave is not simply a brother or a cousin or a boyfriend without value compared to the mothers at the game. Dave seems to realize that he is exactly like a single mother who struggles to wear multiple hats to care for Toph. He must work outside the home, and he must work in the domestic sphere even if that means sitting with other mothers who do not see him as a peer. Instead of fleeing from the tension or anxiety, Dave embraces the reality that affords him the opportunity to truly align himself with the mothers at little league.

And yet, Dave falls into an all-too-familiar trap of toxic masculinity by refusing to connect with the mothers and attacking them in his private thoughts. Casting himself as the Other, Dave rants, “Fuck it. I don’t want to be friends with these women, anyway. Why would I care? I am not them. They are the old model and we are the new” (Eggers 57). Dave embraces his new identity as a single mother but with outdated ideological ramifications. Though he says, “Fuck it” as if he does not care, his anger is apparent, and he dismisses the mothers and refuses

to bond with them despite the shared realities they face as parents. He understands that he is not the same mother as the women sitting at practice. Instead, he is a young male learning to embrace feminine roles so that he can give Toph the love and support that is needed. He and Toph, his brother, are the “new” model of “mother” and “son,” but this new definition causes him to alienate the women and cast them aside. Dave falls back into his white masculinity as a safe haven, attempting to gain back the power he feels was taken from him by the women. This moment is rife with important tensions. Yes, he is learning to exist outside the stereotypes of masculinity so that he can author the version of masculinity that is needed, but he regresses back on stock, outdated cultural notions. He and Toph are the “new” version of single mother and child, but Dave makes no effort to interact with, learn from, or commiserate with these women. Instead, he casts them aside as enemies with no common identity. While the scene depicts a powerful evolution in thinking about masculinity that transcends the stereotypical depictions of motherhood in one moment, the scene also relegates the women to second-class citizenship bound to *his* definitions of single-female-parent. I argue that this moment of progressivism and conservatism facing off, exposing the tension of developing a new form of masculinity, is a necessary step in depicting the development of a new Generation X male protagonist. By depicting a moment of failure, the reader is allowed to see what not to be or become.

Later in the novel, Dave is confronted with another moment of crisis when he chooses to align himself with single motherhood proudly, seemingly learning from his previous failure, and moves closer to the awakening in the church. This successful moment demonstrates the path to a more evolved masculine identity that is lauded in the novel. Dave not only defends the plight of single mothers but also identifies himself as one. Eggers creates a scene where Toph is sleeping, but Dave deploys a fictional conversation between the two sons that allows his repressed feelings

to have free expression. I argue that Eggers aligns Dave with the reality of single motherhood because Dave is like them: a new reality that American culture is not ready to embrace because of the powerful common-sense notions of traditional family. In a 2001 article published in *Newsweek*, Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert use census data to conclude that single mothers are a very complex and diverse cohort that transcends the simplistic stereotypes associated with them. Defying stereotypes, “single mothers may be divorced or never-wed, rich or poor, living with men or on their own”; the cohort is “the new faces of America's family album” because “traditional households” are declining (Kantrowitz and Wingert). It is easy to see why Dave aligns with this demographic. First, his respect and admiration for his mother leads him to align with the feminine, but moreover, Dave is an orphaned son raising his younger brother as a single parent. His identity defies simple definitions, just like the single-mother demographics demonstrate. An example of Dave embracing the role of single mother occurs when fictional Toph recounts “a scene from just last week” where Dave and his friend Marny fight over Toph being late and not calling from his friend’s home to lessen Dave’s worries. Dave plays what seems like a stereotype of an angry mother: “So he was at Luke’s the whole time, but he hadn’t called. For about five hours. I had dinner ready, was waiting around, was going out of my brain” (Eggers 116). Marny tries to defend Toph, and Dave responds, “See, that’s just such bullshit, that you think you have a say in something like that, just because I’m young. I mean, you would never contradict some forty-year-old mother, would you?” (Eggers 116). Before Dave lets her fully respond, he states, “Well don’t. Because I am a forty-year-old mother. As far as you and everyone else is concerned, I am a forty-year-old mother. Don’t ever forget that” (Eggers 117). Recalling the scene in the park where Dave fails to align with mothers is important. Previously, Dave failed to connect his plight with the women in the park, but now he willingly aligns himself

with mothers and the struggles they endure. Instead of portraying himself as a single father, Dave highlights the respect a mother should be given when it comes to mothering her child. He views himself not as a stereotypical hands-off father, but as a hardworking, caring mother who deserves respect. It is at this moment that Eggers calls for white middle-class masculinity to align itself with single motherhood. While this gender reversal may seem totally ironic because Dave is not an actual mother or forty years old, I read this as a sincere moment of empathy for the struggles mothers face. The struggles in Dave's life have forced him to embrace motherhood. This is an example where Eggers celebrates the power of mothers by depicting Dave's evolved understanding that mothers deserve respect for the difficult jobs they perform.

But before the scene ends, Eggers complicates Dave's evolved alignment with motherhood by adding a racial component to Dave's understanding. The imaginary Toph steps in to tell Dave, "You've got that single-parent rage, that black-single-mother defensiveness, combined with your own naturally ready-to-be-indignant/aggressive [I read as masculine] tendencies inherited from our mom" (Eggers 117). While the sentence is no doubt quite funny, there is a moment of real tension where child/brother/Dave/Eggers defines Dave by the identity of their mother (manifesting masculine stereotypes) and a cultural depiction of black women. It is very clear that Dave celebrates his mother throughout the novel and aligns himself with her directly and indirectly. Dave floats into a new territory when imaginary Toph aligns him with the single black mother. The portrayal feels like the stereotype of the "angry black woman" mixed directly with his mother. However, it is difficult to read the moment clearly because the statement is buried in metafictional commentary. For instance, since Dave is so celebratory of mothers and their struggles in this scene, it is possible he is depicting a single black woman that is often maligned by society and therefore angry that she must constantly prove herself as a

valuable mother. Since the 1980s and Ronald Reagan, there has been the deplorable stereotype of black women as “welfare queens” using their children to exploit the resources of society. By Toph equating Dave to single black mothers, Eggers is asking readers to see that both Dave and single black moms are parents that the culture is not completely ready to embrace. Both are minorities that do not fit the mold of a white patriarchal definition of single motherhood. This is a positive reading of the scene, especially when one considers that the 1990s were “echoing the problems of the Black Power and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s” because “it once again seemed that women were invisible in race politics and race was invisible in gender politics” (Harrison 15). Eggers’s conversation with fictional Toph explodes the moment and sharpens his understanding of women and race because Dave is compared both to a single black mother and his own mother, citing the struggles of both. Simultaneously, this moment reads like a white male author stereotyping the Other, which rings of racism and sexism. While I will cover more overt struggles that Dave has with diversity in this novel, this moment is an exact reflection of the struggle with masculinity the novel uncovers and tries to explore: To become a progressive male who understands the plight of women and minorities is not an instantaneous creation. Cultural ideologies about white patriarchy are too strong. And despite these positive moments in which he celebrates his mom and single mothers of different races, Dave is still not a complete progressive male role model. That evolution only occurs once he comes to terms with the death of his mother and unmask his repressed rage when he returns to the site of her funeral.

While the previous examples focus largely on content as a means of celebrating his mother and womanhood, the form of the novel does so, as well. In a very lengthy Acknowledgments section filled with jokes and metafictional references, Eggers provides an “Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors” in which he attempts to break down key

elements of his text that are both ironic and sincere at the same time (much like the rest of the Acknowledgments section). What is noteworthy is just how many of the examples are related to his mother. Sun, tiny stuffed bear, Toph, dolls, and Lake Michigan are all symbols for his mother, he insists. The importance of a bear and dolls are not nearly as significant as Lake Michigan, where he comically scatters her ashes. But what is more telling is that Toph is a symbol of his mother. Therefore, I read this symbol as the burden that his mother felt to be a good parent. If his mother is also the sun, consider how life could not exist without it. The world would cease to exist, just as the Eggers children would cease to exist. The mother is the core of their existence. Of course, it takes a father to create children, and Dave does not leave his dad out of the symbols section, but his father is relegated to far more minor symbols, which, once again, demonstrates Eggers's celebration of womanhood over masculinity. The moon, the wallet (that Dave thinks he lost), and John, who is Dave's friend battling depression and addiction, are all connected to his father. Though the moon is traditionally associated with women, Eggers uses it as a symbol for his father and thereby subverts traditional metaphors to portray his father as in constant flux, never stable as one identity. Like the moon, his father continually goes through phases. As the novel demonstrates, his father was more distant and often difficult to connect with, while his mother was constant and strong until her death. The most telling symbol is the final one that is offered: Dave as mother. Therefore, the character depicted in the novel who struggles at every turn to find himself while trying to raise a child is a symbol for the struggles of his baby boomer mother and, I contend, mothers in general. By using so many symbols in the text, the novel becomes a mother-centric symbolic system—a tissue of reference and cross-reference that always comes back to the mother; thus, it's a novel written directly against, one could argue, not just Freud (for whom the father is at the center of the subject's symbolic

universe) but patriarchal culture more broadly, insofar as the father is the center of patriarchy's symbolic order.

Eggers's novel demonstrates the need for a sensitive male who is open to not only depicting the struggles of women and mothers but also celebrating their efforts. Though he possibly stumbles in his comment about single black mothers and definitely un.masks his own white patriarchal tendencies with the moms at little league, the novel moves to a much more open and honest, sympathetic depiction of women, particularly mothers. Where the previous Generation X novels simply indict mothers (baby boomer parents in general) as part of the characters' problems with coping in their time, Eggers struggles to unearth the real life of modern women. In highlighting these moments, the novel functions to teach its readers that this is the behavior that should be modeled, especially for white male readers. Dave is an example of masculinity that must be willing to embrace emotional pain and the powerless feelings that accompany the suffering. By accepting the emotional tension instead of projecting it onto the Other, Dave is an example of the potential for a more progressive masculinity. My reading jibes with Miller's "leakage" and Konstantinou's "postironic ethos" directly, where these moments of success and failure should be read as earnest depictions of emotional struggles that become instructive scenes of progressive change. Not only should women and mothers be acknowledged for their powerful roles, but men should also embrace their sympathetic emotions so that they can be much more fully developed individuals for themselves and those close to them. In this way, men can become much more important figures participating in a culturally progressive era.

Masculinity and Labor: Gen X Evolves

Just as we can read *AHWOSG* as a critical response to earlier Gen X novel's scripting of womanhood, so too can we read it as an indictment of earlier Gen X novels' malaise about work,

labor, etc.—especially work and labor prospects for a certain demographic of American men. Once again, the death of Dave’s mother causes an awakening to the realities of modern American culture. As explained, Dave has an epiphany about the disrespect mothers endure when he returns to the empty church and confronts the devalued labor his mother performed. He remembers that the “same crowd” attended his father’s funeral. Dave’s father was a lawyer, while his mother was a teacher. As Dave explains, his mother used her job to help the community, especially children with chaotic home lives. The fact that more people from the community did not show up to pay respects to the important work she performed causes Dave to confront the truth that workers are not valued for labor they perform that benefits the culture around them. A common trope of Generation X literature is a failing job market that offers meaningless, low-paying labor that not only makes success difficult but also leaves the worker unfulfilled psychologically. From the 1980s authors through Eggers, this struggle is always in the foreground. The difference between this novel and its predecessors is that Eggers tries to find a solution for Dave in the creation of a magazine with social and political goals as a means of trying to end the dead-end argument of his Generation X peers. By exploring a new avenue for employment, Eggers attempts to forge yet another new path of progressivity. Yes, the experiment fails before it can truly take hold, but clearly, it creates a map for Eggers’s own creation of *McSweeney’s*, which features his mother’s maiden name. Thus, she is a symbol of progressivism not only in the novel but also in his life. Naming the magazine after her honors her life and what she stood for in Eggers’s life. Therefore, *Might* magazine becomes a first attempt at developing a business that affords Dave a more evolved form of masculine labor, and one that is continuous with his understanding of the kind of subjectivity his mother—and perhaps a whole swath of “baby boomer” mothers—embodied. *Might* signifies power and possibility—optimism for Dave

and his friends. For now, it is important to focus on how *Might* magazine allows Eggers the opportunity to demonstrate the need and attempt for progressive labor as a Generation X male.

Positioning Dave next to previous authors' workers illuminates the evolution Eggers attempts to create. Though the various Generation X characters share a bleak view of their labor prospects, the characters' different views of their jobs help to understand why Dave is an important marker of evolution. McInerney's male, second-person narrator labors at a prestigious magazine only to find it unfulfilling to the point that he does everything possible to get fired. Abusing drugs and alcohol at work while choosing to avoid his responsibilities earns him a termination that is sorely deserved. One would think this was a dream job for a character who wants to be a writer and who lives in New York City in the 1980s, but it turns out to be meaningless (like everything else in his life). By the 1990s, Coupland's characters struggle with "McJobs" for so long that they decide to flee the United States and set up a hotel in Mexico that may rely on the barter system, especially stories shared, as a means of economic independence. Though highly unrealistic as a viable career, the effort underscores the need for a break from traditional labor paths that are either no longer available or that offer no meaning. Of course, Palahniuk raises the stakes and depicts angry young men so alienated from their labor and the meaning they desire that they become a militant terrorist organization that wants to destroy society and reset the system to a time when men dominated the labor market. Eggers embraces the past work of his predecessors in his depictions of temp work. The jobs are meaningless and offer no pride for the worker. But Dave realizes that this meaninglessness offers a type of freedom he had not anticipated. Moreover, the meaningless nature of the work inspires him to find a job that will offer him a newer, more progressive labor identity.

Dave begins his working life in California as a temp, and he finds the labor empty and uninspiring, but nonetheless freeing. This is a new view of labor for the Gen X writers of this project because none of the authors were able to find positivity in dead-end jobs. The evolved view Eggers offers resides in the very devalued and temporary existence of his labor:

While temping there are breaks, and lunch, and one can bring a Walkman if one so desires, can take a fifteen-minute break, walk around, read—It's bliss. The temp doesn't have to pretend that he cares about their company, and they don't have to pretend that they owe him anything. And finally, just when the job, like almost any job would, becomes too boring to continue, when the temp has learned anything he could have learned, and has milked it for the \$18/hr and whatever kitsch value it may have had, when to continue anymore would be a sort of death and would show a terrible lack of respect for his valuable time—usually after three or four days—then, nearly enough, the assignment is over. *Perfect.* (Eggers 85) [italics in original]

Embedded in this passage are the same labor realities represented by previous authors. The difference lies in Dave's expectations and his acceptance of the limited opportunities of the labor market. Even though Eggers describes a similar labor market with diminished opportunities, here he parts ways with earlier Gen X writers because he discovers unexpected possibilities for himself as a temporary worker. Dave does not expect that being a temp will offer him a path into a company leading to a solid career that will last until retirement. He sees the situation for what it is: neither employer nor employee values each other. The temp work is a paycheck; the temp worker is anonymous, temporary labor to be cast off when no longer needed. Whereas the protagonists of 1980s and 1990s Gen X novels respond almost immediately with animosity or rage when they find themselves faced with similar work situations and prospects, the protagonist

of Eggers's novel is, at least for a time, anything but resentful or disaffected: he signals that he accepts his "exploitation," and he recognizes in it a form of freedom.

Eggers's depiction of labor does not stop here. His representation of work is not merely a re-coding of the meaning of "flex-spec" labor vis-à-vis earlier Gen X writers; instead, Eggers also, and unlike earlier writers, imagines in his novel a form of labor that departs from McJobs and that is both sustaining and rewarding for the worker. His temp job is not a necessary step on the ladder to a higher paying career; Dave realizes that releasing himself from this paradigm of masculine labor opens up space for him to create something new. Beyond the boundaries of an employee seeking security and promotion within a worn-out system, Dave decides to create a job that is more reflective of the values he is developing as a progressive male and aligned with his baby boomer mother's social consciousness. It is as if Eggers picks up on the unrealistic dream hotel Coupland's characters decide to create at the end of *Generation X* and instead gives Dave the real opportunity to define his labor in a way that is meaningful to him.

Therefore, Eggers's novel is not, finally, a celebration of temp jobs as freedom. In fact, the temp job is nothing more than a stepping-stone to finding a job that not only pays the bills but also fulfills Dave as a progressive individual. But instead of trying to create this world alone, Dave reaches out to the friends in his life who are experiencing the same lack of options and are moving to California. Sympathetically, Dave understands that even though "it's this mass migration, [with] about fifteen of us out here" and "more of us landing in San Francisco every month," the opportunities are so bleak that "no one has come to take advantage of this job market, which is anything but enticing. For now, we're all scraping by with temping, with anything" (Eggers 129). I contend that the shared lack of opportunity awakens Dave to the possibility of collective labor to create the job opportunity they cannot find. Since they are all

suffering under the same lackluster job market, they can work together to create options. Dave's realization is made possible by understanding that his lack of mobility is his friends' lack of mobility, as well. And this reality of diminished labor opportunities is exactly what motivates the characters to create something more fulfilling, more progressive. Instead of being angry and hating their jobs and getting fired, instead of fantasizing about destroy the all-encompassing labor system like the previous Gen X characters, Dave and his friends decide to create something. This progressive change is needed for the characters in the novel to create *Might* magazine.

The beginnings of *Might* magazine resonate in the language of destruction similar to Palahniuk's characters from *Fight Club*. After a failed sexual hookup with friend Meredith on a beach where "it suddenly feels forced, silly between friends who should know better...we talk about our jobs" (Eggers 143). This discussion leads to *Fight Club* allusions where the destruction of the world is fetishized. Meredith states, "We just converge on the buildings like ants, then wire the things and knock them down, knock everything down, every day, so the world, by noon or so, is flat again, wiped clean of buildings and bridges and towers...we wake up, tear the world down to its foundations, or below that even, by three in the afternoon, we've got a new world" (Eggers 145). The language used is reminiscent of the language of Project Mayhem and its need to destroy the world. A parallel is found in *Fight Club* when the mechanic states, "Imagine hunting elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center" (Palahniuk 150). Dave tells Meredith, "I mean, imagine walking among the ruins, you know? Wouldn't that be phenomenal? Not ruins like dead people everywhere or anything; I mean, just ruins like things disassembled, cleared away, so every day you'd be left with just a bare, pure landscape..." (Eggers 145). While both novels imagine a world reborn after destruction, both the goals *and* the

voice are different. The men in *Fight Club* want actual destruction to bring about their return to masculine glory and power: “Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world” (Palahniuk 125). For Dave and Meredith, a male *and* a female, their vision is more metaphorical and built around progressive goals: “Yeah, sure, more justice and everything, but as much as that, really, is the feeling of—” (Eggers 145). This feeling that is never really defined is exactly the point. They are searching for something that offers feeling, sympathy, and connection achieved through their labor. Meredith even explicitly states, “every day a world-clearing sort of revolution, a bloodless one, one more interested in regeneration than any sort of destruction” (Eggers 144). Notice that the goal of their labor must be about creating and not simply destroying, and this view is an evolved version of Palahniuk’s Project Mayhem. “Bloodless” and “regeneration” are stark contrasts to the goals of Project Mayhem, a male-dominated organization. A peaceful revolution is the goal from the female and male characters. Clearly, Dave and Meredith’s discussion of needs and goals is a more progressive view of their collective group than has been offered prior to this novel.

Moreover, *Might* is a progressive form of labor for the workers because their work speaks to the power of literature and ideas to change the world while still reflecting concerns about diminished labor opportunities similar to earlier Generation X novels. Dave explains to Meredith that Moodie, Flagg, and Marny are “putting something together that will smash all these misconceptions about us, how it’ll help us all to throw off the shackles of our supposed obligations, our fruitless career tracks, how we will force, at least urge, millions to live more exceptional lives to...do extraordinary things, to travel the world, to help people and start things and end things and build things...” (Eggers 147). “Smash” and “throw off the shackles,” again,

harkens back to Palahniuk, but it is tempered with the need to help people find more meaning in their lives, focusing on building instead of destroying. Beyond that, this is not Palahniuk's *Fight Club* world of the physical, where violence is condoned as the manifestation of masculinity. Instead, this is a world like Coupland's, where Andy creates the story of Edward offering people maps to help them find their way in the modern confusion. For Eggers, the magazine can be the map for Generation X. But where Andy's creation is a private, fictional character sharing his story with only the reader, Dave and Meredith and their friends make their vision real. They use their progressive sentiments to put into action a plan that offers them employment while giving back to society. Thus, their labor is meaningful to them and society. This new view of labor is accomplished by favoring the world of sentiment over the world of the physical violence as a means to enact change.

While both Palahniuk's Project Mayhem and Eggers's *Might* magazine both fail to bring about the "revolution" they wanted, the latter creates a new progressive view of labor for Gen X characters. Yes, Dave and Meredith's progressive dream fails, and the death of the magazine becomes inevitable no matter how lofty their hopes. Dave explains what "the rest of us pretty much knew going in: that there would be no money in this, not for a long time at least, if ever, and the hours were going to be ludicrous, spent in a filthy corner of a shaky warehouse, where dust falls from the rafters when the tenants walk above, where the lock are decorative only, where the rent sets us back \$250 a month" (Eggers 169). The Paper Street house where Palahniuk's "space monkeys" labor away in horrible conditions and the workers at *Might* are in similar situations. The difference, again, is that Dave and his friends understand that though the odds of failure are high, the need to create meaningful labor is worth the risk. *Might* magazine is about creation for opportunity but also creation of a newer life: "All together, our floor, our

building, it has something, is bursting, is not just a place where people are working but a place where people are creating and working to change the *very way we live*" (Eggers 170). Thus, Dave makes clear that work is more than a paycheck; work is the action of making meaning for the betterment of the worker's life. The "our" use of first-person possessive repeated speaks to the very view of labor that is valorized. No one boss is in control like Tyler Durden, the traditional patriarch from the early twentieth century. Here, men and women work together collectively for the progressive goals they choose to champion: "We want everyone to follow their dreams, their hearts (aren't they bursting, like ours?), we want them doing things that we will find interesting" (Eggers 173). "Hearts" speaks to the very sentiment of compassion that is the heart of the progressive goals Eggers champions in the novel. It is as if, for a moment, Dave's life is no longer "heartbreaking" once he decides to give back and connect with people. By building *Might* and working with his friends, the labor becomes fulfilling to him. Moreover, by focusing on progressive ideals and using the magazine as a vehicle to communicate these beliefs, Dave attempts to reach out to the masses and inform them with the very same ideals. However, they learn that "the grind has begun...we've reached the end of pure inspiration, and are now somewhere else, something implying routine, or doing something because people expect us to do it, going somewhere each day because we went the day before, saying things we said before because we have said them before, and this seems like the work of different sort of animal" (Eggers 287). Dave asks, "what was conquered?" and, "what was changed?" (Eggers 416). He answers his own questions by stating, "It has been something to do, some small, small point to make, and the point was made, in a small way, and so fine..." (Eggers 417).

While Dave seems to feel that the magazine accomplished little, making only a small point, I contend that the magazine and its failure represent a monumental shift in Dave's life and

his Generation X labor identity. During another example of metatextuality, Dave takes part in an interview with an MTV executive in the hopes of gaining a spot on the television show *The Real World*. The interviewer is actually Dave, and Dave is actually the person being interviewed. The fourth wall is broken several times during this scene. But during a question about the magazine and its name, *Might*, Dave tells the interviewer, himself, “it can mean two things at once, can sit right on the fence between two meanings—with, in this case, ‘Might’ meaning both *power* and *possibility*” (Eggers 203). For the Generation X novels I have examined, the men often feel like powerless sufferers stuck in dead-end jobs that offer no means to traditional power and no means to a new power. Because of this, they all quit (McInerney), run away (Coupland), or seek to destroy everything around them (Palahniuk). But Dave learns that there is power in the collective. Work that is shared among peers with sentimental goals of changing the world can motivate people to new forms of labor. Moreover, the fact that Eggers allows Meredith to be such a voice in the creation of *Might* speaks to the necessity of women becoming equal allies in the world, not inferiors or competition hell-bent on emasculating men. Where Palahniuk’s narrator continually ignores Marla’s important voice throughout the novel because of his misogynistic values, Dave listens to Meredith and her ideas. Finally, the word “possibility” speaks to hopefulness and creation. Destruction will not bring about meaningful labor as the men in *Fight Club* seem to believe, unmasked as the negative examples of Generation X masculinity they represent. Thus, Dave’s creation of a magazine with his friends reflects another progressive moment for masculinity because he does not seek power over others. Furthermore, Dave relies on hopefulness to enact changes that benefit his fellow workers and the culture at large. *Might* magazine might have failed as a business for Dave and his friends, but it succeeded in demonstrating that there are other avenues for masculinity and labor that transcend the traditional

models, which no longer accurately reflect the political and cultural moment the novel was written in or the moment we are living in currently. Moreover, *Might* stands over and against alternatives like *Fight Club*. Thus, the struggle with labor offers another moment of instruction, “leaking” emotional lessons of “postironic ethos” learned by the protagonist to the reader in very sincere terms.

Residual Ideology: Conservative Masculinity Rears Its Ugly Head

Thus far, I have explored examples of Eggers’s progressive masculinity as positive models of a new articulation for Generation X masculinity built on sympathy and fellow feeling. These examples are a larger expansion of the position Coupland created in *Generation X*, where an evolved masculinity is presented through characters sharing personal stories to break free from the anger, resentment, and hopelessness depicted by Ellis and McInerney. However, there are moments in the novel where Eggers falls back into outdated notions of manhood, like Palahniuk’s characters, when the residual ideologies of traditional twentieth-century masculinity prove difficult to discard. I read *Fight Club*’s two protagonists as a negative example of Generation X masculinity. The nameless narrator and Tyler Durden are the anti-Generation X males that must be discarded in favor of progressive manhood more reflective of the historical and current problems Generation X faces. Similarly, Eggers presents key moments where Dave finds himself falling prey to his worst prejudices, which, again, should be viewed as negative examples of the progressive masculinity that Generation X novels demonstrate. Therefore, the following should be read in the same manner as *Fight Club* as strong criticisms of outdated masculinity.

As previously mentioned, a minor example of this problem occurs in the moment when Dave is speaking to himself through the imaginary Toph and compares his single-parent

struggles to those of a black woman. While Dave recognizes the serious struggles of a minority trying to fulfill the difficult duties of a single parent, there are also serious problems. First, Dave, a white male, aligning himself with a black woman is problematic because of the very different experiences both are afforded by American society. Dave's privilege is seemingly ignored and disregarded. Moreover, Dave appears to fall into the trap of seeing single black moms as the negative stereotype of the "angry black woman," which is a damaging depiction of the realities that black women face. Clearly, this is a negative example of white masculinity professing the residual ideologies of white privilege. Furthermore, this moment depicts "mansplaining," where an ignorant version of reality is offered in place of a more sympathetic and realistic understanding. When coupled with the failure at practice where Dave lashes out in private thoughts, railing against mothers existing in a similar position to him, it is clear to see that when it comes to women, Dave needs to evolve before the novel ends, which he does after truly facing his mother's death. Again, I do not read this as a complete failure of Eggers's progressive goals. Instead, I see this as a Palahniuk-esque moment where the reader is presented with negative examples that present a failure to depict the limitations of such outdated notions of manhood. And yet, there are other key examples in the novel that offer the same criticism.

Creating the cover of the first edition of *Might* magazine offers another failure for masculinity to live up to the progressive identity that Eggers posits in the novel. This minor example of failure is quite powerful because it demonstrates the blindness to racial and gender equality that belied business in the age of affirmative action during the 1980s and 1990s, when businesses, largely run by white males, bristled at government mandates that weakly attempted to level a tilted playing field by requiring employers to hire minority employees. Not only did this band-aid not help the issue, but it often exacerbated the problem because affirmative action

allowed white men to see themselves as victims of a system trying to take their power and offer it to those, they deemed unworthy and unqualified. Of course, much of this backlash was nothing more than sexism and racism hiding behind stock indictments of big government ruining business and interfering in the lives of the private business owners. Dave falls prey to this very same residual ideology when he and his friends realize that their staff is not diverse enough to reflect their progressive image, which will be depicted in their first magazine cover, to the outside world. Dave explains:

Of course, we'll be there, for starters. Moodie, Marny, and me. Now to diversify. We are obsessed with seeming diverse. Not in terms of actually having an incredibly diverse staff or anything—but in terms of appearing diverse... We *must* look like the perfect cross section of young America! For the camera we need three men and three women; three whites, one black, one Latino, one Asian—But instead we have just us, three/four white people (*and not even a Jew!*). (Eggers 177) [italics in original]

Adding to this troubling attempt to diversify, Dave considers using Shalini, who is Indian, to “pass for a more well-known minority” only to then consider June Lomena, who “is our black friend” (Eggers 177). The problems pointed out in these passages are numerous.

First, the language Eggers employs speaks directly to the very problems of traditional masculinity. “Appearing diverse,” “for the camera we need,” “a Jew,” “pass,” and “our black friend” are so antipathetic that they are almost difficult to read. The first two phrases reflect a disturbing reality of the business world. Diversity was not a truly progressive goal to help achieve gender and racial parity; it was simply a forced public relation move so that businesses could appease the government and *appear* diverse, as Dave explains. There was no true nobility in most cases; it was all about public perception. Thus, Eggers actually portrays a serious

problem America faced at the time, and *Might* magazine represents a microcosm of this reality. Furthermore, racial identity becomes very tense when Dave begins to use the language of “a Jew,” wants an Indian friend to “pass,” or even wheels out “our black friend” to fulfill a business image. In these phrases, Dave becomes the worst depiction of the most traditional white male identity from the twentieth century: the WASP. For the WASPs, Jewish people, Indians, and black people are all the Other and must be treated as such. Dave’s language smacks of this very negative depiction. Only the most racially insensitive white man would refer to “a Jew,” consider asking a man to “pass,” and fall back on the notion of progressive race relations by referring to the token “black friend.” Questions over Eggers’s intentions are almost impossible to answer. Frankly, his intentions are not as important as the results. This scene at the magazine illustrates that as progressive as a Generation X white male might be, ideologies are very difficult powers to shake off. Eggers offers the reader a glimpse into the inner workings of the blindness of conservatism that impedes the development of the sympathetic and emotionally open male that Dave must become. I argue that these moments exist precisely to challenge the reader, to make him/her confront the depths of ignorance and racism that exist in the dominant paradigm of white masculinity. We are supposed to cringe and be angry with Dave because he fails the very goals he strives to achieve. Dave’s failures become didactic because they instruct the reader on what not to be.

To compound the problem of residual masculine ideology, Eggers offers two negative, racially charged scenes in the novel that directly tie to outdated notions of white masculinity and race that are essential negative examples of Generation X manhood. The first scene occurs after Meredith and Dave’s decision to create a magazine to express their progressive hopes. While on the beach and about to have sex only to be interrupted (traditional masculinity denied), Meredith

and Dave are accosted by a group of “Mexican” (Dave believes) males and females who bully them and threaten to steal their clothes and money only to give up and confess that it was all a joke: “hey listen, man, we was just goofing around. Sorry” (Eggers 151). Of course, it is clear that this was not a funny joke and quite scary for Dave and Meredith, and it appears the scene is over until Dave realizes his wallet is gone. Dave confronts the group for the wallet he believes they stole, and Dave’s choice of language reflects deeply embedded patriarchal and racist thoughts. Dave first begins by demanding to talk to “the man,” which demonstrates that he believes power *is* masculinity (Eggers 152). As his interrogation continues, Dave defines himself as “the cop,” “I am America,” the “stern but fair warden,” “the foreman,” “the boss,” “overseeing” the “Mexicans” look for the wallet as they plead their innocence (Eggers 153–155).

The language used in the moment of trying to reclaim his white patriarchal power (symbolized in Dave’s father’s missing wallet) is disturbing. Dave unleashes a litany of racist portrayals of the Other while affirming white masculinity as American power, noble and just, that must stop criminal foreigners from their inherent evil behaviors. Dave even goes so far as to point out that police will believe “two regular people” sitting on the beach versus “you people” only to double down on his xenophobia by stating, “I mean, I don’t know what your status is with green cards and everything, but this could get really fucking ugly, you guys” (Eggers 153–154). The terrifying thing about this scene is that it feels as if it was written in 2016–2018 with echoes of “build the wall” lingering in the air. The real possibility that these people may very well be American citizens, his equals in a democratic nation, does not occur to Dave. Instead, he is the locus of power that must dole out justice to the villainous Other: “I am the president” and “I am Captain America” (Eggers 151) feel all too familiar with Trump’s visions of America. Dave returns home lamenting his lost wallet and the white patriarchal masculine status it affords

him: “the wallet is gone. My father has slipped further down the well. The wallet was the constant reminder; every time I used it, it was always there, in my pocket! Taken by stupid Mexican spiders, the fuckers” (Eggers 162). I read this scene as Dave feeling his loss of traditional masculine power by the influx of Mexican immigrants or citizens as a staunch criticism of the very conservative belief that America must return to traditional values that Generation X youth witnessed in political symbols—Ronald Reagan all the way to Donald Trump—where white men are the victims and need to return to a time when their power was clear and untested.

The chapter ends very abruptly with Dave walking into his room and seeing “The wallet. On the dresser. It was here” (Eggers 165). Besides the fact that this proves the “Mexican” group did not steal his wallet, it also demonstrates that all of his racist anger and attacks were unjust and unrealistic. Moreover, the fact that Eggers makes no comment speaks directly to his use of the novel itself functioning as criticism. Dave makes no apology. Dave does not attack himself. In fact, Dave says nothing, and the chapter just ends. He blindly moves on without so much as a word of regret or self-criticism. By not addressing this horrifying moment, Dave’s ugly mistakes are amplified and underscored for their very ignorant beliefs rooted in prejudice. The silence reads as an omission of guilt. At a moment of crisis when his masculinity (the wallet) was believed to be stolen from him, he turned to racism to quell his fears only to find that it was his mistake all along. This is a powerful example of the very negative behavior that Generation X males need to confront within themselves so that they can replace the negativity with a more open and sympathetic belief structures about Others.

Though much more minor than the beach scene, Dave, again, allows racism to guide him during another patriarchal crisis reflected in John’s suicide attempt of ingesting pills. The suicide

attempt conjures up images of masculinity destroying itself, furthering the fear of lost power similar to the beach scene. Rushing to the hospital to see John, Dave narrates the scene as follows: “I pull up to a light, next to a bunch of black kids. Maybe they’ll shoot me. I’m in the zone of probability. I cannot be surprised...if these kids happen to be bad kids, and have guns, and want to shoot someone for an initiation or whatever reason bad kids shoot people like me, it will be me...with the bullet in my head, I will drive into a tree” (Eggers 268). Instant questions arise about the nature of his perception of the scene. He automatically assumes that young black kids are carrying guns and want to kill him as initiation into a gang. Had the car been full of white kids, it is doubtful Dave would have had the same concern. Yes, it is a historical reality that gang violence with young black and Hispanic males was on the rise in southern California in the late twentieth century. In a 1994 FBI publication, Brantley and DiRosa contend:

In the 1980s, a combination of factors fueled a dramatic increase in gangs and gang affiliation among the Nation’s youth. Gang violence grew to unprecedented levels, as an expanded number of groups battled for control of turf and profits from drug distribution. This trend continues in the 1990s. In Los Angeles County—the focal point of gangs in contemporary American-gang-related homicides increased over 250 percent—from 276 in 1979 to over 700 in 1990. [3] By contrast, during this same period, the number of nongang-related homicides declined significantly.[4]

While Dave’s concerns are aligned with a disturbing reality in Los Angeles at the time, Dave is in San Francisco. His immediate stereotyping that all young black males anywhere in California are gang members looking to kill a white male reflects, again, that in moments of crisis related to his father—a symbol of the past, class, and white masculinity—Dave has repressed racist tendencies that rise to the surface when his manhood is challenged. In moments of anxiety or

fear, hidden ideologies expressed as racist stereotypes surface. These expressions underscore Eggers's overall portrayal of the struggle for white men to become more sympathetic to the Other. Clearly, this is not the Generation X male that Eggers attempts to create throughout his novel. This is another example of what *not* to be, just like Palahniuk's characters.

To fully appreciate the complexity of these two scenes depicting Dave's racism, we must return to the "Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors" where Eggers aligns his dad with the wallet, which also represents security, the past, and class. Lastly, John is also a symbol for his father. Using these symbols, Eggers unmasks the depths of residual patriarchal ideology that is a powerful impediment to the progressive goals of the novel associated with his mother. Eggers's guide allows the reader to push deeper into the complexity of these racially charged moments to witness the depth of problems inherent for white males who cling to outdated, common-sense notions. By casting aside his progressive mother and aligning with his father and John, a friend struggling with drugs and a failed suicide attempt, traditional masculinity becomes flawed and dangerous. There is no stability in a father who was an alcoholic and a father he never really knew, as Dave admits when recalling the funeral scene (Eggers 33–35). However, two scenes tie directly to the wallet and John, both symbols of his father, that depict the worst racial tensions of the novel. Therefore, my contention is that when Dave is forced to align himself with his father and not his progressive mother, he falls prey to residual ideologies, returning to the outdated and insensitive behaviors of white masculinity that the novel pushes against. These negative examples serve to further my reading that, like Palahniuk's novel, the book's negative examples should teach the reader of the failures that need to be overcome on the way to becoming a truly sympathetic, progressive male.

By focusing on the Dave's failures concerning race and gender in the text, I call attention to the power of Eggers's novel to demonstrate not only negative examples like Palahniuk, but to take these negative examples a step further. These failures illustrate just how quickly and easily racism and sexism come to the forefront when residual ideologies of outdated notions of masculinity, which view white manhood as power and righteousness, are challenged. Moreover, these examples provide depth to these beliefs for males anxious about their shifting status at the turn of the century. This is not a far cry from the calls to "Make America Great Again" or even the 1980s fetishizing of the 1950s as the golden days of American power, which is nothing more than a very simple code for putting women and minorities back into "their place." I contend that Eggers's use of such brutal failures serves as powerful reminders that becoming a progressive, sympathetic male cannot and will not be easy. Therefore, these failures are important moments because they "leak" his emotional and psychological failures in a sincere manner to the reader so that important lessons can be felt emotionally and experienced indirectly. The mistakes read as genuine struggles to evolve beyond the trappings of outdated masculinity.

Eggers and Evolution: Whitman, Masculinity, and Generation X

To fully make his argument for an evolved masculinity, Eggers, ironically, turns to the past by adding the voice of Walt Whitman to his novel. Though the poet is never mentioned directly in the work, Eggers channels his poetry, particularly *Leaves of Grass*, at the very ending of the novel, which reads like a Generation X version of Walt Whitman. Far from reading this as a simple allusion or nod to the poet, I contend that Eggers's use of Whitman is purposeful due to the progressive masculinity that Whitman offered during his lifetime (and beyond). Where *Leaves of Grass* functioned as a text that aimed to unite a nation on the brink of civil war, the ending of the novel functions as an attempt to unite Generation X into a progressive unit more

interested in collectivity than selfish individuality. This call for a more united, sympathetic group built on the sharing of pain and suffering instead of repressing emotions comes from the white male narrator and author. Thus, I argue the ending is profoundly important because it demonstrates that a progressive Generation X male must cast aside stereotypical and retrograde masculinity built on dominance as strength and emotion as weakness. Instead, a sentimental masculinity is needed if there is ever going to be a progressive identity for both males and the generation at large.

Whitman's depiction of masculinity is complex and nuanced, but simply stated, it was a progressive view for his time that modeled sympathy for the Other underscored by the belief in freedom for the individual. In his book *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, David Leverenz contends that "From *The Wide, Wide World* to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, from *Walden* to 'Song of Myself,' American Renaissance writers build much of their rhetorical energy by dramatizing a process of conversion, and by directly addressing readers whose values have to be transformed" (18). For Whitman, a key part of this transformation is what exactly white masculinity is versus what it should be. In other words, Whitman posits that white masculinity needs to become more progressive and inclusive of the Other. I argue that this paradigm should be applied to Eggers and his novel as celebrations of alternative Generation X masculinity. I will return to this argument later, but for now, it is imperative to see the connection between masculine identity for Whitman and Eggers. To develop his argument, Leverenz uses Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth" as an illustration of Whitman's concern with patriarchal control: "For Whitman, manhood is his father's problem. It is a family pressure to be transcended, not of spirit of self-reliance to be emulated" (100). While Leverenz goes straight to the ideological powers of family to shape masculinity, I take this a step further, contending that

family is an ideological construction itself reflective of culture. Therefore, manhood is not only a family constraint but also a cultural one. Thus, Whitman's argument against patriarchal rule is far more radical because it works against larger cultural norms about masculinity.

Furthermore, I contend that Whitman's poem celebrates not merely white masculinity but also of the so-called Other—the slave, the woman, etc. By celebrating the Other, Whitman suggests that this new masculinity is a positive example of American manhood. Whitman offers the following examples:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside...
And [I] brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and
bruised feet,
And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him
some coarse clean clothes,
...And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and
ankles;
He staid with me for a week before he was recuperated and
passed north,
I had him sit next to me at the table...my firelock leaned in the
corner.

This powerful scene demonstrates Whitman finding a runaway slave and treating him as an equal; giving him comfort, shelter, and clothes; and treating the wounds from his chains. But finally, Whitman gives him a seat at the table (which African Americans were still fighting for during the Civil Rights era) only to have a gun near to protect the life of the runaway slave. This type of masculinity, extremely progressive, was a direct challenge to the notions of manhood in

1855, when slavery was still the dominant ideology of the American south. For Whitman to paint such a direct picture of love and protection for the runaway slave asserts that this is the masculinity that should be embraced by white American males.

Similarly, in the very next section of the poem, Whitman introduces the reader to a woman, “Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth / bather,” who is so repressed by the cultural norms of the times that she can only imagine joining the men she voyeuristically fetishizes: “Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore, / Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly, / Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.” Far from indicting the woman for her sexual desires or slut-shaming her as modern society might, Whitman feels for her and gives her freedom to follow her desires and needs. Seeking to destroy the cultural repression she suffers under, Whitman allows the woman freedom to explore her sexuality: “an unseen hand also passed over their bodies, / It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.” By focusing on these two examples, the runaway slave and a single woman, it becomes clear that Whitman’s view of masculinity is one that protects and encourages the freedom of the Other, which is clearly an example of transformative masculinity.

Whitman gives voice to other oppressed groups within *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman paints a picture of a negro, a slave no doubt, working with his horses in the field but goes on to state, “I behold the picturesque giant and love him.” More examples abound: “The quadroon girl is sold at the stand,” “The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race,” “The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf and the levee,” and:

The opium eater reclines with rigid head and just-opened lips,
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bob on her
tipsy and pimpled neck,

The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and
wink to each other,

(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you,)

In each of these examples of the Other, Whitman's gaze gives them validity because he uses his art to give them life. Instead of being something marginalized and therefore something to ignore, these outsiders become human beings who are suffering beyond the male-dominated gaze of American culture. It is fitting that the example I end with has Whitman chastising the men for their behavior and making clear he does not align with them. Throughout these examples, Whitman argues for a more progressive and sympathetic male that sees the suffering of the Others instead of ignoring them, or worse, inflicting their pain. This view of masculinity that Whitman professes and argues for in *Leaves of Grass* becomes important for Eggers's ending where he speaks to and for Generation X as a white male pleading for a new masculine subjectivity.

The direct correlation between Eggers and Whitman is found in Dave's discussion of "the lattice." During his fictitious interview for *The Real World*, Dave asks himself about his theory of "the lattice" and explains:

The lattice that we are either a part of or apart from. The lattice is the connective tissue. The lattice is everyone else, the lattice is my people, collective youth, people like me, hearts ripe, brains aglow. The lattice is everyone I have ever known, mostly those my age or thereabouts...but my people, we are still there, still able, if we start right now—I see us as one, as a vast matrix, an army, a whole, each one of us responsible to one another, because no one else is...people who have everything in common no matter where they're from, all these people know all the same things and truly hope for the same things, it's

undeniable that they do, and if we can bring everyone to grab another part of the other, like an arm at the socket, everyone holding another's arm at the socket, and if we can get everyone to, instead of ripping this arm from the socket, instead hold to it, tight, and thus strengthening—Then, um—Like a human ocean moving as one, the undulating, the wave-making—. (Eggers 211)

The fact that Dave trails off, unable to fulfill his metaphor, speaks to the complexity of what he wants to achieve. If we connect this to earlier Generation X novels, it becomes clear that his vision is inexpressible because it is something entirely new. McInerney and Ellis cannot even fathom a unified vision where Generation X works as a collective. Coupland envisions the possibility but only in a small, intimate group. While Palahniuk creates a collective, it is centered around a patriarchal control that does not build or foster community but destroys it.

Eggers spends the majority of his novel tearing down the patriarchal control embodied in his father and John while celebrating his progressive mother. In fact, this Whitmanesque ending (pages 435-437) only occurs *after* his failings with gender and race once he comes to terms with his mother's death. Thus, the celebration of his mother, which is the major goal of the novel, allows him to open his heart and begin to embrace all people in his lattice. That means that the women at the park, the single black mother, his minority friends at *Might*, the "Mexican" group on the beach, and the black male teenagers are all part of his lattice, are all his people. By becoming the progressive, sensitive male, Dave can unite with all the people that directly and indirectly connect to his life. I argue that Eggers ends his novel with a Whitmanesque rant about the responsibility of Generation X to one another because he sees that a new progressive masculinity is a major component of the evolution of a generation seeking to create a lasting and more evolved group.

To create the connection with the generation, Dave chooses to speak to the generation directly while invoking his progressive mother. Using the theory of the lattice, Dave writes, “Don’t you see I have done this all for you? I have done this all for you” (Eggers 435). These lines directly echo the epiphany at the church where Dave reflects on his mother’s life, improperly celebrated by her community: “They were not the same, these two lives...All she put in, all she gave for you people—she gave everything for you people, she fought every day, she fought everything...” (Eggers 406). At the pivotal moment when Dave begins his Whitmanesque speech to unify his generation, Dave aligns himself with his mother fighting for people who did not celebrate her sacrifice. He then turns to a violent description of his collective vision: “I pretend that I do not but I do. I eat you to save you. I drink you to make you new. I gorge myself on all of you, and I stand, dripping, with fists, with heaving shoulders—I will look stupid, I will crawl, drenched in blood and shit, I will...” (Eggers 435–36). The act of consumption Dave describes is the very act of open and shared sympathetic communication set free of pride. In contrast to Clay, the second-person narrator, Dag, and Tyler, Dave is arguing that instead of repressing and hiding the pains and losses that dominate Generation X literature, the members must express the pain allowing the metaphorical act of cannibalism. By consuming and sharing emotional pain, people can not only leak their sincere suffering but also connect with others feeling much of the same pain and loss. In other words, by embracing grief instead of repressing it, people can bond and create deeply emotional ties that can become larger cultural movements. Judith Butler explains this connection by clarifying the bonds that grief can create: “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it turns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” because grief allows its participants to experience “relational ties that have implications for

theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (22). Instead of being individuals suffering like the 1980s characters, Dave wants to sacrifice himself for suffering Gen X members like his mother did for the people she witnessed suffering. But instead of trying to simply help a small suburban community or help a small group of friends like Coupland’s Andy, the difference is the scope of the connection Dave desires: “There is nowhere I stop and you begin. I am exhausted. I stand before you millions, 47 million, 54, 32, whatever, you know what I mean, you people...and where is my lattice. I am not sure you are my lattice” (Eggers 436). The stopping and beginning sound straight from Whitman (“I am large, I contain multitudes”; “I stop somewhere waiting for you”) and then extend to the fluctuating numbers of Generation X’s size due to debated years of beginning and ending dates. However, the anger and confusion are palpable as he worries that Generation X does not recognize themselves as part of him as he is part of them. This anger spills over into a full rant where Dave argues:

I am there. I was there. Don’t you know that I am connected to you? Don’t you know that I’m trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you, that I hate you people, so many of you motherfuckers—When you sleep I want to wake you up, so many of you I want you to just fucking sleep it away because I only want you to run under with me on this sand like Indians, if you’re going to sleep fucking sleep all day fuck you motherfuckers oh when you’re all sleeping so many sleeping I am somewhere on some stupid rickety scaffolding and I’m trying to get your stupid fucking attention I’ve been trying to show you this, just been trying to show you this—What the fuck does it take to show you motherfuckers, what does it fucking take what do you want how much do you want because I am willing and I’ll stand before you and I’ll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait, and I’ve been old for so long, for you, for you, I want it fast

and right through me—Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you fuckers finally, finally, finally. (Eggers 437)

This long and angry rant, poetic and ungrammatical, is an emotionally sincere tirade about the lack of sympathetic connection among the generation. Notice that the form mirrors the content in this passage. Just as Eggers's content argues that Generation X must be emotionally open, letting out its frustrations and fears and anxieties so the grief can be exorcised, he uses the form of his angry, profanity-laden rant to convey the very same meaning that "leaks" unironically from Dave to the reader. Eggers wants the pain of his novel and his protagonist Dave to serve as symbols of shared suffering about the shifting cultural landscape Generation X has endured. From a childhood of divorce and family breakdowns, to a job climate that arrests the model of adulthood they were taught, to a shifting cultural climate where minorities are finally starting to gain ground, Generation X has faced a lot of difficult challenges to the very core of their American identity. Instead of hiding from these realities, it is imperative to face them head-on. It is imperative to share the struggles. It is imperative to evolve beyond the outdated models that never really worked in the first place. Eggers ends the novel with Dave, an angry white male, trying to wake up a generation so that they can work together to embrace the changes and become progressive participants in the twenty-first century. Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* ends with a vicious and passionate call for unity where he offers up his novel and himself as sacrificial lambs that begin the healing process through an open and emotionally progressive voice that demonstrates the very change that is called for throughout the Generation X novel.

Eggers's Contribution

By looking back at the male protagonists created by these major Generation X male writers, it becomes clear that Eggers creates the most fully evolved male which is a symbol for a new type of masculinity that should be embraced by Generation X. Returning to *Leaves of Grass*, I call attention to Whitman when he states, “Who need be afraid to merge? / Undrape...you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded, / I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no, / And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless...and can / never be shaken away”. In a typical progressive fashion, Whitman makes clear that all should unify and not be afraid or ashamed of who or what they are. The speaker is kind and assuring, letting the reader know that no matter what, he will not abandon them. What is fascinating about this passage, for my purposes, is how well it connects to the evolution of Generation X masculinity that Eggers creates.

By examining the male protagonists of each novel, it becomes clear just how important Eggers's creation of Dave really is. The early 1980s novels of McInerney and Ellis depict a fractured and alienated version of masculinity. The second-person narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* is so lost in the horror of his life, so alone without any real connection, that he hides from himself, narrating the story in second person so as to never fully embrace his own grief. But more directly, Clay states throughout *Less Than Zero* that “People are afraid to merge,” and the novel is littered with emotionally empty, unsympathetic Generation X teenagers who care very little for any of their peers or, maybe least of all, for themselves. Both authors illustrate a generation dealing with broken families that resonate into broken relationships with their peers. It is not until Coupland creates *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* that the very possibility of community emerges. With Andy as the positive model for Generation X

masculinity, Coupland creates a motley crew of varied characters all connected by their private grief and fears about their families, their careers, and their futures. However, it is only when the characters begin to open up and share fictional stories about their pain, which evolve into actual personal confessions, that it becomes clear Coupland is making a positive argument for how Generation X members can help each other deal with their frustrations. The highly sensitive and emotionally open Andy, leading by example, uses his stories to convince his peers to share their stories. Community is created for a small group, and for the first time, Generation X novels begin to offer a positive message that transcends the stereotype of being nothing more than “whiny complainers.” By the time Palahniuk publishes *Fight Club*, he creates community on a larger scale, founded by white males who have thrown away emotionally open lives, trading sensitivity for raw anger and violence. Being the anti-Andy, Tyler Durden and the nameless narrator create a world of violent men who believe that returning to the worst stereotypes of twentieth-century patriarchy and masculinity will be the salvation for their empty lives. This parody of community serves as a harsh critique of masculinity that does not privilege the emotionally open lives of Generation X men.

And that is where Eggers becomes so important as the final novel of my study. Eggers’s entire novel is about grief, suffering, fear, anxiety, and the hope of using these negatives to unite a generation. The entire novel serves as one giant open wound of emotional sharing, demonstrating that it is the emotional life, sensitivity to one’s own suffering and the suffering of others, that should constitute the new Generation X male. More importantly, this is the Generation X male that is needed to participate in evolving progressive values to build a greater community for all. Just as Whitman states that no one should fear to merge, Eggers spend his entire novel with his creation Dave communicating his grief in an effort to merge with the

suffering of other Generation X members. Whether or not Eggers's goal is realistic or achievable is not the point. What is important is that "to grieve" does not mean that the sufferer "is resigned to inaction," but instead, grieving can become "a resource for politics" (Butler 30). Therefore, Eggers's new version of progressive masculinity that transcends the emotionally stunted characters of his predecessors is deeply political. There is a hopeful path forward. Literature is about teaching people to be more sensitive and more emotionally open individuals. Eggers achieves this goal and sets the path forward for a generation to lose the fear that has haunted it for thirty years and finally begin to merge, using the power of sympathetic communication to create progressive, cultural meaning.

CHAPTER 6

EPILOGUE

In the opening lines of *Bright Lights, Big City*, McInerney's nameless narrator states, "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy" (1). That these are the first lines of such an early Generation X novel is important because his confused confession illuminates the central tension of the novel: a Generation X white male narrator completely alienated from his own identity. But more importantly, the narrator's identity crisis is the core concern of my literary engagement with these Generation X novels. The white male narrator is alienated, out of place, unable to truly say where he is or what he is doing because he is lost. These short, declarative sentences reflect the utter stagnation of his life. By moving forward to the year 2000 and viewing the final lines of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, we see an evolution of both narration and arguments about white masculinity. Eggers's Dave offers a final sentence that covers sixteen lines of text relying on hyphens, commas, and questions to confess his desperate need to "pump blood to you" because "this is for you," as Dave offers to sacrifice himself to the reader (436). Dave is "willing" to "give you my chest and throat," demanding "you motherfuckers" must "do it do it you fuckers finally, finally, finally" (437). In terms of content and form, Eggers's angry final lines are filled with a depth of meaning and purpose. Dave is fully aware of his identity and what he desires for himself and his generation. Eggers's ending is a progressive example of evolved masculinity. Looking at the juxtaposition between the opening lines and the final lines of my project's novels, I contend it is apparent that the Generation X novels evolve with greater complexity in terms of their form and content as they grapple with the creation of a sentimental male narrator. Indeed, I

argue Generation X novels written from 1984 to 2000 stage a political discourse focusing on first-person narration that reflects the need for an evolved form of white masculinity founded on sympathy. Thus what I have been trying to do is, on the one hand, understand how literary texts respond to—deal with, manage, react to—the contexts from which they emerge and, on the other, highlight the differences (as well as the similarities) within Gen X fiction with particular attention to first-person, confessional, complicated narration that engages and deploys the sentimental literary tradition.

This literary evolution should not be undervalued or overlooked as merely populated by “blank fiction.” In fact, Generation X novels with white male first-person narration offer a map for understanding masculine identity’s struggle to find its place within the cultural and historical shifts occurring in the late twentieth century. Simply put: the early novels of Ellis and McInerney cling to the traditional masculinity where the “strong silent type” suffers alone and keeps his emotional pain to himself. This choice destroys both narrators. Coupland posits a new masculine identity built on sentimental connections forged into sympathetic networks of friends able to express their anxiety and fears through storytelling. Palahniuk continues Coupland’s argument for open emotional communication by creating a narrator so alienated from his world that he unknowingly creates a hypermasculine projection in Tyler Durden that becomes the negative reflection of Coupland’s Andy. Finally, Eggers destroys all boundaries of Generation X masculinity with his narrator Dave, who learns to emulate his dead mother’s emotional desire to foster community without any selfish concern for accolades. I contend that these narrators offer a politically charged indictment exposing the trappings of repressed masculinity that refuses to accept its current moment by critiquing the desires to return to a past filled with the worst elements of patriarchy while simultaneously celebrating those who embrace evolution.

By focusing on the creation of sentimental narrators who teach moral lessons, I align these Generation X novels in the American tradition of sentimental fiction, where emotional sincerity and empathy are celebrated as the means to create and foster community. Thus, these novels grouped together create a bildungsroman narrative where Generation X male narrators grow from selfish yuppies like Clay and McInerney's second-person narrator into sentimental men seeking to unite a generation through shared suffering, embodied in Eggers's Dave. Thus, the novels rely on "sympathy's power"—that is, the power of emotional openness to create networks of sympathy (or the negation of sympathy's power in negative examples)—to create connections as a tool for individual and political change (Barnes 18). These Generation X novels align with a historical movement when literary culture deploys sentimentalism as a solution to (perceived and real) crises where sentimentality is used in literature to instruct people how to live moral lives within their political moment. Barnes argues that "sentimental fiction essentially puts self-interest to affective work, reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable division between the internal and external authority, between the individual right and the needs of the community to which the individual belongs" (18). Thus, these novels create a new paradigm of masculinity that understands how being selfless and concerned with the suffering of others can benefit the individual and the community in which he lives. As Ellis's, McInerney's, and Palahniuk's narrators emotionally arrested lives fail, the reader learns to transcend selfish emptiness and become more like Andy and Dave, who succeed by living emotionally open lives. In other words, progressive masculinity is privileged as the best means to help the individual, which in turn benefits the collective.

I have sought to produce an understanding of Gen X fiction according to which this fiction is not merely an expression of, or not completely subsumed by, what we might call the

“dominant” ideology of its moment. Certainly, that the Gen X novel invites the reader to believe that the solution to the problems of the late twentieth century is the moral and psychological reformation of twentysomething white men means that this literature is far from radical in its political imagination and demands. Yet, it is not fair or right, I would suggest, to read Gen X novels as patently neoliberal. This is, it seems to me, Rachel Greenwald Smith’s argument when she contends Eggers’s novel is guilty of “mirroring the neoliberal dynamics of agency” (79). The base of her argument focuses on the postmodern aesthetics of the novel, like self-referential jokes, fourth-wall violations, and disrupted traditional narration. More directly, Smith’s argument hinges heavily on the form of the novel, which allows her to argue that the novel “comfortably...sits with neoliberal emotional norms, providing a strong sense of readerly orientation that allows the experience of sentimental feelings to seem as if they easily coincide with the individual pursuit of autonomy” (89). Therefore, the novel “reflects the neoliberal celebration of choice,” which offers the reader “a sense of freedom while constraining that freedom through the production of sentimental attachment” (89). While Smith’s argument about the form of the novel are quite compelling and lead to interesting questions, I contend that the lack of emphasis on sentimentality it favors leads to a missed opportunity to engage the cultural dynamics at play.

Eggers’s postmodern novel does allow the illusion of agency in that the reader is able to make certain choices when it comes to the form of the novel, but that is not to say this stylistic choice is the most important aspect of the novel. Yes, a reader can choose to skip the introduction and the excessive notes. Similarly, the reader can choose to celebrate the satire of memoir culture at work in the novel when Eggers has Dave parody *The Real World* and his attempts to get on the show. However, these moments of postmodern play should not be read as

the actual intent of the novel. To do so would be to negate the true sincerity or “heartbreaking” subject matter at work. To be clear: this novel is an elegy for his mother that celebrates her emotional power as an agent of change within her community. Therefore, I argue that Dave’s mother should be emulated as a mother, but moreover, as a person who sacrificed herself for the community by being a teacher and a surrogate parent for struggling kids. In the end, Dave realizes that to be a valuable member of society is to become like his mother: a baby boomer woman never given the credit she was due.

Moreover, the novel is a rejection of worn-out masculinity indebted to traditional patriarchy. Over and over, Eggers’s novel critiques Dave when he fails to live up to his mother’s example. When Dave alienates the women in the park, the novel casts him as a misogynist. When Dave verbally assaults the “Mexicans” on the beach who never stole his wallet, the novel casts him as a racist. Simply put, when Dave fails to use the power of sympathy to create sentimental bonds with other characters, the novel critiques him for failing. By doing this, the content of the novel evokes the argument that Dave must become a progressive male leaving behind the failed masculinity of his alcoholic father. Moreover, by returning to the “Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors,” Eggers uses the form to deepen his critique about traditional masculinity, where the wallet is a symbol for his father. Thus, I contend the novel actually allows the reader to have real choices, not the illusion of them. The novel invites the reader to engage in ethical thinking, to think with its protagonist about the choices he faces, and which is right—Dave’s failures when he falls back into traditional masculinity or his successes when he embraces his mother as a model of sentimentalism and behaves accordingly. These choices have everything to do with gender and race. For instance, since Dave has never really dealt with women on the level of motherhood, he is unable to align with their reality. This causes him to

fall back into familiar tropes. Similarly, his lack of experience with racial minorities leads him to the worst expressions of white masculinity. Negating the emotional thrust of the novel would mean missing the importance of its placement in the sentimental tradition and the argument for sympathetic masculinity. For all its artistic machinations, Eggers's novel is an emotional exploration of a Generation X male learning to be a decent, moral human being by simply learning to be emotionally sincere and connect with people sympathetically. Sympathy for others is not a characteristic of neoliberalism. I find it difficult to square tenets of neoliberalism like free trade, deregulation, privatization—all of which benefit the economic elite while harming the impoverished—as harmonious with sympathy. Sympathy is a progressive ethic that we are currently in dire need of culturally, especially in terms of white masculinity.

At its base, Green's skepticism of the novel's progressive politics is accurate in that the novel read alone, out of its historical context, does not call for young white men to engage in traditional political action. Dave does not form a coalition to help the homeless or create a Political Action Committee to elect more women to the California legislature, both of which would be examples of true, unselfish, political action. Thus, Dave can be read as simply arguing that becoming more sympathetic to the suffering of the Other is, in fact, all a white male needs to do to become a more progressive male. However, placed historically among the other Generation X novels of this project, we can see that Eggers's narrator is a massive leap forward from the selfishness and brutal inaction of his 1980s predecessors or the violent, retrograde masculinity that Palahniuk rebukes. Even Coupland's positive representation of evolved masculinity, manifested in Andy and built upon sympathetic connections among diverse peers, pales in comparison when placed against Dave's excessive emotional confessional narration that seeks to unite an entire generation of disaffected youth. I argue that Eggers's novel must be read in

conversation with the previous Generation X novels to truly understand and appreciate the masculine evolution that culminated with Eggers's experimental novel.

Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* argues that by embracing the emotional needs of the self, individuals can heal themselves and then begin to participate in healing the community at large. Therefore, the novel follows in the tradition of sentimental fiction's didactic nature (though buried in deeply complicated textual moves), which strives to heal both the individual and the collective. This need to participate in the collective defies the often-selfish nature of neoliberalism and makes the novel all the more relevant to the current moment. Returning to the novels in my project, it is quite easy to see Clay and Tyler Durden as neoliberal men spouting "Make America Great Again." Clay is a wealthy white male, privileged since birth to an entitled world that slides all the food on the table to him. Tyler Durden is an alienated blue-collar worker who sees that all of his efforts to reclaim his former masculine glory have been taken by failed unions and outsourced jobs. Instead of seeing that his food was taken by a system embodied by men like Clay, he blames women for taking his dinner and leaving him scraps. However, when we imagine both Clay and Tyler making declarations supporting "Make American Great Again," they are simply expressing their foolish desire to return to white male patriarchal control embodied in the 1950s and its culture of containment against minorities. There is no way Coupland's Andy is falling for this. And there is no way Eggers's Dave is participating in this frightening celebration of the past. Both characters have moved beyond this dangerous return of the repressed. Their sentimentality teaches the reader to embrace their own. Generation X novels written between 1984 and 2000 are explicit indictments of failed masculinity and the dangers it poses for our culture. These novels stand as important road signs:

if men do not learn to merge, the road to the future is going to be far more dangerous for them and the culture at large, especially for people who are not white men.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Robert E. Woolridge

robwoolridge@yahoo.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Science, Education, May 1999

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Master of Arts, December 2002

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