

Modern Wasteland:
Defining Escape for the X Generation
by
Kristin A. Mason

Modern Wasteland:
Defining Escape for the X Generation
by
Kristin A. Mason

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree/
with Honors in/
The Department of English/
University of Michigan/
Spring 2007

© 2007 Kristin A. Mason

Acknowledgements

I want to thank everyone who supported and encouraged me through this long and challenging process, without which this would have been an isolating experience.

To Josh Miller for helping me formulate coherent thoughts out of initial chaos. To Scotti Parrish for her Tuesday's of commiseration and finally of elation. To Eileen Pollack for her generosity of time and sheer knowledge.

To my family for sending me to the University of Michigan and supporting me in all my endeavors.

To my friends who put up with my absence from many social activities—I'm free!

Abstract

This treatment focuses on the highly publicized, and often negatively received Generation X youth novels, including Jay McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City, Donna Tartt's Secret History, and Bret Easton Ellis's Less Than Zero. The purpose is to establish the relationship between these novels, members of Generation X, and the commercial culture. Members of Generation X desire an escape from the mainstream that parallels the desires of the previous Beat Generation. The mainstream for the Beats was the middle-class status quo, which they could evade by living counter-cultural lives at the margins of civilization and by producing literature that provided a counter-discourse. For Generation X, however, the mainstream had become a commercial culture, an inescapable chaos of consumption and spectacle, where dissent can be commodified.

The escape for Generation X is further complicated by their relationship with the mainstream. While the origins of the Beats generated outside of the mainstream, Generation X was born within it. They are the first generation to grow up with programs targeted at young audiences such as, Sesame Street, and later to be targeted as teens with MTV. Their identity is entangled with their ability to navigate television and understand pop cultural references—one reason as to why they were unwilling to sacrifice their place within the mainstream. Generation X is also a prime target market with a buying power of over 125 billion. The commercial culture, bolstered by Reaganomics catered to their every desire and interest. Moreover, before members of Generation X could be treated like a unified target market, advertisers and the media had to concoct a sense of generational solidarity, in which case their identity became hyper-marketed as well. Members of Generation X were not merely spectators of the commercial culture but actors as well, making their escape impossible.

The first chapter focuses on the generational desire for escape, noting the similarities between the Beats and Generation X but also the significant difference in Generation X's inability to escape. The second chapter focuses on the novels and the author's portrayal of the modern world by tracing the trajectory of the deterioration of reality in reference to French theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum. In the end, the simulacrum disappears completely. There is no longer a façade of reality, but the awareness that there is no longer real experience or real people. The characters are alienated from their own lives because products, advertising, and fictive reference intercede, creating inauthentic experiences devoid of subjectivity and individuality. The three novels of focus indict the commercial culture and its deleterious effects on members of Generation X. The third chapter identifies the blending of reality and unreality in the authors' works and lives, lending credence to the claims made in their novels. The culture that emerges is not conducive to the literary heroes of the past, like Holden Caulfield or Dean Moriarty. For past generations that made reference to a song lyric or television show to explain a state of being, they were conscious of this decision. The Beats for instance, were able to distinguish the real from the unreal. For Generation X, the force of commercial culture and media technology blends reality and unreality to the extent that separation is no longer possible and even representation becomes interpreted as real, as true.

CONTENTS

Short Titles	i
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Beats to Boredom	6
Chapter 2: Blank Existence	30
I. A Big Nothing City	38
II. Charm School	45
III. All this Useless Beauty	54
IV. Deep Dark Truthful Mirror	54
Conclusion	57
Works Consulted	rtr

Short Titles

“BDYS:” Charters, Ann, ed. Beat Down to Your Soul. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001.

“CWHH:” Colomina, Beatriz et al., eds. Cold War, Hot House: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004

“GenX:” Ulrich, John and Andrea L. Harris eds. Genxegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth Culture. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

“LP:” Ellis, Bret Easton. Lunar Park. New York: Random House, 2006.

Introduction:

This project began with an essay written by Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage Wasteland: Coming of Age Novels in the 1980's and 1990's."¹ Curnutt opens the essay addressing the popular negative reception of Generation X youth novels. He references the authors of a popular satire of contemporary youth culture Generation Ecch!, Jason Cohen and Michael Krugman, who describe the novels as "portraits of solipsism, blankness and reticence that are themselves solipsistic, blank and reticent" (Curnutt 93). Literary critic and author, Bruce Bawer, holds a similar point of view complaining that works, including Jay McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City and Bret Easton Ellis's Less Than Zero, "transform profound, embattled despair [...] into something very superficial, solipsistic and modish" (Curnutt 94).

Instead of labeling the novels as trendy, Curnutt wants to focus on why these superficial and detached protagonists have become a trend in the first place. Curnutt identifies parental disengagement and absence as a source of youth anomie in the Generation X literature, suggesting, "we need only to reinvest in the value of parental authority and discipline" to ameliorate the youth problem in reality (Curnutt105). Aware of the vast oversimplification of the previous statement, Curnutt suggests considering "the broader transformations currently affecting the family" (Curnutt106). I was certain that there was another correlation between disturbed youth beyond increased divorce rates and women entering the work force. Curnutt oversimplifies the youth problem by confining it to the scope of familial relations. I wanted to identify what Henry Giroux calls the "larger

¹ Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage Wasteland: Coming of Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s," Critique 43 (Fall 2001): 93. Hereafter cited in the text.

set of postmodern cultural conditions” that connected to the greed and commercialism of the eighties, and Generation X’s position within the postmodern world (Curnutt 94).

Although not much literature exists regarding the dubbed “blank fictions,” there was enough literary discussion to corroborate my suspicion of a connection between the media technology and commercial culture of the eighties and the resurgence of the “blank fiction.” The first chapter sets up the context of Generation X by comparing it to the previous Beat Generation of the fifties. The framework that emerges is a generational desire to escape the mainstream. The Beats were able to escape the middle-class values they felt confining by living counter-cultural lives and writing literature that opposed the mainstream standards. For Generation X, the concept of counter-culture became commodified and was no longer a viable method of escape. While both the Beats and Generation X feared the forces of homogenization, the source of this threat was different. The Beats were working against the Establishment that proliferated middle class values as the status quo. Generation X was struggling against the incessant mediation of their experience through products and pop cultural references making a “real” moment and authentic personality difficult to acquire. Their escape is complicated by the intersection of their identity with the mainstream as both consummate spectators of television and consummate consumers. Members of Generation X found themselves in a paradoxical position of wanting to escape the commercial chaos that had become their lives, but an awareness of the impossibility of that escape.

Chapter 2 looks at three highly publicized blank fictions: Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City, Donna Tartt’s Secret History, and Bret Easton Ellis’s Less Than Zero.

These novels reveal the escape from the mainstream as an escape from the unreality and inauthentic experience that derives more broadly from the commercial culture and media technology. These characters are not living in reality, but rather a simulated existence. This existence appears real, yet their engagement with life is not their own. Their lives are controlled by the consumer mentality generated by advertising, which produces inauthentic desires that the characters consume as their own. Products substitute for personalities, and an insatiable appetite for more consumption results in dissatisfaction and disconnection from the people around them. Sensory overload due to the deluge of images in the commercial and media culture further removes the characters from their own experience creating desensitized spectators. They cannot escape comparing their lives to movies, and their feelings to songs. Authentic articulation is impossible without representation—the result of being a television generation. The novels depict the ceaseless blending of the real and unreal that has become the state of postmodern culture.

The three novels of focus throughout this treatment chart the progression of the deterioration of the real. French, postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum (a simulation of the real in which reality is no longer produced) will be applied to an understanding of the three novels' depiction of reality. In McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City reality still exists beneath the superficiality that functions as the simulacrum. The protagonist is able to access authentic feelings and experiences by returning to his past and his family. Tartt shatters reality in Secret History, encapsulating Baudrillard's theory. Beneath the facades, which serve as the simulacrum, there is nothing—no truth, no "real." As the name implies, Ellis's Less Than Zero, depicts a further shattering of reality. The characters are worse off than the others because there is

not even a simulacrum to hide the fact that there is no truth. They do not even simulate an engagement with life. There are no facades or superficial encounters, but rather apathy and indifference.

Chapter 3 addresses the common theme of the use of mirrors and shattered images in the three novels. The surface of the mirror that Generation X engages with is inhibiting in relation to the surfaces that the Beats explored. The surface the Beats engaged with was the spatial landscape of America that offered freedom and new, real experiences. Mirrors, however, reflect images and experiences back to Generation X confining them to a spectator role and to a referential relationship. The mirror also represents a self-awareness of experiencing life that makes life seem less authentic. Moreover, the function of the surface is to generate reflections, which are representations of the real and contribute to the chaos of sensory images.

These authors are not “ascribing significance to meaninglessness.”² For the most part, they are writing from their own experience. They are depicting the destruction of an individual’s subjectivity and individuality in the consumer culture. The society these authors indict is one that is no longer capable of providing an authentically real moment—unmediated by products, by fictive reference, by advertising. They are criticizing a society where fiction becomes an easier way to tell the truth, and unreality and reality are no longer distinct and separate experiences.

While McInerney, Tarrt, and Ellis are indicting society, their lives also demonstrate how they could not escape it either. As celebrity writers they became wrapped up in the superficiality and decadence that mirrored their characters, and allowed

² John M. Ulrich and Andrea L. Harris eds. *Genxegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 167.

the commodification of their identities to sell their novels. The intersection of their lives and works also reinforces the blending of reality and fiction (the unreal) that occurs within the novels. While these novels may not provide the answer to the question “how to live” that catalyzed the Beats’ search, they do provide insight into why the heroes Holden Caulfield or Dean Moriarty are not re-materializing in postmodern literature. Moreover, these authors are drawing attention to the deterioration of the real and authentic, which is even more relevant today in the world of reality TV shows, and advanced media technology, including the Internet.

Chapter 1: Beats to Boredom

No doubt, the desire to escape is itself a defining moment in any generation's self-identity, as is the cognitive task of mapping out the difference between the current rebellion and those that preceded it.. Katie Mills, "Await Lightning."³

The Beat Generation was the product of a post-war cultural climate of extreme anxiety and containment. The government sought to check the interests of certain groups, including women, gays, black veterans, and unionists who were mobilized during wartime. Women were of particular concern due to the disruptiveness of their obtaining roles outside of the home during World War II. In the work Rock of Ages, anthropologist Margaret Mead noted a "continual harping" on the idea of domesticity and the value of being mothers and wives.⁴ Through the promotion of homeownership, financed by the GI bill, the government constructed connections among the suburbs, stability and social mobility.⁵ The home came to represent the ideal space, morally and economically, for every American. The Cold War intensified the general anxiety. The nuclear arms race was underway, and Senator McCarthy's investigations promoted the association of Communism with a deviation from family stability and traditional gender-roles.

³ John M. Ulrich and Andrea L. Harris eds. Genxegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth Culture (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 229. Hereafter cited in the text as "GenX."

⁴ Alice Echols, ed. Shaky Ground (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 58. Hereafter cited in the text.

Beatriz Colomina et al., eds. Cold War, Hot House: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 210. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "CWHH."

The Beats wanted to escape, for the one thing upon which they would all agree “the valueless abyss of modern life is unbearable.”⁶ The Beats harbored the conviction that people need to believe in something beyond the self and to learn how to live in an American culture that could not fulfill their needs. They would accomplish this end not through an active rebellion, but by living unconventional lives and producing self-justifying literature.

Similar to the struggle the Lost Generation experienced in the twenties after World War I, the Beats engaged in esoteric quandaries regarding their place in the Post-nuclear-war era. In an article published in Playboy in 1958 titled “Origins of the Beat Generation,” Jack Kerouac recalls a conversation about the Lost Generation between himself and John Holmes and subsequent ponderings about Existentialism in an article. In the context of this conversation, Kerouac remembered saying, “You know, this is really a Beat Generation,” leaping up and affirming his own epiphany as he cried, “That’s it, that’s right!” Initially he explained the term as describing “a swinging group of new American men” who were “intent on joy” because they had survived World War II. The term was intended to represent their “wild self-believing individuality” (BDYS xv).

The word’s original meaning, however, derived from a less positive origin. Ginsberg credits his hustler friend Herbert Huncke for introducing the slang term to Kerouac and William Burroughs in the 1940’s. *Beat*, in the street vernacular, meant “without money, without a place to stay, without drugs for withdrawal symptoms” (BDYS xxii). Ginsberg put a positive spin on the term, suggesting that it meant “exhausted at the bottom of the world looking up or out, sleepless, wide eyed, perceptive, rejected by

⁶ Ann Charters ed. Beat Down to Your Soul (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001), 238. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “BDYS.”

society” (BDYS xxii). The adjectives “wide-eyed” and “perceptive” suggest a privileged insight into the manner of life.

Eventually, *beat* took on a chameleon-like quality, becoming different things to different people. For Gary Synder, beat was a particular frame of mind, a way of looking at life that differed from what was expected by the mainstream. For critics, it was “shabby and bearded men” who influenced delinquent behavior and did not know how to write (BDYS 428). For many of the Beats, especially Kerouac and Ginsberg, being beat became a spiritual quest, in which they were “groping toward faith out of an intellectual despair and moral chaos in which they refuse to lose themselves” (BDYS 237). This search would play a prominent role in shaping their attitudes and how they decided to live. For youth, Beats “alerted [them] to an alternative existence, a way out of the awful gray dullness looming before them” (Echols 60). For Ann Charters, who worked directly with Kerouac to compile a bibliography of his work, “[beat] suggested the arrival of something unconventional and different from the mainstream, marginalized yet possessing potential force and authority” (BDYS xx). In this way, the Beat Generation’s classification expanded beyond the writers and poets who lived primarily in New York or San Francisco. People all over the country were relating to the combination of disaffection and the unwavering conviction that one could reclaim meaning in modern life. It was from the voices of these writers/poets that a message and mentality proliferated and began to shape an image of a generation.

Despite America’s shortcomings, the image of the Beat Generation did not reflect apathy and compliance, but rather action in creating a space to counter the mainstream. Life magazine journalist Paul O’Neil evoked the Beat mantra in his article “The Only

Rebellion Around,” “the only way a man can call his soul his own is by becoming an outcast” (BDYS 426). The Beats chose to embrace radical alternatives to the nuclear family and conventional notions of community. They rejected the idea of domesticity as “an imposition of middle-class values, suppressing other possible forms of sexuality and experience” (CWHH 213). These writers were usually traveling, alone or with a friend, with no consistent community. The road and mobility were synonymous, offering freedom from work and domestic roles. The Beat writers own journeys West and Kerouac’s On the Road have been described as attempts to reclaim the concept of America by turning their backs on country’s origins in the East (CWHH 198) They withdrew to the margins of society in search for a better America, a better way to live.

When the journey ended, their alternative lifestyles still continued. Ginsberg had a life-long lover, while Kerouac and Burroughs attempted multiple marriages (although, Burroughs also had homosexual relations.) They also lived in the city, the counter image to suburbia, characterized by poverty, violence and drugs. In New York and San Francisco, not only did Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs associate with criminals, drug addicts, ex-convicts, and oppressed racial groups, but they also experimented with drugs, went to jail, and lived sexually uninhibited lives. This engagement with the marginalized experience allowed them to escape the process of normalization. Government regulations and an American majority who followed the socially constructed status quo perpetuated middle class standards of living, limiting the American experience. The Beats believed that an escape from this process was the only way they could truly know themselves and have an unmediated, authentic experience.

An understanding of what the Beats felt they would be surrendering if they remained a part of the mainstream helps explain the general sense of urgency and willingness to sacrifice their own health and materialism for instance to ensure their escape. For some, the possibility of having “an unfettered individual soul” was worth jail, madness, or even death (BDYS 235). The strategies of escape they used included “trespass[ing] many boundaries legal and moral with the hope of finding a belief on the other side” (BDYS 229.) The choices however, were not always illegal and immoral but included a wide spectrum of experiences, including living isolated in a monastery (BDYS, 231). A scene in Kerouac’s On the Road captures the irrelevancy of the final destination for the Beats, as long as they could escape their current situation:

“We gotta go and never stop going til we get there”

“Where we going, man?”

“I don’t know, but we gotta go” (BDYS, 232)

The Beats felt an urgency and a certainty about the need to escape their present existence.

While physical exploration of space was a defining characteristic of the Beats, the inward journey through literature is where their desire to find beliefs at any cost are articulated. For instance, Allen Ginsberg’s explains that his poem “Howl” was an affirmation of his individual experience with “God, sex, drugs, absurdity” (BDYS 236). As he recalls in the electrifying first verse of his poem, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked....” The aim of Ginsberg’s writing is a defense of the human spirit in the face of a civilization trying to destroy it (BDYS 236). After William Burroughs shot and killed his wife Joan, he entered a “lifelong struggle in which [he] had no choice but to write [his] way out” (BDYS 135). He also felt that writing could cure his drug addiction. His internal consciousness seemed

to heal through the process of externalizing his thoughts through writing. Kerouac's own personal discoveries are revealed through his characters, who are ultimately able to say, "No one can tell us there is no God. We've passed through all forms...everything is fine, God exists, we know time...Furthermore, we know America, we're at home...We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness...." (BDYS 237). For Kerouac's characters their journey led to answers and contentment reflecting a level of peace for Kerouac in an otherwise tormented existence, dying at the age of 47 from a life of heavy drinking.

Although Beat literature projects a political tone (non-radical, non-conformist), the Beats were not attempting to make political changes, but rather to use writing as a form of self-justification for eluding society. Burroughs's "Electronic Revolution" may appear aggressive or rebellious, but he is not trying to shatter square society, only to justify why he does not want to be a part of it. He criticizes specific aspects of language that exclude alternative possibilities, thereby altering reality. For instance, the definite article "the" implies one and only one reflecting the "Western control machine's" assumption of a singular identity.⁷ He also rejects the tendency to reduce complex phenomena into binary oppositions. Mass culture, usually instigated by the government, creates a dichotomy of right and wrong, normal and abnormal, American and un-American. In this way, Burroughs exposes the language of the mass culture as intentionally denying a complex continuum of identities, lifestyles, and values. Burroughs's intentions in Naked Lunch are to reveal the flaws of the institutions of control in America, and as the name implies to "reveal what is at the end of every fork" (Myrsiades 156). For instance, the mad scientist Dr. Benway is dedicated to "Automatic

⁷ Kostas Myrsiades ed. *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 155.

Obedience Processing.” Burroughs is generating his own answers, which include the notion that people digest discourses and incorporate them into their lives without contemplation. No one questions the control machine.

Ginsberg’s work also emphasized the importance of an uninhibited voice, and the production of a discourse counter to the mainstream. Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” responds to the discourses that McCarthy instigated that functioned to repress Americans’ sexuality. The threat of Communism in the United States functioned as a tool to keep people from deviating from the norm. During a heightened surveillance, no one wanted to incite suspicion. Senator Joseph McCarthy took this idea one step further when he equated political and sexual deviation, creating an analogy between the nation and the body. His campaign attempted to purge the federal government of sexual deviants in order to protect the national body from contamination. Ginsberg would subvert McCarthy’s body metaphor in “Howl” to make his own sexual-political statements:

I’m with you in Rockland
Where we hug and kiss the United States under our
Bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won’t
Let us sleep.

Ginsberg creates the image that America is the body that is sick *and* in bed with a homosexual (CWHH 203). He sexualized literature in order to provide a counter discourse to pervade the American landscape. He believes that the “only way out is individuals taking responsibility and saying what they actually feel” and that is what the Beats are trying to accomplish (BDYS 1). Therefore, to see their writing as a rebellion is to miss the point. The Beats may be making political judgements, but are not taking action to alter power structures.

The fissures of the 1950's erupted in outright rebellion in the 1960's. People believed that the structures of society could be overturned and that change was possible. The riots and rebellions of the sixties were not a spontaneous eruption but were rooted in the existing ideologies of the fifties. For instance, in the book Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, Aldon Morris argues that the movement was a result of determined organizing that stretched back to the late forties (Echols 53). Similarly, John D' Emilio's work Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities reveals the way fifties homophile activists paved the way for gay and lesbian liberationists of the seventies. Second-wave feminism also identifies its roots in sixties organizations such as National Women's Party and Women Strike for Peace (Echols 54). The continuity of the political organizations represents the political mindset that occupied Americans through the seventies.

Literature also changed upon entering the sixties, shifting away from the individual to focus almost exclusively on national and collective interests. Tom Wolf remembers waiting for the new young writer "who would do the big novels of the hippie life or campus life or ... the war in Vietnam"... who would right about their first-hand experiences. Yet, "who did they get? Ken Kesey" and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, which recapitulated the concern of the Beats for societal conventions ostracizing deviators.⁸ Norman Mailer was also writing about bringing down the power structure. Elizabeth Young argues in her essay "Children of the Revolution: Fiction Takes to the Streets" that "the culture shock of the sixties was immense" and people were not capable of writing about the counter-culture (56). Young argues, "it seemed no one could establish a language or tone to encompass the bohemianism, squalor, excess and black

⁸ Neil Campbell ed. American Youth Cultures (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54. Hereafter cited in the text.

humor that comprised the counter culture world” (57). Twenty years later Thomas Pynchon wrote Vineland, a candid acid flash-back, but it was greeted with “confusion” and “derision.” (Campbell 56).

Not only was no one ready to write a novel dealing with the post-war societal shifts, but society was not ready to read it either. It was assumed that if people really looked at the reality of the times, “a status-crazy, drug-addled nexus, the cyber-spatial, nerve shriveling intensity of the urban megalopolis, one responded in horror” (Campbell 57). Moreover, Young argues that during the sixties and seventies there was actually “a shortage of creative writers.”⁹ She explains that when the young voices began to emerge, they chose to write lyrics or become music journalists. These voices critiquing the system are still products of it, and went straight for the lucrative music industry rather than a publishing house. For instance, Richard Hell wrote a song called “Blank Generation” in the late seventies that would later become the label for the eighties novelists. Those that were writing novels that addressed the “underbelly” of the modern world, such as Kathy Acker, were working with small, independent publishing houses, a literary underground sufficiently removed from the mainstream.

A literary trend emerged in the eighties and early nineties that declared the arrival of a new generation. Similar to the Beats, Generation X novelists, “Blank Generation Writers,” were expressing a desire to escape American culture and obtain an unmediated experience. However, they were not articulating a concern for a valueless, homogenized society mediated by the government. The threat for Generation X was the commercial culture that interceded into every aspect of their lives. The commercial spectacle in

⁹ Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney. Shopping in Space (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), 6. Hereafter cited in text.

conjunction with media technology turned their reality into an “unreality.” The awareness of their paradoxical role as a hyper-marketed generation, while simultaneously marketed to as a target demographic bonds Generation X together, justifying reference as a singular entity. They are the consumers and they are the commodity, the actor and the audience. This relationship with the commercial culture is crucial to understanding the literature and its protagonists, and why their escape from the mainstream is more difficult than the Beats’.

Reagan’s policies and rhetoric encouraged consumption in the eighties. Reaganomics was based on the concept that “growth is good, the entrepreneur is a hero,” “fair government is limited” and “competition breeds creativity” culminating in a façade of a “dynamic economy,” which eased the mad rush toward materialism.¹⁰ In the 1980’s members of Generation X were a prime target market with an annual buying power of over 125 billion (GenX 165). As consumers, they were “spurred by Reagan’s gospel of progress and prosperity... [and] happily indulged themselves” believing this prosperity was patriotic (Troy 3,4). Generation Xers were no different than the majority of Americans during the “decade of decadence” (or “Reagan renewal” depending on how one inflects the image of the era)—they were obsessed with “having the latest, the hottest, the best” (Troy 17, 4).

Before Generation X could be targeted as a solitary market by advertisers, they had to be convinced that they were united as a generation with similar tastes and opinions. Generation X grew up when generational identity was a hot commodity among marketers because resistance to this unification discouraged communal investments in pop culture

¹⁰ Gil Troy. Morning America (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 63,67. Hereafter cited in the text.

(GenX 180). With exposure to advertising ploys and media gambits all their lives, Gen X caught on to the attempts at unification, responding with “The Great Refusal;” a “unified” resistance to the “colonizing force of media hegemony” that threatens autonomous personality (GenX164). Author, Richard Blow, advised his peers that the only response to the mass targeting was to “reject the media hype and disband altogether,” asserting that the generational need for solidarity is fabricated, a desire imposed by those with a vested interest in making them think like a target market. (GenX 165). This “eternal fleeing from sameness...is the genius at the heart of American capitalism.”¹¹ People consume not to fit in, but to make a statement about imperative difference. Individualism and resistance is still a unifying characteristic, another ethos of consumer conformity.

In response, Corporate America attempted to change its image from homogenizer to a facilitator of individuality. As opposed to American culture in the fifties, which was restricting and repressive, in the eighties and early nineties America was a purveyor of “immediate gratification” and “diverse individual lifestyles.”

Corporate America is not an oppressor but a sponsor of fun, provider of lifestyle accoutrements, facilitator of carnival, our slang-speaking partner in the quest for that ever-more apocalyptic orgasm. The counter-cultural idea has become capitalist orthodoxy, its hunger for transgression upon transgression now perfectly suited to an economic-cultural regime that runs on ever-faster cyclings of the new...(Frank 34).

Corporations realized they could make more money by appealing to people’s desire for the “evermore apocalyptic orgasm” as opposed to maintaining the status quo of the past in

¹¹ Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, Commodify Your Dissent: The Business of Culture in the New Gilded Age (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 34. Hereafter cited in the text.

terms of the conservatism of the Establishment (the ruling-class elite that controls structures of society) and its desire to stifle individuality and personal expression. Corporate America became a companion in defining one's self by offering "lifestyle accoutrements." Since their infancy, Generation X has struggled to negotiate their experiences and identity as mediated through consumer products and media. Every new or rebellious sub-cultural action became re-packaged and sold back to them as a commodity, imbedding itself within the mainstream context. For example, the chain clothing store "Hot Topic," located in shopping malls "homogenized artificial environments," sells counter culture images including grunge and punk (Troy 3). For Generation X, not only was their identity for sale, but their dissent was commodified, as the "counter-cultural idea [became] capitalist orthodoxy."

For the Beats, the explicit demands of the Establishment made deviation easily identifiable. When the Establishment demanded homogeneity, the Beats embraced diverse, individual lifestyles. When the Establishment demanded "self-denial and rigid adherence to convention" the Beats embraced "immediate gratification, instinct uninhibited, and liberation of the libido and appetites" (Frank 35). This strategy of direct opposition was no longer available for members of Gen X, complicating their escape from the mainstream.

Generation X novelists who attempt to describe the position of their peers within American culture struggle to avoid the claim that they are merely "cogs in the cultural machine." They are criticized for accepting the role of zeitgeist in order to profit from selling the introspective and spiritual quandaries of "twenty-somethings." For Generation X, writers who exploit insight into a "generations's self-loathing" are traitors, failing to

exhibit the generation's "resistance to the selling of [their] self image in a consumer culture bent on commodifying [their] attitudes and entertainment interests" (GenX 164).

Two examples of such zeitgeists include Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis, whose work was instantly turned into a commodity. The voices of these novelists were new and fresh, and because the economic-culture runs on "ever-faster cyclings of the new," they were prone to exploitation. Publishers also recognized McInerney's and Ellis's profit potential as young people writing about young people. McInerney's book caused a stir because his personal life ran parallel to the novel. His protagonist for instance, worked at a prestigious art and fashion magazine that mimicked McInerney's own employer The New Yorker, and frequented the Odeon and other nightclubs that were trendy at the time. Ellis's documentary intentions were also publicized, and his status as a college student when he wrote the novel was particularly emphasized. Ellis and McInerney's similar personas led the media to initiate the beginning of the literary "Brat Pack," young writers who created a publicity spectacle by partying together and then writing novels about "yuppie angst" and disenfranchised youth. As one reviewer remarks, "McInerney and Ellis became spokesmen for their generation, exploiting our indefatigable fascination with the young."¹²

Although Generation X is writing in a heightened consumer culture, the Beats did not avoid commodification either. After Kerouac's novel On the Road became a hot selling commodity, he sold the movie rights to MGM for his next novel Subterranean which premiered in 1960.¹³ Ironically, the novel Subterranean about subterranean

¹² Jeffrey Giles. "The Selling of the Young," National Review 39 (November 1987): 64.

¹³ Whaley, Preston. Blows like a Horn : Beat Writing, Jazz, Style, and Markets in the Transformation of U.S. culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 84,84.

lifestyles, alienation, art, and subordination found its way into popular media. Kerouac also made public appearances on mainstream television shows such as Steve Allen. In 1960 Mad Magazine ran a spoof on the movement, “Beatnik: The Magazine for Hipsters.” Their counter cultural movement was made fashionable, undermining its “underground” intentions. The Beats themselves were considered “no longer human” but “comical bogies,” “plastic beatniks,” to name a few media satires on the entertainment industry’s profiting from the Beats. Literary celebrities are not a new phenomenon. The difference is that in the fifties the consumer culture was not the rebellion the Beats were fighting, commercialism was at its infancy, and conformity was considered a more urgent threat. An even more important distinction, however, is that the Beats were not simultaneously commodified and marketed to as a group. Although the Beat personas and Beat author’s works entered the mainstream the Beats’ origins were distinct and separate from the mainstream, while the identity of Generation X members and authors was intrinsically linked to the mainstream from the very beginning.

Television, in particular MTV, forever linked Generation X’s identity with the mainstream. Katie Mills contends that “if television was a baby crawling through the late fifties (in reference to Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Television was a Baby Crawling Toward That Death Chamber”) then the television became a baby sitter for the next generations of American infants” (GenX 226). Generation X was the first television generation because of the extent to which they watched television, but also because they were the first generation to be targeted by networks with children’s programming including, PBS’s Sesame Street (1969-present) and ABC’s The Brady Bunch (1969-1974). Beginning in 1981 they would be targeted as teens with MTV, claiming their space as consummate

spectators. Perceptions of MTV were often contradictory as both an outlet for individual expression, but also a medium of homogenization. On the one hand, MTV promoted campaigns like “define yourself,” and was “speaking to them in their own aesthetics,” which included pop cultural references (GenX 222). On the other hand, MTV created a collective identity, and therefore the much-needed unified market. Regardless of whether MTV was unifying or fragmenting their generation, their image remained within the boundaries of the mainstream. More broadly, many Gen Xers felt that TV became a way to escape family and society without leaving home, and the remote control was an empowering device, “a prosthesis for organizing the ecstasy of communication” (GenX 226,227).

Generation X struggled to find an existence outside of the network of what theorist Jean Baudrillard refers to as the “feedbacks and interfaces” of modern existence. All space is subsumed by the consumer chaos of “signs, symbols, and simulation,” turning reality into a “hyperreality.” Baudrillard theorizes that in the “hyperreality” objects no longer exists in terms of its purpose, function or inherent value, but is replaced by symbols. For instance, a designer handbag is a symbol with “floating signs” such as wealth or status that are not grounded in anything real, in other words, not related to the purse as object, as a container meant to hold change, wallet, eyeglasses etc.¹⁴ Value is not inherent, but rather manifested through advertising. The distinction between the purse as object and the purse as symbol can be traced back to Karl Marx’s theory of exchange value versus use value. The use value refers to “the utility of the thing,” a material reality that can be objectively determined. The exchange value “manifests itself as something totally independent of their use-value,” and is based on its worth, a concept further

¹⁴ From a conversation with Professor Pollack Spring, 2007.

explored through the theory of “commodity fetishism” in which objects are imbued with artificial meaning and worth (for example, through advertising).¹⁵ In other words, a correlation can be made between Marx and Baudrillard in that Baudrillard seems to be arguing that the exchange value system has replaced the use value system.

Baudrillard proposes that in a society that is based on the manifestation of value through advertising and appearance, one’s experience is always second-hand. Reality can only exist in reproduced and representative forms, creating the simulacrum. Baudrillard uses Los Angeles and Disneyland to explain this concept. Disneyland is a simulated world, a simulacrum of Los Angeles, “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real.”¹⁶ (Baudrillard 12). LA is a city “of incessant unreal circulation” where people wait in line to use the stair-climber and eat “natural” food, but health food is “the economy of the market, and not of nature at all (13). Baudrillard claims there has been a Disneyfication of the world, where authentic, unmediated space no longer exists. The real is no longer produced, and the simulacrum is accepted as true.

Even history became a sanitized theme park for the members of Generation X, another way to reaffirm their “reality.” Author of The End of History?, Francis Fuyacama, calls it “Historical slumming,” visiting locations such as “diners, smokestack, industrial sites, rural villages—locations where time seems to have been frozen many years back” (GenX191). The purpose of such an experience is to feel relief when one returns to the present, to “reality,” similar to how Baudrillard believes one to feel when one returns from Disneyland. Moreover, members of Generation X experience history vicariously as a spectator of the past, confirming their spectators’ roles in the present. In

¹⁵ From Karl Marx’s Capital via History of Art 211: Gender and Popular Culture Fall, 2006.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard. Simulacra and Simulation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994),12. Hereafter cited in the text.

short, reality is so unrecognizable as “real” that there needs to be obvious simulations of reality (Disneyland, Historical slumming) to make reality seem more real in comparison.

Television blends and complicates reality and unreality, confirming the existence of the simulacrum for Generation X. The television program Friends is a simulacrum of urban life for young, middle-class, white Americans. Generation X is aware of the simulacrum in their reality. One might reference “having a Chandler and Monika moment” to explain one’s neurotic tendencies with a real-life partner. This awareness of the simulacrum makes people in reality feel less real. The awareness of the show’s simulation of the real destroys the reality of the moment. People can no longer have spontaneous reactions because they know how they are supposed to react from television. It is through TV that they see their situation reflected most clearly, “complete with regular breaks for consumerist fantasy” (GenX190). As children, teens, and then as adults television was their “master narrative” their “reference tool” from which they measured their behavior (GenX191). In his novel, Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Youth, which popularized the generation’s name, Douglas Coupland describes Generation X’s “tele-parabolizing” tendencies, referring to morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots. Life was reduced to a script that Gen Xers have been taught since they were born.

Even the nature of escape for the Beats, the road story, became a media trope, a trendy “script” to consume. Mikhail Bakhtin calls the road an important chronotope, “that is, a narrative device offering a privileged space inseparable from a special time” where “space is filled with real, living meaning” (GenX 225). The road is no longer an open, free space, but is immediately transformed into a Generation X experience, “cut one frame

at a time from an endless spool” (GenX 222). Generation X remembers Dean Moriarty and Sal and how the road trip is supposed to be. Too aware of the simulacrum influencing their reality they imagined their journey a movie, in which they play the stars. For example, in one January 2005 episode of Beverly Hills, 90210 two of the main college- aged characters Dylan and Brandon decide to take a road trip. Excitedly explaining the plan to his parents, Brandon gushes, “It’s an American tradition, two old buds hitting the road. It’s Easy Rider” (GenX 230). In her essay “Await Lightning,” Katie Mills contends that the “simulacrum is part of every television generation, shaping the young adult’s search for what was never really there except in a pixelated form” (GenX 236). The road is no longer the answer, but has become a cliché, a movie everyone has seen too many times.

Members of Generation X have a paradoxical sensibility about their desire to escape the unreality of their lives. They express a “desire for the transcendent and the inclination that all accessible strategies are, in the end, exhausted and ineffectual” (GenX 20). For GenXers there were no answers of how to have pure, first-hand experiences. Even their search and desire to escape American culture seemed unoriginal, a generational right of passage. This is not to say that generations of the past are immune to reproduction or reference either. While Gen Xers express their inner states referring to television shows, the Beats referred to Buddhist terms. Generations of the past had more control over these references in that they had experiences separate from television and were aware of this distinction. For Generation X, their “master narrative” was television and shows paralleled their own realities so that they became indistinguishable. As Katie Mills argues, “to kids raised in this era, all of life seemed to be one long tabloid

documentary, and fantasies looked curiously similar to music videos” (GenX 227). The blending of the unreal and reality is evident in the similarities between the 7 o’clock news and a movie, “both [seem] equally real or unreal, each [has] the same truth-content” (GenX 191).

The literature of Generation X expresses a self-conscious awareness of Gen Xers’ desire for the “real” and yet, an unwillingness to make the necessary sacrifices. While the Beats could live marginalized lives to escape, the commercial culture could not be avoided at the margins of civilization, and it was also something members of Generation X did not want to give up. They wanted to “take pleasure in commodities” while simultaneously being able “to articulate and disavow that desire” (GenX, 212).

Gen Xers are typically economically privileged, which offers one reason as to why they may not want to escape the mainstream completely. In other words, Beats were attempting to elude middle-class money and conventions, while Gen X “spokesmen” are white, middle-class, and highly educated. Instead of narratives about subordinate status, and repression, these narratives illuminate the struggles of the middle class.

You see, when you’re in the middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you. You have to live with the fact that history can never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for the day to day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happinesses are sterile; all sadnesses go unpitied.¹⁷

¹⁷ Douglas Coupland. Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Youth (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 147.

The majority of characters of these novels are white, and from the upper-middle class where issues of poverty, race, and sex are moved to the background to focus on the threat of commercial culture, which would seem insignificant in comparison. The novels address the problems encountered in the midst of economic comfort—a problem, history would usually ignore. These characters are no longer sure what makes them happy or the source of their unhappiness (a trend identified by author-academic Gil Troy in relation to the Reagan eighties) which creates individual misery and social dysfunction.

One might argue that Gen X authors are whiny and self-important, but not only are Gen X authors aware of this reputation, but they use it to support their indictment of the times. Generation X is described as a “self-absorbed, self-important generation” who “rationalize its own existence, ascribing significance to meaninglessness” (GenX 167). Generation X began working during the “go-for-it-gusto Reaganite ethos” that enabled many Americans to do whatever it took to make money (Troy 231). Gordon Gekko, the infamous character from the 1987 film Wall Street, captures the spirit of the time with his maxim: “If something's worth doing it's worth doing for money.” Ellis also demonstrates Generation X's self-awareness of their image as greedy and self-absorbed in Lunar Park: “I became very adept at giving off the impression that I was listening to you when in fact I was dreaming about myself: my career, all the money I had made....”¹⁸ Ellis's ironic self-awareness creates a facetious tone, yet of more importance is the notion that the greed and money-hungry culture captivated a majority of Americans, and was not an isolated experience for Generation X.

¹⁸ Bret Easton Ellis. Lunar Park. (New York: Vintage Contemporaries-Random House, 2005), 12. Hereafter cited in the text as “LP.”

Moreover, Ellis indirectly defends his generation's self obsession by reframing the reputation in terms of a necessary introspection. Those who did not "rationalize [their] own existence" were the one's Ellis described as "so lost inside it all" (the chaos of consumer culture) that they are unaware of its negative influences (LP 33). Many GenXers could not rationalize the difference between the liberating experience of consumer choice, and the confining experience of the commodification of their own identity as a Gen Xer. Thinking about one's circumstance became imperative to understanding the consumer cultures threat to one's individuality and selfhood. As Ellis explains, everyone around him, including Jay McInerney were so wrapped up in the scene that he was left "totally alone," he had no choice but to retreat into himself (LP 33).

While Generation X authors' rationalizations are extremely complex, they subvert the traditional narrative through the seemingly empty nature of their novels. They have been informally named "Blank Fictions," characterized by their "preoccupation with violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism and commerce."¹⁹ These novels mark a shift away from complex plots, as well as political and academic subject matter. They value superficiality over depth. Therefore, the characters all seem indistinguishable and flat, but that is the point. It is through the characters' relationship with the economic dimension, more specifically, late capitalism, that the significance of the novel emerges.

The Generation X novel is also unique in that space and time precede character. Place, by literary standards, usually serves as a background for plot and character development, where issues of the human experience, such as morality or maturation, are

¹⁹ James Annisley. Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 1.

contemplated and challenged. For these novels, however, geography and space are brought to the foreground to dictate themes and structure. This reversal is prompted by the fact that forces in fiction and reality prohibit character growth and stimulation. For instance, the character Clay of Less Than Zero with his “numb blank bored demeanor” and overall pointlessness is emblematic of the Gen X characters who see little use in a quest like development, more concerned with finding a reprieve from boredom (Curnutt 98). The novels reflect an image of desensitized, de-individualized, and alienated youth—a betrayal of the media technology and commercial culture in which they live. Generation X embraced the following lesson from the Beats: “the form of the traditional novel is a metaphor for a society that no longer exists;” therefore, they proposed a new metaphor for society, by replacing character with place (Campbell 62).

The Beats initiated the postmodern literary battle, believing the traditional form of the novel would not suffice to tell the story of their experiences and observations within postmodern culture. Author Sanford Pinsker notes that the American culture takes blending of life and art quite seriously, a claim validated by the Beat’s rejection of the Academy on the grounds that “everything... artificial that separates literature from life had to go” (BDYS 236).²⁰ The Beats opted for “spontaneous bop prosody,” which entailed a disregard for rationalization or censoring and would be completely disconnected from the convoluted process and overly intellectual works of the time. Hence the Allen Ginsberg dictum: “First thought, best thought.”²¹ The Beats wrote in an uninhibited, confessional manner that would evolve into the self-conscious metafictional habits of Generation X, which included a sense of irony and an awareness of themselves as writers. Kerouac

²⁰ Sanford Pinsker Bearing the Bad News (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 27.

²¹ Bill Kaufmann. America First (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 169.

would intentionally take trips across the country “in order to invent his life so it could be made into literature” (CWHH,193). With this intentional intersecting of life and fiction, the perception of the postmodern author breaking through literature to comment on themselves is not surprising. Furthermore, the manner in which the Beat’s allowed fiction to influence reality and vice versa is perceived as the forerunner to the blending of reality and unreality in the lives and fiction of the authors in the eighties.

In an attempt to find a way to coexist within the mainstream and still obtain authenticity, Generation X authors opted out of the spatial mobility of the Beats and focused on living within a specific place. The authors all lived in the various locations of their novels, including New York, Los Angeles, and East Coast universities. Their experiences at these locations lend credence to the claims purported in their novels as they are reporting from their own experience. The elements of autobiography in their fiction again serve as an example of the blending of unreality and reality characteristic of Generation X. From three locations of youthful promise, big cities and an intellectual setting, the novelists portray characters’ desires for anything real and authentic. This desire transcends a variety of milieus, from Tarrt’s intellectual environment to McInerney’s New York literary scene, as well as Ellis’s Los Angeles hedonism. Drugs, sexual extremes, and Dionysian frenzies are the characters’ strategies of escape, largely unaware of the force they are trying to escape: the commercialized spectacle that is their lives. This unknown force is the origin of their dissatisfaction with life because they always want more, something bigger and better. Apathy and unhappiness is the result of insatiability.

Despite the difference that the Beats are capable of escaping the mainstream, the Beats and Generation X both reveal a gap between what is promised by America and what is fulfilled. America is supposed to offer freedom and the American Dream, but these two generations seek escape. They are on personal rather than political quests to discover how to reconcile this bleak realization. They both want to learn how to make the American culture they are living in more fulfilling.

Chapter 2: Blank Existence

*A Town Called Big Nothing*²²

In Bright Lights, Big City, Jay McInerney's protagonist lives in a cocaine-induced haze of parties and sex. Initially, he is complicit with the monotony of superficiality that consumes his life in New York City. Eventually, however, he undergoes a transformation in which he becomes aware that nothing in his life is profound. All his relationships are fake in that the encounters is not genuine, but rather a façade of human connection. His experiences are never first-hand, always mediated through drugs. His life has become a simulation of reality that appears inescapable. While the protagonist discovers that a life unmediated by superficiality and drugs can be achieved through the reclamation of personal histories, his own writing reveals that he cannot have a purely fictional or "real" experience; the two are always intermingling.

In the beginning, drugs dictate the protagonist's experience with "reality." At a club, the narrator describes the sensation of "Bolivian Marching Powder," his code name for cocaine: "Hup, two, three, four. The solders are back on their feet. They are off and running in formation. Some of them are dancing and you must follow their example."²³ The effect of the drugs consumes his thoughts resulting, in a disengagement from his surroundings. Moreover, this disengagement results in a isolated indifference to the world.

²² All Sub-titles in chapter 2 are songs by Elvis Costello, an icon of punk and counter-culture from the seventies. Ellis's Less Than Zero is named after Costello's song by the same name.

²³ Jay McInerney. Bright Lights, Big City (New York: Random House, 1984), 5. Hereafter cited within the text.

He is not only blindly led through life by cocaine, but also by his friend Tad Allagash. Tad takes the narrator to all the right places, where they will be seen with all the right people, the rich and spoiled. Again, the point of their existence is to “be seen,” to project a certain appearance and persona, not to be known, a concept the protagonist finds comfort in as “just now [he] wants to stay at the surface of things, and Tad is a figure skater who never considers the sharks under the ice” (32). Tad and the protagonist’s estranged model wife, Amanda, are the only two people with whom the narrator expresses any connection, and they are both the epitome of superficiality. The narrator is envious of Tad’s “strict refusal to acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure” (3). He wants to be like Tad even though he also thinks Tad is “shallow” and “dangerous” (3). The protagonist is not concerned with exploring his inner self – or anyone else’s.

The narrator’s estranged wife is a model, a profession that conjures notions of surface beauty and appearances. In one scene he identifies a mannequin in a window as the replica of his wife (a literal cast of her body.) When the narrator tries to remember if this is what she really looked like, McInerney explicitly draws parallels between this plastic façade and the internal void of the mannequin with the real Amanda. The narrator reminisces about their first night in New York, when he insisted they stay at the Plaza. He thinks: “You are the stuff of which the consumer profiles—American Dream: Educated Middle-class model—are made,” aware of the way the consumer culture has shaped his expectations of fulfillment: money, decadence, and beauty (151). Yet, he realizes that this awareness does not hinder his consumer mentality as he rationalizes: “when you’re staying at the plaza with your beautiful wife, doesn’t it make sense to order the best scotch that money can buy before you go to the theater in your private limousine?” (151).

Although the protagonist will pay for the best, the point of the purchase is not in the inherent value, but the appearance of value. The protagonist's indifference to authenticity is explicitly established when he comes face-to-face with a street vendor selling fake Cartier watches. The protagonist examines the watch and asks, "How do I know it's real?" to which the man replies, "How do you know anything is real? Says Cartier right there on the face, right? Looks real. Feels real. So what's to know?" (28). The protagonist ends up buying the watch, suggesting compliance with the idea that it does not matter if something is real as long as we cannot tell the difference. This is the notion of the simulacrum articulated by Baudrillard who argues that the real is no longer produced, and that the simulacrum is true. The simulacrum can be understood as a simulation of reality, a substitution "of the real" with "signs of the real" (Baudrillard 2). Thus far, the protagonist's acceptance of his second-hand experiences that have the appearance of reality confirms the reality of the simulacrum.

Moreover, the watch scene illuminates the arbitrary nature of the value system. The street vendor prompts the protagonist—and the reader—to consider what makes a "real" Cartier more valuable than a watch that looks like a Cartier and says Cartier. Gauging the sum of all parts seems like a plausible response. However, even the measure of gold is arbitrary, based on a system of supply and demand and the fetishization of certain metals. The "value" is manifested through advertising, which creates an aura around the "real" watch where signs of status and wealth circulate. Baudrillard explains the process in terms of the watch becoming a "floating symbol" because it does not have any real inherent value. Upon the realization of that value is discretionary, the value

system collapses. The protagonist, however, accepts the fake watch, again affirming the simulacrum is working.

The protagonist's praise of fiction also lends credence to the idea that he does not value what is real or true. He works as a fact-checker at a magazine that also produces fiction. He ruminates, "In fact, you don't want to be in Fact, you'd much rather be in Fiction" (22). Fictional writing for the narrator is closely tied to his negotiation of his identity:

Nothing seems to be what you want to do until you consider writing. Suffering is supposed to be the raw stuff of art.

You could write a book. You feel that if you could make yourself sit down at a typewriter you could give shape to what seems merely a chain reaction of pointless disasters....

Maybe get outside autobiography altogether, lose yourself in the purely formal imperative of words in the correct and surprising sequence, or create a fantasy world of small furry and large scaly creatures (39).

He thinks that writing will help create meaning out of the "chainless reaction of pointless disasters" that is his life. There is a comfort in fiction in that it provides an ability "to lose yourself," as well as an opportunity for self-preservation. He also implies a fictional element to autobiography in that "to give shape" is to go beyond fact or strict transposing of reality. In using fiction to negotiate his identity, however, he is also welcoming reality into the realm of fiction.

The fictional nature of the protagonist's life is reinforced when one considers the element of "unreality" in the novel's "reality." The New York Post headings are de-contextualized with no grounding in reality: "Sex Fiends," "Liz Taylor," "Coma Babies," and "Teenage Terrorists" (11). The hero's drug-induced uncertainty of almost everything makes a reader question the validity or realness of an event. Moreover, fragmented conversations contribute to the unrealistic quality of one's experience. When he arrived at the Plaza, the protagonist remembers thinking he was "arriving at the premiere of the movie which was to be [his] life" (151). He also ruminates about his life fading behind him, "like a book you have read too quickly" (127). These examples concede to Generation X's tendency to equate life with fictional or entertainment references, a category they understand.

The protagonist finally champions truth in a literary context. When he is verifying the facts of an article, the hero comes to the conclusion that he wants "to rally and whip hell out of falsehood and error" (32). He also changes his previous position of supporting fiction when he identifies it as a source of confinement. When he begins to write one morning, he realizes "this is dreadful" and tears up the sheets of paper. On the next sheet of paper he types "Dear Amanda," but when he looks at the paper it reads "Dead Amanda." "Screw this," he cries, "you are not going to commit any great literature tonight" (43). The protagonist relies on narrative in negotiating his identity and "giving shape" to his reality, but there is also a betrayal. The first lines he writes are regarding Amanda calling from Paris telling him that she is not returning. The protagonist wants to turn the event into fiction in order to "find the source of this chaos." However, no other name manifests except Amanda. Not only is Amanda's name unavoidable, but "Dead

Amanda” can be interpreted as the fact that she is really out of his life and instead of addressing her, he should be saying goodbye. In other words, elements of reality seep into his fictional space; the two no longer exist as separate experiences.²⁴

When the narrator remembers his last conversation with his dying mother, he undergoes a transformation. She asks candid questions about his life, cocaine, and sex. As the mother probes her son, critic Graham Caveney argues, she becomes a mirror that reflects an image of the narrator back to himself (Young 55). It is a moment described in psycho-analytic terms as Lacan’s “the mirror stage,” in which a child recognizes itself as a unified whole. The child begins to construct an image of “I” as reflected back by an object or person in the external world. Moreover, the mother explains that the pain she experiences from the cancer is like the pain she suffered when he was born. They also tell stories of when he was a child, evoking a sort of re-birth for the narrator where he more closely relates to the child of the “mirror stage,” looking at himself in totality for the first time. The mother evokes Lacan’s theory when she says “I was standing in front of a mirror as if I’d never really seen my own face before. I felt strange. I knew something had happened, but I didn’t know what” (169). The external other is reflecting the image back to him; thus, these words apply to his own recognition of a transformation, but an inability to identify the nature of the change.

It is significant that the transformation does not occur at the moment of the conversation between the narrator and his mother. He is remembering the experience, again assuming the position of spectator in which he observes the interaction of the past.

²⁴ This scene mimics the same love-hate relationship Generation X has with the consumer/technological society. On the one hand, members of Generation X use products to define their identity, in the same way they look to MTV to distinguish their tastes and aesthetic from those of other generations. On the other hand, the same society that allows Gen Xers to differentiate themselves from each other, also attempts to homogenize the generation through advertising and media stories to create one target-market.

Arguably his mother is not reflecting an image of himself, but he is watching his own image of himself in the past. Through his memory, he is creating his own mirror, which reveals himself in totality for the first time.

It is not until the narrator follows the smell of fresh bread that he understands the meaning behind recalling his mother. The moment is intense, "As you approach, the smell of bread washes over your lungs. Tears come to your eyes, and you feel such a rush of tenderness and pity that you stop beside a lamppost and hang on for support" (181). This scene reflects the dichotomy of nature versus culture; a transition from numbness, chemicals, and decadence to the natural, emotional and spiritual (Young 53). The meaning of this metamorphosis is revealed when he recalls a morning when his mother was baking bread. She had asked why he came home and he said, "a whim." She explains how she has to keep herself busy now that her sons are gone, and the narrator remembers that he said "[he] hadn't left, not really" (181). He realizes that he has never forgotten where he initially derived meaning--his family.

Perhaps, he was never really comfortable in his life in the "Big City." He is finished "thinking that with practice [he] will begin to enjoy superficial encounters" (52). With a clear mind he realizes he has been faking it. The drugs helped him lie to himself, helped him avoid facing the emptiness of his life. He is ready to go back to the beginning, where he can make different decisions. He wants to go back to when everything is real and pure, before it became convoluted with drugs, money, and appearances. When he eats the bread, he explains, "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" (182). The fresh bread is analogous to an unmediated experience with life. He has not had an authentic

experience in a long time, and will have to learn what a life without drugs and superficial encounters, is all over again. However, he is finally ready to work through problems by negotiating the places and people he has come from in order to return to reality.

While there is still a reality beneath the simulacrum, accessible through reclamation of personal history, the simulacrum still exists. Therefore, even though the protagonist changed his idea of fulfillment and human needs to family, a change in priorities does not eliminate the source of the superficial desires that led him to New York—the commercial culture. Moreover, even though the protagonist has escaped the “unreal” world of drugs and appearance, the simulacrum functions on a much more subtle level. The simulacrum will continue to function for instance, when the protagonist’s fictional space reflects elements of reality, and his reality is fictionalized because of his own inability to separate the two.

Charm School

Similar to the protagonist in McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City, Donna Tartt's characters in Secret History simulate an engagement with life. Their experiences are tainted with a game-like quality and are perceived by themselves as sensory events that do not penetrate into the depths of an emotional or spiritual response. The characters are products of sensory overload, desensitized spectators. They seek authentic, real existences, only to learn that a simulated life, in which a façade of reality remains, is better than knowledge of reality's absence.

In the beginning of Secret History, the protagonist, Richard, arrives at Camden College and is introduced to the mysterious Greek professor Julian, who only teaches to an exclusive group of students. Initially, Julian appears to be a wise man offering profound advice, offering his students an alternative way to live. One of Richard's first discussions with Julian, after he is granted access into Julian's class, regards the advantages to speaking Greek:

One's thought patterns become different when forced into the confines of a rigid and unfamiliar tongue. Certain common ideas become inexpressible; other, previously undreamt ones spring to life, finding miraculous new articulation.²⁵

A new language, in which "undreamt" ideas find "miraculous new articulation," opens up space for currently limited thought processes. Whereas the Beats created an alternative space to the mainstream by living marginalized lives, the students can purportedly use Greek to explore new ways of thinking that allow them to escape their routine and shallow

²⁵ Donna Tartt, Secret History (New York: Random House, 1992), 200. Hereafter cited in the text.

sensory-cognitive experience. Julian also discusses with his students the idea of the Dionysian frenzy in which one “throws off the chains of being for an instant, to shatter the accident of our mortal selves...rip[s] away the veil and look[s] that naked, terrible beauty right in the face...that fire of pure being” (42). Julian glorifies raw, pure experience, criticizing its absence in everyday “mortal” existence. Both his perspective on the Greek language and his description of the *Bacchae* inspire the students to escape their mortal selves.

The students decide to escape “the chains of being” by experiencing a *Bacchae*. In retrospect, Henry, one of the students who experienced the *Bacchae*, tells Richard, “‘After all, the appeal to stop being oneself, even for a little while, is very great.... To escape the cognitive mode of experience, to transcend the accident of one’s moment of being’”(164). Henry feels as though he has succeeded in escaping from his life of sensory perceptions and simulation.

Nietzsche’s explanation of the Dionysian and Apollonian forces in The Birth of Tragedy illuminates a particular reading of the *Bacchae* within this text. Together, the Dionysian and Apollonian create the essence of Greek tragedy. The Apollonian is analogous to a dream-state because inspiration derives from this force that will help an artist conceive his art or poetry. Of particular importance for this reading is that the Apollonian, even at its most intense moments, can only be recognized as “mere appearance.”²⁶ The force that opposes this illusory dream-state is the Dionysian, which is described by Nietzsche as analogous to intoxication and music. The Dionysian is an ethereal force that transcends words. Nietzsche argues a person can steal “a glimpse into

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche translated by Douglas Smith. The Birth of Tragedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34.

the nature of the Dionysian” by imagining the “blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man” at the sight of the collapse of the “*principium individuationis*.” The Apollonian serves as the “plastic” that allows a reveler to encounter the Dionysian, without which the horror of beauty would be too significant to bear. A person cannot directly encounter the rawness and purity of the Dionysian, in the same way one cannot have an authentic, pure experience with reality in a consumer culture. Instead of a pure experience with the Dionysian, one engages with the Apollinian, the façade of the real. In a parallel manner, instead of a pure experience with reality, one engages with Jean Baudrillard’s “*simulacrum*,” a simulation and “mere appearance” of reality. In an attempt to experience the Dionysian and escape the Apollonian, the students are symbolically escaping a simulation or appearance of life for a real, authentic experience. Unlike the Dionysian that exists beneath the Apollinian, Baudrillard argues that there is no reality beyond the surface of the simulacrum.

However, the students have not escaped; the unreality of the “hyperreality” pervades their experience. For Baudrillard, life is a simulation that threatens the difference between what is “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary” (as opposed to pretending, which leaves reality intact) (Baudrillard 3). Tartt captures this conflation by turning life into a game or a performance in which even murder is devoid of any real meaning or value and is instead transposed into just another sensory image. After hearing about an accidental murder during the frenzy, Richard comments on how “it is odd how little power the dead farmer exercised over [his] imagination” and the “corpse itself seemed little more than a prop” (211). The murder does not incite any “raw” emotion, and the general magnitude of the event does not generate any subjective

meaning. The substitution of a “corpse” as a “prop” not only promotes the idea that life is a performance or simulation, but also supports Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum as “substituting the signs of the real for the real (2). The focus is no longer on the object itself, corpse versus prop as signs of a body, but rather the symbol the body represents, death; in which case, the corpse and prop have the same truth content.

Again, Richard fails to elicit a genuine response when he witnesses the murder of the students’ friend Bunny, who knew too much information regarding the murder.

I watched it all happen quite calmly—without fear, without pity,
without anything but a kind of stunned curiosity —so that
the impression of the event is burned indelibly upon my optic
nerves, but oddly absent from my heart (276).

The suggestion that the image “burned” into his “optic” nerves emphasizes that the intensity of the event was experienced through his senses rather than through any subjective, emotional engagement. The simulation and sensory over-kill of the “hyperreality” has left these characters immune and desensitized—spectators of a performance, foreigners to reality.

Richard describes the murder as though it were a film, not only confirming his position as an “unwilling audience,” but also the event’s absence from reality. He describes the murder as “an objectionable documentary” and uses the language of film to explain that it is impossible “to examine individual frames” because the murder was so quick (276). The film mirrors his remembered experience, and Richard marvels at how it is detached in viewpoint and largely “devoid of emotional power”(276).

There is also an element of “unreality” in the planning of Bunny’s death. Richard says, “Never, never once in any immediate sense, did it occur to me that any of this was

anything but a game.” (276). Henry also states that he has not been able think of the planning and execution of Bunny’s murder “as anything but a chess problem. A game” (250). Moreover, when they are waiting to push Bunny into the ravine, they have a mundane conversation regarding what they are going to eat for dinner afterwards. These characters cannot escape the intermingling of reality and unreality. There is an “undertow of reality” or simulation of reality in “talk, footsteps, the slamming of doors,” but also an air of unreality suffused even the most workaday details” (251, 276).

The college community’s response to the death is also described by the protagonist as “simply play acting” (379). Bunny’s disappearance leaves the students and wider town community largely undisturbed, but at news of his death people became strangely frantic. Richard recalls that “everyone suddenly had known him” and had to “try and get on as well as they could without him” (377). The community seems to simulate the action of grief, a “formulaic expression of homage and dread” and “affirmation of community” (379).

The students’ dinner party for Julian serves as yet another example of the inescapable nature of performativity and appearance and the inability to have a genuine experience. Richard describes how all of the students are “slouched in the living room” and “dull eyed with fatigue,” but the moment the door bell rang “their spines would straighten, conversation would snap to life, the very wrinkles would fall from their clothes” (90). Their actions are unnatural, presenting a false exterior of formality and engagement. Richard notes how all of them are very good at this performance, “so convincing, in fact, so faultlessly orchestrated in the variations and counterpoint of

falsehood” that he finds himself believing in the illusion of genuine engagement they present (91).

Julian’s response to the discovery of the students’ crimes catalyzes Richard’s own painful discovery that behind the façade of intellect, Julian is a cipher. Until now, Julian has been more than a professor; what the students felt for him was “love and trust of a very genuine sort” (505). Richard says, “I loved him most of all,” and Henry recalls how he “loved him more than [his] own father...more than anyone in the world” (519). As father-figure and proverbial classics professor who always has an opinion, Julian should have a strong reaction to the murders; however, he does nothing. He is not the old sage they thought he was, but is weak and morally ambiguous. Richard fantasizes that Julian wept at the news, “wept for Bunny, wept for us...wept for himself, for being so blind, for having over and over again refused to see” (511). Instead, “he is brittle and shallow as a mirror” and his façade of unwavering conviction and knowledge is shattered. (511).

When Julian’s façade shatters, his romanticized projection of his students shatters as well. From the beginning, Julian fails to see the students or anything in its true light. Richard realizes “there was never any doubt that he did not wish to see us in our entirety, or see us, in fact, in anything other than the magnificent roles he had invented for us” (site). The students revel in these roles, loving the people they were with him, “for what it was he allowed [them] to be” (510). However, the students alter themselves in order to resemble Julian’s inaccurate image. For instance, Julian persuades Richard “to embroider, to flatter, to basically reinvent” (510). Richard buys new blazers to portray a sophisticated, intellectual image similar to his peers’. He lies about his parents’ education and his modest up-bringing. He manifests an inauthentic, false version of himself.

Richard does not easily accept the truth about Julian, because it also means acknowledging the pretense of his own identity and the loss of someone he believed could “make his dreams come true” (510).

Although Richard finds comfort in illusions, he is now painfully aware of Julian’s distortion of truth. He recognizes that Julian is constantly reinventing people, “conferring kindness, or wisdom, or bravery, or charm on actions which contained nothing of the sort” (510). He has a gift of “twisting feelings of inferiority into superiority and arrogance,” but only out of an “egotistic impulse of his own” (510).

In realizing the “truth” about Julian, the students realize there is no “truth.” In a response to this discovery about truth, Henry feels the need to “make a noble gesture, something to prove to [them] and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught [them] to use” (544). He does not want to accept that his life, and the person he believes in the most, are “mere appearance,” falsely constructed exteriors. He re-writes truth through the “noble [authentic] gesture,” suicide. This moment, in conjunction with the other moment of “escape” during the Dionysian frenzy, reveals an association between the search for truth and death. What the search reveals is that truth is always a façade, and “behind the glitter of constructed facades” there is nothing. The idea of a facade can also be understood in relation to Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum. The simulacrum, “never ‘hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact that there is none’ (1). This new-found awareness, that the façade, which functions as the simulacrum is destroyed, haunts Richard, and cuts right to “rottenness of the world” (547).

All This Useless Beauty

The characters of Bret Easton Ellis's Less Than Zero exist within the convoluted reality of Hollywood. As sons and daughters of parents in the film industry, they are both the audience for the entertainment industry and actors in the Hollywood spectacle. They are the inhabitants of the city of dreams and fantasy, yet these characters have no dreams, no ambition, no thoughts. They are spiritually and emotionally starving. Numbness prohibits them from expressing a desire to escape the mainstream or articulate the force that propels them into their unhappiness. The novel alludes to the idea that the parents are to blame for the young character's dissatisfaction with their lives, but there is also a much larger institution at work, consumerism. The characters of the novel are too busy consuming to be able to connect to one another. Their consumer mentality of insatiable appetites, either propels their thoughts into the future, the next best thing or into a voyeuristic, removed existence. No longer inhabiting the moment, and with the past no longer a sanctuary these characters are trapped in the cycle of consumption that creates unappeasable desires.

Consumption is the most conspicuous theme of the novel. All conversations revolve around characters name-dropping the names of trendy restaurants, stores, and designers. For instance, one party conversation consists of advice about "shopping for suits at Fred Segal and buying tickets for concerts" (30). Memories are referenced by what car was driven to get to the characters' destination, the Porsche or Ferrari. The magazine The Face is consumed with desperation and urgency. "I bet you don't even read the Face. You've Got to... You've got to." "Why do you have to?" I ask... "Otherwise

you'll get bored'" (96).²⁷ Consumption is a form of entertainment because "there's not a whole lot to do anymore" (126). People are even seen in terms of their commodity value. The novel's most vivid examples of the commodification of the human body are Clay's repeated mantras "wonder if he's for sale?" and a side-comment to his friend Julian, "You are a beautiful boy and that's all that matters" are (183). Clay recognizes the universal value of youth and beauty and its homogenizing affects: "they all look the same: thin, tan bodies, short blond hair, blank look in the blues eyes, same empty toneless voices, and then I start to wonder if I look exactly like them" (152). Without naming the culprit, he fears the possibility of de-individuation, evident in another one of his repeated mantras, "disappear here," which he observes on a billboard.

Consuming is turned into a way of communicating. Products are signs that communicate the symbols of status and wealth, a process characterization through brand names. When Clay's dad takes him out to lunch his dad plays a Bob Seger tape, which Clay interprets as "some sort of weird gesture of communication" (43). The characters are also constantly buying movie tickets under the pretense of spending time together, but in doing so are really embracing an excuse not to communicate. They also avoid problems by consuming television. There are numerous examples of the characters turning on MTV to block out their thoughts, to numb themselves against feeling any emotional anguish through the pixelated spectacle of mindless images. When "a truck with video games strapped in the back passes by and [Clay's] sisters are driven into some sort of frenzy" which realistically portrays what Young describes as the "frantic, universal response of the

²⁷ A sub-textual reading of this magazine pertains to the Generation X 's relationship with the mainstream. The magazine both reports and invents high-fashion, which parallels the media as both inventing Generation X's solidarity and reporting aspects of their "real" identities. The intersections of what is reported and what is a media concoction are blurred in both circumstances.

consumer maddened by dizzying excess” (23, GenX 29). With an unlimited number of consumer choices, there is no time for connection, or emotional response, for “if you are not busy being born, you are busy buying” (GenX 29).

The absence of human connection illuminates the dysfunctional nature of relationships in the commercial culture. In a number of scenes, the protagonist wants to say hello to someone but realizes “it’s pointless...the guy is stoned and doesn’t see [him], doesn’t see anything,” forcing Clay to consider the possibility that “[he’s] not here (181). Disjointed conversations suggest that possibly Clay is not here. For instance, Clay asks his ex-girlfriend if she knows where his friend Julian is she answers, “he’s probably at the house in Malibu,” with complete disregard for her answer Clay responds “well, maybe I’ll stop by the house in Bel Air” (89). One wonders if he even heard her, if his thoughts are even directed toward the conversation. Another exchange between Blair and Clay before he leaves her house portrays the same disconnection, “ “Clay?’ I stop but don’t turn around. ‘Yeah?’ ‘Nothing’ (58). When Clay leaves his friend Kim’s house, he expresses that “It’s easier not to care, “ it’s “less painful” so he convinces himself that when he looks at her “[he] didn’t feel a thing” (205, 149).

Parents and children do not communicate either. Both Clay and his mother lock their doors, intentionally and conspicuously voicing a desire for solitude and disconnection. Clay invites his mother to come to lunch with him and his father, and she says she is “busy,” although she is only reading magazines by the pool when he asks her to come (144). Nor do Clay’s parents really want to hear the truth about his life. When his dad says that he doesn’t look too well, Clay mumbles, “It’s the drugs.” The father says, “I didn’t quite hear that” and the conversation continues on a completely different

topic (43). When Clay and his sisters get in a fight in the car about Clay's locked door, Clay explains, "Because you both stole a quarter gram of cocaine from me the last time I left my door open," yet his mom says nothing (25). The parents are too busy doing their own consuming to pay attention to their children. At the end of the novel, Ellis leaves a reader with the image of "parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they eat their own children"(207). Clay's friends' parents are also nonchalant about their children's drug use, and one of his friends does not even know where her mom is except through the information provided in the Variety, the trendy entertainment magazine.

The people of the entertainment industry surround Clay, complicating the distinction between what is real and is produced, as well as his roles as both audience and actor. The famous people Clay spends time with exist as characters on screen, but also as real people he interacts with on a daily basis. For instance, Clay meets the star of a new ABC series, and he floats from party to party over winter break where he hangs out with actors and directors. His friends appear on the television show *mv3* and scream in excitement "Did you watch it?" (103). Other friends attend premieres with their parents and end up in People magazine. Clay also recognizes people from clubs dancing on a television show with "a monolithic screen flashing images at them" (194). There is no division between the simulacrum of television and Clay's reality. Everyone is connected to the film industry from Clay's father to the prostitutes catering to "typical studio execs" (179). Clay cannot escape the web of Hollywood either. In one scene, a cab driver insists that Clay is a certain actor, while simultaneously the song lyric "Now I'm a part of the debris," bellows from the radio (46). At a party, a photographer is constantly taking pictures of Clay and his friends. When they spot one of the guests in a bedroom shooting

up heroine, the photographer and Clay both become spectators of a gruesome display of nihilism.

Clay and his friends seamlessly move from the role of actor to audience. The ease with which they accept their role as spectators is largely a response to their consumer mentality. These characters are “looking for the evermore apocalyptic orgasm” (quote from gen x intro). At first they appease their appetites by watching a fifteen-thousand-dollar snuff film. One kid, however, “doesn’t think it’s real, even though the chainsaw scene was intense” (154). This statement sets off a chain of arguments in defense of its realness. The fact that the debate even takes place means they are aware of the simulacrum and will now have to find a spectacle that is bigger and better and more “real.” After being brought to the scene of a dead body, a girl responds, “We’ve gotta bring Marcia. She’ll freak out”(186). Similar to the responses elicited in Donna Tartt’s Secret History, the characters are desensitized to the image of a dead body; it is nothing more than a spectacle to excite their senses. No one calls the police or is emotionally affected by the image. The characters comment on the fact that he does not have socks on and then stick a cigarette in his mouth. Boredom soon sets in and in an effort to arouse the senses again, one of the boys propositions, “I’ve got something at my place that will blow your mind” (188). As Elizabeth Young argues, these characters are driven to the extremes in an effort to experience something, to feel (33). As Clay says, “I want to see the worst,” to witness an event that society has not already represented and acclimated him (172).

He assumes a disturbing voyeuristic role when he witnesses his childhood friend Julian prostitute himself, and on a separate occasion, witnesses a gang bang. As he wonders what Julian and the man are going to do, Clay tells himself that he can leave;

however, "the need to see the worst washes over [him] quickly, eagerly" forcing him down into his seat (175). Clay's friends' desire to experience extremes compels them to continuously rape a girl, a more shocking spectacle than the image of the dead body near the club. One of the boys thinks the scene might be good for a screenplay. While a twisted suggestion, the comment also calls into question the notion that "any quest for 'real' experience, something that will end the cycle of craving and desire is almost always equally doomed because our approach will still contain the same measure of fictionality" (36). The characters cannot escape the process of imposing fictional or unreal elements into their experiences. In other words, they cannot escape the simulacrum, the representation of the real, as their reality.

When Clay admonishes his friend Rip for his involvement with the rape, the conversation reveals the dark psyche behind the consumer mentality. Clay does not understand Rip's immoral actions because Rip has everything, purporting a fundamental question about human needs and commodity fulfillment equaling morality and happiness. Rip responds, "I have nothing to lose" (190). Even though Rip has everything, his life is still empty and lacks meaning because nothing he owns is important enough not to lose. "Everything" is worthless after its initial thrilling experience. The consumer mentality is also present when he justifies his actions, "If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it," an attitude that reflects "go-for-it-gusto" of Reaganism (189). The characters in both Secret History and Less Than Zero believe they have the right to consume anything, even each other; a comment on the moral and spiritual disintegration of young people in the consumer world. They are the epitome of self-interest and greed.

In the world of Less Than Zero, even love is portrayed as worthless once it is achieved. Clay remembers when he was dating Blair and they went to Pajaro Dunes in Monterey. They find a case of champagne in the garage, take romantic walks on the beach and make love in candlelight. However, the accoutrements of a happy romance bore them quickly. Their experience seems too perfect, resembling too closely the simulacrum or representations of romance on TV, rendering the experience unreal. So, they turn back to the TV, and the cycle continues selling them the same images of romance and love that they are engaged in. The scene reflects the general blank of Generation X, agonizing famine in midst of plenty (37). In the search for something bigger and better they substitute the present for thoughts of what's next. They consume their own happiness and continue a search for a reality that does not exist as opposed to the reality that does exist in Bright Lights, Big City beneath the surface.

Sometimes, the search for something better takes the characters of Less Than Zero back to their past. One of Clay's friends ruminates, "I want to go back.' 'Where?' 'I don't know. Just back'" (18). Clay, wants to go back to Palm Springs, his childhood vacation home, to "remember the way things were" (44). He thinks there was a time when life was less complicated, when his friend did not need to prostitute himself in order to pay for his drugs, when instead they were in the fifth grade and went to Sports Club after school. Clay considers that perhaps this magical time never existed or cannot be retrieved with the same illusion as before. Clay recalls going back to Palm Springs in high school, remembering how his "memories seemed faded compared to empty beer cans that were scattered all over the dead lawn and the windows that were all smashed and broken" (44). He now remembers the past with a removed disillusionment. He remembers the

imperfections that lay just beneath the surface. For instance, he remembers playing cards with his grandma and sitting on her lap on airplanes, but he also remembers how she “slowly turned away from [his] grandfather...when he tried to kiss her” (163). He also remembers the director who came to their house in Palm Springs, and how he told the tragic story about the death of a young stuntman on his set, “a wonderful boy” the director says, “He was only eighteen” (145). When the name of the stuntman was asked, Clay prayed the director would remember, “for some reason it seemed very important to [him]” (145). The director “opened his mouth and said, ‘I forgot’” (145).

Clay also goes back to his elementary school, where he hears songs and watches games he forgot existed. He notices a boy who went to school with him in the first grade, “standing by the fence, alone, fingers gripping the steel wire and staring off into the distance” (164). Clay does not want to admit that they are all alone, craving the same fantasy of childhood, a time when happiness existed. He tells himself that, “the guy must live close by or something” (164). He then walks away from the school without looking back, returning to the world where “we’ve all lost some sort of feeling,” a place where one keeps thinking about whether it was “better to pretend to talk than not talk at all” (158, 200). Following the quote is a reference to Disneyland, an evocation of Baudrillard. One then wonders if the “hyperreality” and the simulacra are better than the bleakness of truth, that there is none, a reality portrayed in Donna Tartt’s Secret History.

For these characters there is no escape. They cannot identify the cycle that produces their desires leaving them always “hungry” and “unfulfilled” (207). The past does not hold the answers as it does for Jay McInerney’s protagonist, and Clay comes to realize that the East Coast is no different from the West. For these characters, car journeys

offer the only solace connecting the fragmented snapshots of their lives. Like the Beats, they find comfort in the road, even if it “doesn’t go anywhere,” because what matters is “just that we’re on it, dude” (195). The Generation X paradoxical sensibility of wanting to escape, yet consciously aware of its impossibility, seems the only definitive logic. Even if the road reflects a spatial blankness, offering no answers, no simulacrum, the desire to be on it remains even if the characters cannot articulate the reason why.

Deep Dark Truthful Mirror

Central to all three of these novels is the use of mirrors and shattered images to convey the main argument of the inescapability of unreality. In Bright Lights, Big City when the puritan image of the protagonist's mother is shattered through her genuine questions about sex and drugs, the protagonist is able to look at himself in totality for the first time (arguably, through the mirror that the mother projects, or the mirror that is created from looking from the protagonist looking at himself in the past). The crumbling façade gives way to a positive experience, a deeper truth beneath the surface in which the protagonist is able to look at himself objectively and transform. The protagonist is able to escape the drug laden, superficial scene in New York City, which he feels to be interceding between himself and an authentic experience. While the mirror does expose the protagonist's "soul...as disheveled," and rekindles a connection with his family, it does not capture the forces that are located outside of himself that led him to New York in the first place. He still cannot answer "How did I get here?" (117). In neglecting to establish the consumer culture as the source of dissatisfaction, the consumer cycle will continue to generate desires that the protagonist will consume as his own, shaping his search that in the end will inherently remain unfulfilled. More importantly, he remains unaware of the blending of unreality and reality that exists in modernity making an authentic, real experience impossible to identify.

In Secret History, the shattering of Julian's image destroys Tartt's characters because it reveals the absence of truth. Their whole perception of the world and themselves was a flattering distortion of reality constructed by Julian. When they are

forced to acknowledge that the mirror he held up to them was “brittle” and “shallow” just like him, shattering at the slightest provocation, they find nothing beneath the surface (511). The students realize that truth does not exist, and that it is constructed through facades and simulations. Now, they are aware of the purpose of the façade they were initially trying to escape from as protecting them from the realization that there is no truth. The facade was functioning as the simulacrum, not hiding the truth but hiding the fact that there is none, in other words, no reality. In the end, it becomes apparent that the protagonist, Richard, would rather remain unaware of the simulacrum, ignorantly enjoying the “sensory pleasure” and “comfort in illusions” (494). The ending reflects Generation X’s paradoxical sensibility. Gen Xers want to escape into realness, but once they realize that would mean disavowing products and television, they are reluctant because they too find comfort and pleasure in the spectacle and are accustomed to a life infused with unreality.

The characters in Bret Easton Ellis’s Less Than Zero are also trapped in the cycle of consumption that generates unappeasable desires. One of the protagonist’s many mantras, “Disappear Here,” which he saw on a billboard, reflects his fear of the consumer culture’s ability to deindividualize people. Baudrillard discusses how billboards that “invit[e] you to relax and choose in complete serenity...observe and surveil you” and then “you look at yourself in it...it is the mirror” (Baudrillard 76). The self disappears to accommodate the new desires and thoughts prompted by the images on the billboard. Moreover, when Clay looks in real mirrors, nothing seems to reflect back. He has no thoughts, or reactions, and the one time he does respond to his reflection, he describes his eyes as being “sockets red, scared...and [he] got really frightened for some reason” (69).

He has a deep-seated fear that “[he’s] not here” that he can “disappear here without knowing it” (26, 176). Pools are also ubiquitous in the novel offering another sub-textual dialogue about the appearance of depth and yet depthlessness (shopping 28). Clay has no authentic self, no subjectivity. His personality is produced by the products he owns and the movies and television shows he consumes, making him indistinguishable from the other tan bodies and toneless voices of LA. This fear propels him to want to feel something, to see the worst, which he believes consists of watching his childhood friend Julian prostitute himself to pay for his drug habit. This moment shatters Clay’s innocent illusion of him in fifth-grade at Sports Club after school, confirming that “things like this can actually happen” (172). Although Clay does observe “a form of amorality to which society has not acclimated him,” he still fears he is one of the masses who disappears into lives of “voyeuristic seduction.” Aware of the impossibility of true individuality, he loses all empathy “devolving into a creature of pure sensation” (Curnutt 97).

Conclusion

Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, and Donna Tartt can be described as “literary performers, allowing the reader to observe the observers,” assuming the Generation X role as both audience and actor (Young, 47). The authors are in an intermediary position between the reader and the character, reality and unreality. The reader struggles to distinguish the difference between the author reporting from their experience versus complete fabrication. As “literary performers” these authors are holding up a mirror to a generation; however, they too are a part of it, trying to escape the unreality that pervades their lives. Their work, however, seems to perpetuate the conflation. For McInerney and Ellis the intersection of their novels and lives makes “real” impossible to distinguish from fiction. The murder in Tartt’s novel also crosses the boundary of fiction, resembling a real murder case. The novels’ relationships with “reality” represents the seamless blending of fact and fiction that is a hallmark in today’s culture.

For Jay McInerney, the intersection between his life and that of the protagonist blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. His work suggests that fiction cannot escape an element of reality (ie., his story is at least partly autobiographical) and one’s “real” experience also contains a fictional element (ie., his life is at least partly influenced by the story he writes). The fact-fiction dichotomy that McInerney sets up in the literary setting of a prestigious fashion/arts magazine is a reflection of his position as a writer. Similar to the protagonist, he worked verifying facts at The New Yorker, and now as a writer, is also suspended between fact and fiction. He is essentially writing fiction from events that he

experienced in reality, yet he also engages in the “unreal world of words” which means there is not necessarily a strict transposing of reality (Young 46). The intersection of his own life with those of his characters has been identified by critics not only in their jobs, but also nightclubs they attend, sexuality, and speculations of drug use. The narrator justifies going out at night as, “gathering experience for a novel. [He] went to parties with writers, cultivated a writerly persona,” which serves as an example of fiction influencing the author’s lifestyle in reality (Young 46). Moreover, because McInerney is not just describing reality but participating in it, a reader may presume a level of accuracy in his narration with this background information. It is possible that McInerney’s work may falsely lead readers to believe elements of reality when there is none or it may be perceived he is falsely fictionalizing what is reality. In the end, what emerges is Generation X’s inability to recognize unreality and reality as separate experiences despite the author/protagonist’s desire for an authentically original, “real” experience.

Of particular interest with McInerney’s novel is the un-named protagonist. Nameless protagonists can be traced back to the expressionist movement as a statement on the dehumanizing effects of social institutions.²⁸ For Generation X, the un-named protagonist is a statement about the alienation between one’s self and their subjectivity in consumer culture, a result of products and advertising monopolizing one’s identity and indoctrinating desires. Not only is the protagonist un-named, but McInerney wrote the novel in second person narrative. The “you” reflects the intermediary role that the McInerney is assuming because it establishes distance between McInerney and the character without telling the story in third person. Bret Easton Ellis explains that “as a writer I guess you’re always on the fringe, even when you’re in the middle” (Young 44).

²⁸ Theater History 444, Winter 2007.

This philosophy reflects Generation X's self-conscious irony, "the ability to step back from direct experience and watch oneself experiencing life" which is exactly what McInerney's protagonist is doing (GenX 228). Rather than a direct participant, the protagonist assumes the more comfortable role of spectator, which allows him to disengage and remain "at the surface of things."

In his most recent book, Lunar Park, Bret Easton Ellis's protagonist is himself. In a seemingly candid prologue to the novel, Bret discusses his own life in ways that closely parallel his protagonist Clay's life in Less Than Zero. After all, Ellis claims, "I could never be as honest about myself in a piece of non-fiction as I could in any of my novels." (LP 32). He describes his on-going struggle with drugs, his hateful relationship with his father, and even the endless driving where he is "guided by palm trees" instead of any real spiritual quest (7).²⁹ He had no direction it was as though "the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost" (7). Baudrillard would agree, contributing that "it is no longer a question of maps or territories. Something had disappeared; the sovereign difference..." just like the "sovereign difference" had disappeared between Ellis's life and his novels (Baudrillard, 2). Like the characters in Less than Zero, Ellis wanted "to feel something" and yearned for the past and its illusion of simplicity (31). He wanted to escape the spectacle that had become his life as a founding member of the "brat pack." The group partied at all the popular clubs and dined at Zagat's top-rated restaurants. They were on the pages of magazines, on talk shows, and in tabloid gossip columns. They were in "hyperdrive. Every door swung right open" (11). He was

²⁹ In the prostitution scene with Julian, the client mentions that he's in real estate. According to Ellis, his father made his money through real estate as well, which creates an association between his father and the sodomist.

exhausted and “sick of the shit it took to keep [him]self standing in the spotlight” (33). With all the money, and all the fame, he “had won the lottery,” yet success gave him “no pleasure: it didn’t vindicate anything” (9). He still felt “poor and needy,” which lends credence to the “fictional” theme in Less Than Zero of famine in an environment of abundance (9).

Following the consumer mentality instinct, he went back for more, throwing himself into the new life that fame offered. The New York Times said his work had become “bizarrely complicated...bloated and trivial...hyped-up” and Ellis didn’t necessarily disagree (5). What Ellis was concerned with was the idea that “if fiction inadvertently reveals a writer’s inner life—things were getting out of hand” (5). This statement seems to suggest that his overwhelmed life as a celebrity seeped into his writing, manifesting itself in the form of gangbangs (Less Than Zero) and the psychopaths (American Psycho) of his novels. In Lunar Park, Ellis is trying to “get back to basics,” assuring the reader that “all of it really happened, every word is true” (5,40). However, no one can know for certain. Even his supposed self-confession is suffused with exaggeration, and complete fabrications such as his actress “wife” Jayne Dennis. There is even a website, jaynedennis.com, dedicated to the faux actress. Ellis takes the conflation of reality and unreality one step further by producing a fictional narrative under the guise of memoir.

As for Ellis and his brat-pack counter-part Jay McInerney, they will always remember when “It was never ‘Let’s not get the bottle of crystal’ [or] ‘Let’s not have dinner at Le Bernardin,’” when their lives mirrored the excess and decadence of the characters they created. (11). What they may not want to recall, is that they fell victim to

the same society they were writing about—a drug laden, consumer spectacle where value did not extend beyond brand names.³⁰ A “scene” from which, as Lunar Park suggests, Ellis has still not recovered.

Although Donna Tartt emerged a few years after the “brat pack,” her novel demonstrates the same intersection between fictional narrative and reality that extends beyond the literature. The plot of the novel is perpetuated by the murder of the character Bunny, which reflects many aspects of a real murder case, “the preppy murder,” in which a wealthy high-school graduate, Robert Chambers killed 18 year-old Jenny Levin during “rough sex” in Central Park. There are parallels in the profiles of those involved: well-educated, affluent, white, and attractive. Another similarity with the two murders is in the media’s tendency to connect the crime with drugs and alcohol. In Secret History the community assumed the murder was “related to drugs.” In the “preppy murder,” the media and city policy “drew a trajectory between the murder and alcohol abuse by minors” even though there were marginal traces of alcohol and no drugs were found in the young girl and boy’s systems (in other words, both were legally sober at the time of the crime.) Both these murders reveal how crimes can be framed in a somewhat arbitrary manner. The “preppy murder” also led to an association of rebellious teens with absent parents, a trend that circulates at the depths of all the novels. At the time of the murder, in 1986, The New York Times ran a front-page editorial, suggesting that, “ ‘the young people most likely to fall into the aimless, nocturnal life,’ educators and psychologists say,

³⁰ A longer treatment could include a discussion of the young celebrity author F. Scott Fitzgerald in relation to Ellis and McInerney both writing in times of decadence and consumption. Fitzgerald also had the same “quasi-autobiographical” elements, and he fell victim to the society he was writing about, an upwardly mobile and fast-past lifestyle. [Elizabeth and Graham Caveney. Shopping in Space: Essays on American Blank Generation” Fiction. (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), 17.]

‘are those without strong ties to their parents’” and this “atrophy in authority” is due to the high divorce rates and women entering the work force, to name a few sources.³¹ The “preppy murder” and the murder in Donna Tartt’s Secret History appear very similar and seem to reflect “the same truth content.”

While these fictional and real-life murders have significant overlaps, the interesting concepts that emerge are the real-life fascination with spectacle, and how the “construction” of real narrative cannot escape fictionalization. The media’s duty to inform the public conflicts with publishers’ and editors’ desires to sell papers. Fortunately, the readership is attracted to the spectacle, to the sensational, so the media can justify their stories on the basis of the audience’s demand for “information.” The sensational narration begins with the unique profile (according to the conventions of news reporting) of the two young people in this murder, which explains tabloids quickly dubbing the case “preppy murder.” The headlines included—“sex play got rough” and “wild sex killed Jenny,” which seem disturbingly familiar to the fragmented headlines in Bright Lights, Big City as well as the song in Less Than Zero “Sex and Dying in High Society” (Acland 45). The New York Times reported that, “the crime with its elements of wealth and sex, has dominated the news all week” (Acland 47). The disturbing images and stories that intrigue the minds of the characters of these novels also captivate a “real” audience.

In a news story, when the “informational” transforms into the sensational a level of narrative is inherently imposed. “Events do not speak of their newsworthiness,” instead they are socially constructed through the framing of the narrative in accentuation, explanation, and mobilization of the events (Acland 46). In other words, the agenda-

³¹ Charles, Acland. Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of “Youth in Crisis.” (Colorado: Westview Press, 1995). 71. Hereafter cited in the text.

setting function of the news operates by increasing the salience of certain problems and inflecting stories in certain ways. For instance, the “preppy murder” was molded into the entertaining narrative of the rich and wealthy gone bad—“evils of big city living and life on the edge” (Acland 70). This process mirrors Baudrillard’s explanation of society as “free floating signs and symbols.” Advertising creates an aura around a handbag in the same way reporters create an aura around a news-story. The purse and the story’s value are not inherent, but constructed. Other stories that were marginalized at the time of the “preppy murder” included the rape of an East Harlem nun as well as a brutal rape and murder that was witnessed by police officers who did nothing to stop it (Acland 48). The “preppy murder” was “the kind of crime story the media play big” because it created a spectacle that would last years. Questions of parenting proliferated, as well as the “problem” with underage drinking, and the crime as a whole was framed to mark an awakening for the young and rich “who were getting the first taste of the harshest realities” (Acland 70).

The news-stories about the “preppy murder” were so entertaining that they inspired a plethora of tabloid television shows as well novels and a docudrama. The prolific circulation of the crime, engrained the case in people’s minds and imagination as an understanding of how crime is supposed to be, how it works. The movie as a representation of the real murder, as the simulacrum, will be utterly indistinguishable from the events of the real murder, particularly when lines like this come from reality: “ ‘This scene is very sick. It all came together and it’s all f—d up. I can’t get it out of my mind. You’re going back to school. You’re so lucky you’re getting out of here’—one girl said to another in the ladies room at Dorrian’s Red Hand, New York City” the bar the

young kids attended before the murder in Central Park took place. The conversation could easily be pulled from one of Ellis, McInerney or Tarrt's novels about sex, drugs, and kids with too much money. The reporter's infiltration into the scene from which the previous quote came suggests that the "gap between writing and actuality has been closed," implying that here "the real, the environment speaks" (Acland 69). However, the real and fiction are strikingly indistinguishable. To give one more example for the "preppy murder" case, in an article for Mademoiselle, the writer continually referenced a then-popular film Something Wild as a "metaphoric descriptive device" (Acland 67). Eventually one cannot tell what came first. Fiction framed and influenced the real event, and the real event was turned back into fiction.

The issue of unreal reality and inauthentic experiences is even more relevant today for the Internet generation. In 1995, Kerouac's On the Road was transformed into The Road Rules, a "reality" television program for an "accelerated culture." MTV re-shaped the road genre "turning the Beatnik landscape of the road into the cartoon-like netscape of television," in other words, making the once "real" space of the road unreal (GenX 222). A few years prior to The Road Rules, MTV released The Real World, and ever since "reality" shows began making their way to the screen. A plethora of "reality shows" emerged since 2000 including Laguna Beach, Hills, Maui Fever, and Making the Band. This genre, however, is not limited to MTV, but other networks are airing shows such as, America's Next Top Model, Top Chef, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Project Runway—all under the guise of objective reality, an attempt at verite. A generational identity is no longer the focus, reality itself has become hyper-marketed (GenX 238).

The battle with the commercial culture that began with Generation X is still being waged by the current generation. Michael Lee Cohen, who took a cross-country tour interviewing Generation Xers, remarked “They see the challenges, but do not have a clear understanding of how to overcome them.”³² Today, young people are not trying to escape the accelerated culture, but embrace it by “trying to recombine it all according to their sensibility” (GenX 229). For instance, if life is like a movie, “these young adults want to pick their own soundtracks and movies” (GenX 229). While both the Beats and Generation X lost control of their identity to the media, today’s youth can look to the Internet as a forum for controlling and proliferating their own representation (GenX 241).

Therefore, while the Beats self-journey may have been less egotistical than Gen Xers, and communication and connection were still valued and possible, the point of these novels is that life has changed. If Sal and Moriarty were here today they would be too busy consuming, too busy counting the number of McDonald’s every square mile, to engage each other. The tropes of automobiles would be substituted for the language of film-making where they would be “sampling [an] image or sound bite” to reenact a famous road story from the fifties (GenX 231). They would be trying to find a song that captured what they were feeling. They would never be able to escape representation, or even worse, the simulacrum, which envelops representation as true. (Baudrillard 6).

³² Michael Lee Cohen. The Twentysomething American Dream: A Cross Country Quest for a Generation. (New York: Dutton, 1993), 232.

Works Consulted

- Acland, Charles. Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of "Youth in Crisis." Colorado: Westview Press, 1995.
- Annesley, James. Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Aspden, Rachel. "Why, Bret?" Newstatesman (October 2005): 54.
- Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Brett, William. "Nailing the Zeitgeist," The Spectator 277 (June 2006).
- Campbell, Neil ed. American Youth Cultures. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Charters, Ann, ed. Beat Down to Your Soul. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001.
- Cohen, Michael Lee. The Twentysomething American Dream: A Cross Country Quest for a Generation. New York: Dutton, 1993.
- Colomina, Beatriz et al., eds. Cold War, Hot House: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.
- Coupland, Douglas. Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Youth. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Curnutt, Kirk. "Teenage Wasteland: Coming of Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s," Critique 43 (Fall 2001): 93.
- Echols, Alice, ed. Shaky Ground. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Ellis, Bret Easton. Less Than Zero. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1985.
- Ellis, Bret Easton. Lunar Park. New York: Random House, 2006.
- Finnegan, William. Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harsher Country. New York: Random, 1998.
- Frank, Thomas and Matt Weiland, eds. Commodify Your Dissent. New York : W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- Giles, Jeffrey. "The Selling of the Young," National Review 39 (November 1987): 64.

- Harris, Andrea and John M. Ulrich, eds. GenXegesis: Essays on "Alternative" Youth (Sub)Culture. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.
- Kalaidjian, Walter, ed. American Modernism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Kauffman, Bill. America First. New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- McInerney, Jay. Bright Lights, Big City. New York: Random House, 1984.
- Myrsiades, Kostas. The Beat Generation. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich translated by Douglas Smith. The Birth of Tragedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Pinsker, Sanford. Bearing the Bad News. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1990.
- Tartt, Donna. Secret History. New York: Random House, 1992.
- Troy, Gil. Morning America. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Wall Street. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Charlie Sheen, Michael Douglas. 1987. DVD. Fox.
- Whaley, Preston. Blows like a Horn : Beat Writing, Jazz, Style, and Markets in the Transformation of U.S. culture. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Young, Elizabeth and Graham Caveney, Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction. London: Serpent's Tail, 1992.