

A (Queer) Souvenir of Canada

Douglas Coupland's Transformative National Symbols

While Douglas Coupland is famous for labelling the post-Boomers “Generation X” in his eponymous 1991 novel, he has written prolifically ever since. Described by some as a *zeitgeist* writer—one whose writing is “saturated with precise period detail” (Tate 16)—he has recently turned his attention to a clichéd Canadian question that has been around as long as the country itself: what does it mean to be Canadian? Although he is clearly alert to the extensive scholarly debate on the matter, as a visual artist and creative writer, he has chosen to explore the question by writing on iconic figures and objects—people and objects that for him signify Canadianness. Though he has recently delved into some fascinating biographies of Canadian icons, I would like to focus specifically on his obsession with souvenirs—the trinkets, knickknacks, and gewgaws that at once structure and clutter a national imagination. Some have argued that Coupland’s souvenirs provide a reductive view of the nation. I argue that they actually embody complex attempts to negotiate the writer’s own sense of self in the context of what he envisions to be truly Canadian and that this complexity poses a challenge to a conservative nationalism. In particular, the film adaptation of his two books titled *Souvenir of Canada* reveals Coupland’s unease when it comes to situating his own biography within the nation. This in turn highlights the awkwardness, indeed queerness, of the idea of nation itself. I define “queerness” loosely as a destabilization of categories of the traditional/non-traditional through tropes of irony, parody, appropriation, ambiguity, and revision.

The *Souvenir of Canada* books and film¹ analyze Canadian identity as it emerges through objects, practices, and events—what Coupland loosely and ironically calls “souvenirs.” From the near-obsolete stubby beer bottle to the beloved male winter pastime of peeing one’s name in the snow, Coupland picks out images that, when combined, begin to form a comical and sometimes profound picture of what makes Canadians tick. He calls these the nation’s “secret insider-only handshakes” (*Souvenir* film). His temporary art installation “Canada House” is specifically designed to be “an environment that only Canadians will understand” (*Souvenir* film). Canada House forms a central part of both the film and the second *Souvenir* book, transforming a supposedly average Canadian home into a parodic visual playground. Notably, his playful tongue-in-cheek nationalism is no stranger to criticism.

Liam Lacey, a reviewer for the *Globe and Mail*, lambasted Coupland when the *Souvenir of Canada* film came out in 2006. While Lacey acknowledges the film as a “slight, and slightly amusing, take on . . . national culture,” the reviewer claims that Coupland makes “certain coercive generalizations” about Canadians and “offers his family stories as proof of the generalizations” (n. pag.). Numerous references to “the average Canadian,” “all Canadians,” and “most Canadians” serve as evidence in Lacey’s case that Coupland is obsessed with pinning down a specifically Anglocentric, even implicitly racist, version of Canadian identity. Ultimately, the film’s reductive nationalism is supposed to reflect the core belief “that Canadians’ souls are tied to an identification with encounters with ‘the wild’” (Lacey n. pag.). This assessment lumps Coupland in with Canadian critics from the fifties, sixties, and seventies, who imagined one’s relationship to wilderness as the quintessential Canadian producer of meaning. Most of Coupland’s writing is solidly set in urban environments, but it is worth reflecting on the peculiar way Coupland constructs “encounters with the wild.”

At a glance, everywhere in the *Souvenir of Canada* books and film, Coupland does indeed seem obsessed with images of essentialized Canadianness, and this, as Lacey notes, appears to be inextricably linked to the wilderness and the land itself. The most obvious expression of this version of Canadianness is in the dedication in the first *Souvenir* book to Coupland’s father: “a more Canadian man is harder to imagine, and to follow in his footsteps is the deepest of honours” (3). As represented by the film and books, Coupland’s father is a masculine hero of sorts, who hunts moose, flies planes into the wilderness, and even faces a waterspout head-on while buckled by a belt to a

tree. Put simply, he is represented as the embodied heroic stereotype of masculinity, and this in turn becomes the ultimate expression of Canada.

However, while the mention of an essential “Canadian man” suggests a desire for a stable, coherent category, the exact means by which Coupland seeks to follow in his father’s footsteps are not nearly as clear. In one passage from the first *Souvenir* book, Coupland reflects on the relationship between Canadian myths and consumption of Canada as a brand, arriving at the conclusion that

[w]e have to watch out, because our reservoir of myths is far smaller and far more fragile than those of some other nations. Once the supplies dry up, they dry up. What happens then is that you start recycling myths, which turn into clichés; and before you know it, history has turned into nothing more than clip art. (7)

If the nation’s reservoir of myths is so small and fragile, then a key set of questions rests at the core of the *Souvenir*: why do the film and books resort so consistently to stereotypes of Canadianness? If he is supposedly aware of the way that clichés reduce identity to “clip art,” then how can he be so oblivious to the reductions he himself appears to be producing? If he is resisting the country and its history being “processed and sold back to us as a product” (7), then why does he seem to swoon with unabashed joy over trivial consumer objects like Kraft Dinner, Eaton’s catalogues, and hockey-fight videos? Beyond this, how can he be so insincere as to place these trivial commentaries alongside comments on more serious nation-shaping topics such as the FLQ crisis and the racist histories of Aboriginal affairs?

To find some answers to these questions, it helps to begin with Coupland’s own vision for his project. If, as he suggests, “Canada’s composed of thousands of secret, insider-only handshakes” (*Souvenir* film), the question that I think resists the kind of critique put forward by Lacey is what it means to be an “insider” in Canada. Does anyone know? Coupland says he wants to find these shared symbols and signs of Canadianness, but does he? Can he? Is there an experience that, independent of all context, could be said to be truly Canadian? While the book may be useful for those seeking to navigate the unique cultural landscape of Canada for the first time, much as one does with a regular souvenir (Smith and Olson 27-30), it also seems more squarely directed at Canadians and questions they might ask about themselves. It is not so much a souvenir for those who are recently arrived or passing through as it is for all those who have spent their lives immersed in the culture.

Before tackling the question of what it then means for Coupland to be Canadian, it is worth pausing to reflect on the nature of souvenirs for a

moment. What do souvenirs actually do or mean? Why would a writer use such a medium to reflect on the utterly complex and irreducible experiences one has with family and country? Perhaps this irreducibility has something to do with the way that souvenirs are mnemonic signposts for emotional connections. Critics have spent time divvying up various classes of souvenirs,² from the tacky tourist treasures to the enchanting found object (Digby 170), to account for varying degrees of authenticity in reflecting experiences. Still, the majority of critics agree that souvenirs—bought, found, or stolen—share one thing in common: they are far more interesting when considered for what is not present, rather than what is. When people buy souvenirs, it is to ensure that they remember that they have witnessed something that has—or should have—elicited an emotional response.³ The moment of souvenir consumption reflects an effort to translate one's personal, ephemeral experiences into something more permanent by manipulating the highly elaborated system of consumable signs⁴ that everywhere surrounds us. On some level, the purchase of souvenirs reflects an effort to “make do” within the impoverished vocabulary of consumer culture. If, as Michel de Certeau states, “[m]arginality has become universal” under the organizing mechanisms of a “productivist economy” (xi), then all that seems left to do is shop for a sense of belonging.

Still, while such purchases may embody complex emotional and experiential negotiations, the notoriously reckless aesthetics of souvenirs also draws attention to the inexactitude (and often total failure) of this negotiation. Like the aesthetic and emotional alienation caused by another person's vacation slide show, souvenirs efface the sensory plenitude of direct perception and experience. Indeed, vacation photos are almost completely about what is not visible (Hutnyk 79). Good art, on the other hand, generally includes frameworks designed to elicit reflection beyond the immediacy of the object at hand; indeed, this is precisely how Coupland's work differs from standard souvenirs.

While a souvenir or slide show often fails to signify anything but a very personal response, a closer examination of the souvenir's perennial tackiness points to another key issue. Simply put, in the majority of cases, the consumer object obscures the experience of viewing the original. Even when souvenirs such as mini Eiffel Towers or tiny pewter Empire State Buildings emulate the shape of their referent, they capture nothing of the object's aura—its unique “presence in time and space” (Benjamin 239). According to Walter Benjamin, the work of art is absorbing when contemplated, whereas mass-produced souvenirs vanish among their countless clones (241). A close reading of Coupland's work indicates that he is completely aware of this effacing action

of the souvenir. In fact, I will argue that he appropriates such effacements as one of his core strategies for disrupting the marginalization enacted by consumer culture. Mass-produced souvenirs are remarkable in their almost total lack of uniqueness; they represent the fragile fringe of consumer culture, nearly exposing the very process of commodity fetishization.

When it comes to Coupland's souvenirs of Canada, then, if we keep in mind the emotional and sensory supplements that people regularly provide for their gift shop and roadside finds, we can begin to see how his undertaking is unique. He says of the objects in his books that "these are souvenirs that you won't find in any gift shop" (*Souvenir* film). At the outset, he seeks to disrupt the absorption of the souvenir into a system of economic exchange, as symbolized by the gift shop. He instead foregrounds the emotional production involved with what would otherwise appear to be bland consumables, ascribing them a more open-ended value by situating them within a textual mesh of his own interweaving family stories and relationships. Souvenirs become the artistic tools by which a destabilizing version of Canadianness begins to be organized and imagined—a kind of Trojan-souvenir. Throughout the books, he uses this formal appropriation to resist the transformation of the nation into clip-art—easily consumed, generic images. He overtly questions beer-commercial-style nationalism's ability to sustain anything beyond its own commercial aims (*Souvenir* 16-7), and it becomes apparent that one of his primary concerns is gesturing at presently unspeakable alternatives to the homogenizing economic flows embodied by souvenirs.

One could legitimately ask here, "Why package the book as a souvenir at all?" Why risk reproducing precisely the thing you are trying to oppose? Why not do something to radically oppose mass culture? Coupland's biography as a writer consistently elicits this question, but as Andrew Tate notes, the writer's corpus actually suggests a strategy where the "bombardment of advertising images that saturate our everyday experience" serves to highlight "the potentially destructive delusions of capitulating to a virtual life" (48). In the *Souvenir* series, as in almost all of his other work,⁵ Coupland first takes commonplace cultural artifacts and then transforms them into artistic materials. This transformation of popular artifacts into artistic materials is made explicit in the *Souvenir* film, where Coupland acquires a site for Canada House and immediately starts poking holes in the walls so that he can "treat it like an art supply instead of being really precious about it."

The reason for this initial transformation is clear: it re-opens all of the relationships and labour obscured by the fetishized objects of consumption.

The souvenir (in this case) becomes a re-production. In *Second-Hand Cultures*, Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe comment on the “rituals of transformation”—things like cleaning, reshaping, narrating, etc. (144)—that people regularly perform when taking possession of previously owned items. These often laborious rituals allow buyers to participate actively in the production of the object, adding their own labour to the value of the object, rather than passively accepting its status as an isolated, complete object. In Gregson and Crewe’s exploration of second-hand practices, they make an important comment that gets at the heart of Coupland’s artistic strategy: “Through such rituals it becomes possible to transfer, obscure, lose or restore the meaning of goods when they change hands” (144).

While Coupland has occasionally been accused of a romanticized or even reactionary view of the past,⁶ it is important to note that a ritual of transformation is not necessarily a romantic rehashing of the good old days. Rather than the meaning of the past being simply restored when objects undergo rituals of transformation, which by itself may suggest a conservative impulse, just as much of the past is obscured and lost, even consciously. Such rituals could be read as a way of trying to revise or heal past traumas, and this is certainly the case in Coupland’s *Souvenir*. By borrowing from popular culture, Coupland does not just use material that mass audiences will immediately be able to comprehend; he uses this material to transform the expectations for Canada’s self-image. By disrupting the boundaries of the original and the replica, Coupland produces a more fluid, anti-foundational vision of Canada. As I note below, he frequently expresses outright disdain for tradition and the past. His narration of the past may be marked with a degree of sadness and loss, but it hardly qualifies as coercive nostalgia.

In this regard, there is a second and vitally important phase of Coupland’s transformations of popular culture. Not only does he make popular artifacts—like his souvenirs and brands—his own by transforming them into “art supplies,” but he also transforms his works, via publication and mass distribution, back *into* popular artifacts once they have been altered. This second transformation is crucial, because it suggests that he is not just concerned with finding a place for himself in the world or producing art entirely for an elite audience; he also wants to slip his transformed objects back into the world of mass consumption, presumably to expand and add ambiguity to the field of what is possible. G. P. Lainsbury argues that Coupland consistently puts “emphasis on the liberation of individuals within the private sphere allowed them within late capitalist reality” (230), but

notably this personal action is always returned to the public sphere by virtue of publication itself. In the following pages, I provide a more detailed reading of this public/private action in the *Souvenir of Canada* series, suggesting that Coupland appropriates select items of Canadiana to challenge and revise received versions of the Canadian nation and family.

As I hinted earlier, in order to occupy and jam the boundaries of the Canadian nation in the *Souvenir* books, Coupland introduces numerous autobiographical elements directly into his account. This move is not surprising, given the mnemonic function of souvenirs. The entry on the Group of Seven from the first book, for instance, features two paragraphs on the painters and four on an experience Coupland has when thinking about them (48-49). Experiencing something he calls a “visitation,” the section involves him, his cousin, and his mother, all being connected through a series of phone calls that trigger his own personal epiphany on the distances involved when thinking about Canada as a whole: “in my head I was racing across Canada at a thousand kilometres a second. . . . I was unable to move and I saw a lucid flashing sequence of my life in this country: the weather, the soil, the plant life and animals” (48). He inserts his personal stories into larger ones about artistic production and expansionist histories in Canada, and indeed throughout his books, he refuses to see the country as something independent from the personal experiences of it.

As a result, engaging with his work does feel a little like watching a stranger’s slide show at times, though he uses a couple of aesthetic strategies to consistently push the texts outside of the realm of an uncritical, slide-show sentimentality. The first *Souvenir* book features a series of still-life images, which Coupland describes as a “nearly extinct visual mode” (1). These consist mainly of items like air-hockey tables dripping with corn syrup and inuksuit surrounded by shining dead fish and tattered fishing buoys; the images are cast in shadows, suggesting an inviting incompleteness. His aesthetic choices formally mirror his stated fears of “how difficult it can be trying to cobble together a national identity with things like canola and, say, the discovery of insulin or basketball” (*Souvenir 2* 15). In the *Souvenir* series, he leaves gaps among these objects so that new possibilities have room to emerge.

To bolster the project and push its content beyond the realm of elite art objects, the staged still-life photos are also interspersed with more aesthetically ordinary images of Canadian towns, homes, and natural settings. Additionally, Coupland adds still-life images from photographer Karin Bubaš’ *Leon’s Palace* series, which features pictures of addicts’ homes

containing many objects similar to those Coupland identifies as distinctly Canadian. In other words, the souvenirs in the book do not belong only to middle-class or wealthy Canadians; uncomfortable symmetries and incongruities are central to the national picture Coupland presents. With numerous gaps and silences created by a series of riveting, bizarre, and cheeky juxtapositions, readers are given the opportunity to pause and enact their own transformations on received symbols of the nation.

In the film, perhaps as the result of the directorial team's intervention, the extent to which familial and national narratives intertwine for Coupland becomes clearer. Although in the film he is still concerned with Canada becoming "something processed and sold back to us as a product," his uneasy position in relation to a Canadian "us" becomes clearer than in the books. Director Robin Neinstein focuses more openly on Coupland's complicated relationship with his family, foregrounding the potential problems involved with trying to describe personal experience using received national symbols. One illustrative scene begins with Coupland stating, "Nothing puts a smile on my brother's face faster than a tape of *Best Hockey Fights #7*." In a slightly dingy-looking family room, shot in warm, grainy film, he sits down on the couch to watch the video on TV with his brother. This is staged as a perfectly Canadian activity, but gradually the extent to which the scene is less-than-comfortable becomes apparent. As hockey toughs duke it out on the screen, his brother Tim prattles on in stereotypical sports-guy lingo about how "back in those days it [fighting] was a critical component of winning a Stanley Cup." Coupland, as if originally skeptical and unaware of the nature of the video, says, "This actually is pretty good," and then punctuates his brother's commentary with a characteristically dainty, "Ooh, okay" (*Souvenir* film).

While the whole scene smacks of a certain uneasiness, the tension comes to a head when Coupland awkwardly links the video to more pressing contemporary issues—presumably ones more suited to his own interests. Following his brother's comment that the sport is fine "as long as they stick to the hockey and there's a couple scraps, you know," Coupland chimes in with a comment of his own: "The internet will pick up the slack. Like, it's hard for this stuff to compete with beheadings on Al Jazeera." In a fraction of a second, Tim's facial expression changes from a comfortable laughter, to confusion, and then profound unease. His eyes shift to the camera, as if searching for help, and then the scene cuts to the next part of the film. Rather than nationalistic coercion, to me this scene illustrates Coupland's failure to achieve a seamless and reductive national "us"—even with his

own brother, even watching hockey. This failure marks his inability to fully participate in the national symbols he identifies. This reaction does not support the comfortable, universalized “we” that Robert McGill sees as a characteristic of Coupland’s earlier work (253). The souvenir here becomes not an “insider-only handshake,” but a moment or memento emphasizing the distance and difference that separates Canadians in even the most intimate settings. It draws attention to the way the consumable signs of nationalism cannot always assimilate or capture specific people’s experiences.

Distances pervade his other familial relationships, including those with his parents. Sitting with his mother on what appears to be a back patio straight out of an old Canadian Tire ad, Coupland envisions the scenario of finishing a book and awkwardly handing it off to his parents. He expresses his reluctance to share the work, and his mother chimes in, “I don’t want it all that much either.” He thanks her “for saying it out loud.” Obviously, this kind of exchange can be attributed to the kinds of complicated emotions that characterize many family relationships, but Coupland’s unease with his family’s reception of his work is called into question later, when he openly laments his parents’ absence at the opening of Canada House. Commenting on his books in a one-on-one interview later in the film, his mother Janet says reading them is “almost like an invasion of privacy, or his own personal space.” On the surface, Coupland seems to agree with this assessment, and yet the film also suggests in numerous ways that he struggles regularly to feel more comfortable within his family and their supposed embodiment of true Canadianness. He is a Canadian, after all: why is the fit so difficult?

The emotional and artistic labour involved with Coupland’s souvenir may represent an effort to use objects to mediate his upbringing with his adult identity. Although the reasons for the family’s distancing have occurred off camera and are thus a matter of speculation, several times it becomes apparent that in fact Canada House represents something other than a bland, clichéd reiteration of national symbols for their own sake. Coupland says, for instance, that his “parents’ place would make a great Canada House house,” and indeed, one begins to wonder if Canada House is not really just an attempt to somehow revisit or refurbish his own personal experience of growing up at home. When his parents do not show up to the house’s opening, he is visibly overcome with grief. He describes it as a feeling of “pre-nostalgia” where “you know you’re going to miss it when it’s gone. And that’s kind of like this house, my family, people in my life” (*Souvenir* film). His comment here renders explicit the connection between Canada House

and his own family. The transformations he has enacted using a supposedly objectified and depersonalized series of souvenirs reflect an attempt to construct an entirely revised way of being Canadian.

Canada and all of Coupland's claims about true Canadianness amalgamate with personal experience, and the results are not always blissful and cheeky; the souvenir is not just a trinket, but a symbol of loss. One visitor astutely observes that "Doug has really poured his heart into it" and suggests that he has a "genuine emotional connection" to the "fragments of Canadiana" he has assembled (*Souvenir* film). The house of souvenirs becomes more than a memory of a time and a place; it becomes an attempt to form space in such a way that the artist can finally fit into it, a unique effort to reorganize a traditional house "whose structure is the patriarchal relationship founded on tradition and authority, and whose heart is the complex affective relationship that binds all the family members together" (Baudrillard 16). While Canada House is successful in terms of generating discussion and interest among its visitors and friends, it is not quite accepted by those with whom Coupland wishes to be closest. At its core, the revision of popular Canadiana trades one type of absence for another.

Insofar as the exploration of souvenirs is a way of negotiating his way into his family and Canada, in many ways it is characterized by loss and obscurity rather than restoration. When asked to describe Coupland's art, his mother's response suggests the crux of the *Souvenir* projects. Her eyes go wide, then she repeats the question back to the interviewer, thinks, sighs, and then with a laugh exclaims, "Bewildering!" Perhaps all of the artist's efforts to locate himself within the Canadian family amount only to a sense of increased distance from loved ones. When he asks his mother to photograph her cupboards for his book, she says to him, "A professional photographer to shoot my cupboards . . . have you lost your mind?" (*Souvenir* film). Her tone remains jokingly loving, but there is an awkwardness at the very core of Coupland's efforts to simply express himself within what he sees as a traditional Canadian family. He also reflects on an incident where he has his car stolen and left in a tree hollow while he is in Europe, and his mother calls inquiring about it, saying, "With you I'm never quite sure. . . . Did you leave it there on purpose, or maybe it's stolen?" Coupland mulls this over: "And I realized just how totally my lifestyle alienates my family, 'cause they weren't even sure, like I go to Europe and park my car in the hollow tree" (*Souvenir* film).

Familial alienation from Coupland's lifestyle is not limited to his mother, Janet Coupland. She describes how his father disdained him for dropping

out of McGill's physics program to pursue art: "My husband would tease him and call him Toulouse for the first couple of months."⁷ She then emphasizes, "My husband is *not* artistic" (*Souvenir* film). As mentioned, the initial *Souvenir* book is dedicated to Coupland's father, and in the film, he is introduced by Coupland as "my father: a doctor, an outdoorsman, a pilot, and the most Canadian man I know." While Coupland expresses a desire to follow in his father's footsteps, he also mentions several stories that suggest that he has not been able to do this in any direct way. He says at one point, "In my family, the wilderness was a playground for my father and brothers who were champion marksmen. I, on the other hand, have never fired a gun in my life. By the time I was a teenager, I just wanted to be back at the mall, smoking" (*Souvenir* film). Again, a picture of distance and difference emerges, and it gets even more exaggerated when he notes, "I guess it was a real drag for my father having someone along who was more interested in hanging out with the animals" (*Souvenir* film). Coupland essentially identifies more with anything other than the men of his family; the supposed nationalistic coercions are in fact enacted against him, and it is through the circulation of art and writing that he seeks to rebalance this trauma. He explains that when he was finally old enough, "I stopped going on all those hunting trips, and I'm not even very sure if my father noticed that I stopped" (*Souvenir* film). The lack of being noticed, of really being an integral part of the family structure, echoes the fact that his parents essentially ignore the ultimate souvenir—Canada House—yet its mass recirculation in the form of a film does ultimately constitute a transformation in the sense of what it means to be Canadian.

The question of what exactly constitutes his "alienating lifestyle" is an interesting one in the film, marked by a queer kind of silence. Many of his conversations occur at very jarring angles, such as when he learns that his father has read his books and comments that "it's so awkward. I almost don't want to know that" (*Souvenir* film). He *almost* doesn't want to, and yet he clearly does desire to be some part of what he positions repeatedly as the ideal Canadian family. In the process, inadvertently or not, the film taken in its totality becomes a new queer version of the Canadian family, of Canada—one characterized not simply by hunting, hockey, and maple syrup, but also by the son who does not quite fit in. This son would rather be at the mall, surrounded by the system of consumer signs that would later enable his reimagining of his family. Moments emphasizing the family's distance function as a kind of uncanny presence, an open secret that nearly

breaks to the surface—indeed out of the closet—at many points. As an adult and an artist, Coupland has found a milieu more accepting of his personal experience of Canadianness. Interestingly, at the Canada House opening, a close friend identified throughout the film as “Doug’s buddy Judd” is the only person who walks around the house in his socks rather than the obligatory booties. Indeed, he feels right at home with Coupland’s artistic re-envisioning of the nation.

Coupland’s attempts to negotiate his way into traditional family structures via ironic inversions of supposedly Canadian souvenirs also highlight the challenges facing any attempt to queer the idea of nation. Indeed, the fact that Coupland’s lifestyle is represented in the film as merely conducive to awkward silences suggests the provisional ways a family negotiates each member’s identity. Following the night of the art show, the filmmakers shoot a scene where they project ghostly old films of the Coupland family onto the inside surfaces of Canada House, and in the next scene it is being torn down. This is a particularly melancholic sequence, in that it represents the laying to rest of a moment where people did not find the way across the distances that divide them. The loss and its obscurity seem complete. Families do not have simply the artistic son, or the awkward son, or the gay son; they have a son, a word that represents, much like a souvenir, all manner of complex, invisible, and sometimes indescribable relationships and experiences. Despite all the difficulties with his family, he comments—as the documentary flashes through some images of pot and gay marriage—that Canadians now “like the freedom to be genuinely different from others.” Promisingly, he claims that that “it’s a good time to be Canadian” (*Souvenir* film). This positive note towards the film’s end suggests some perceived success in the transformations of an old Canada into a new one.

While it is tempting to reduce Coupland’s creative process entirely to the complicated family dynamics that play out in the film, it is also interesting to note that he has had similar difficulties in his relationship with Canadian letters and institutions at large, particularly in “his perceived status as a ‘half-American’ writer” (Tate 29). He says at one point in the documentary that “in Canada, I was perceived as not a Canadian writer,” and so he eventually started setting his books in Canada to remedy the situation. Despite his efforts, he notes, the critics continued to say “still not Canadian,” so he began to write books on Canada, specifically; that is where the *Souvenir* project comes in. These too, at least at first, were met with choruses like Liam Lacey’s, of “nope, still not Canadian.” It seems his efforts to work his way into the nation

extend beyond the struggles with his family, but interestingly, while still hinting at a note of loss, he is a little more relaxed and jovial about it. He has no qualms about crushing Canadian icons underfoot, and his central reflection on Canadian critics in the film is followed by a scene where he busts up hockey sticks and tosses them in the Canada House fireplace. When the souvenirs fail to match your experience, you try to transform them. Notably, when it comes to negotiating deep symbols from the past such as national traditions, the rituals of transformation are never completed; the illustration of the process itself is what is ground-breaking about Coupland's work—the fact that the *Souvenir* series shows that Canada is open to renegotiations.

The result of Coupland's *Souvenir* project is a revised Canadianness, one embodied by the totality of the *Souvenir* works. Notably, to pinpoint Coupland's unique negotiation of Canada and its signs to this or that aspect of his personal life would be to objectify and reduce the subtle and complex way he has negotiated his own identity within the Canadian mainstream and his perception of the Canadian family. Regardless of his biography, the *Souvenir* works reflect a uniquely clandestine and anti-revelatory approach to questions of identity in a historical moment where everything—even one's own identity—is being classified in the name of more effective branding. Coupland resists the effacements of consumer culture across his work; he seeks to transform it from within. On Canadian multiculturalism, for example, he expresses his annoyance with self-congratulatory, pro-mosaic hoorahs, claiming that the world is going to become a much scarier, more brutal place in the following century, and “[w]e have to prepare” (*Souvenir* 1 68). Though his art and writing may appear at first to provide a reductive picture of things, as I have illustrated throughout this piece, the simplicity of his work is deceptive.

Coupland's most recent novel, *Player One*, which is based on the Massey Lectures he gave in five major Canadian cities in 2010, illustrates the unique and complicated relationship of this author with institutions of this nation. These well-known lectures were started in 1961 as a response to the 1949 Massey Commission, which was tasked with promoting and stabilizing Canadian culture. They have become a forum for the most accomplished and recognized of contemporary thinkers. Interestingly, Coupland is one of the few to have delivered them in an experimental, non-traditional mode, jamming the lecture structure with the novel form. His novel in five parts involves five characters stranded in a Toronto airport cocktail lounge while an oil-shortage apocalypse threatens to destroy the world outside. Taken as a symbol of the Canadian nation, the novel suggests a place that is at once

isolated and cosmopolitan, abundant and situated in a world of scarcity. It is a thoroughly ambiguous and unstable vision of the nation from beginning to end, much like his *Souvenir* accounts.

Going beyond its arguments at the level of content, *Player One* also reflects an attempt by the author to both inhabit and transform a national institution, the Massey Lectures. Given the accusations of nostalgia and coercion that Coupland has received about his work on Canada, it is, I think, telling that he would chose to reform such a central nationalist tradition. He at once recognizes the received influence of the institution by giving the lectures, but he also completely reshapes it to suit his own purposes, again indicating a note of alienation or even hostility when it comes to tradition. He refuses the cliché while employing its structure, which is precisely his approach to souvenirs. Throughout his work, Coupland demonstrates an effort to “follow in the footsteps” of his predecessors, but only in the most unexpected and self-defined of ways. In truth, for Coupland, being Canadian has nothing to do with the material objects of one’s affection; it has nothing to do with the souvenirs of Canada, the material markers of Canadian culture. Instead, it involves the freedom to express oneself as one sees fit whenever the structures of the past create dissatisfaction with the present.

NOTES

- 1 Throughout, I have cited the original *Souvenir of Canada* book, *Souvenir of Canada 2*, and the *Souvenir of Canada* documentary respectively as *Souvenir 1*, *Souvenir 2*, and *Souvenir* film.
- 2 Hashimoto and Telfer provide useful schemes for classifying souvenirs (193-95).
- 3 The most cogent expression of this perspective is Jane Bennett’s. She claims that “the affective force of those moments might be deployed to propel ethical generosity,” rather than simply signifying the obscuring of social relations (4). Nissa Ramsay tempers Bennett’s arguments about material objects, commenting that while enchantment plays an important role, just as often the relationship of consumers with objects is characterized by “uncertainty, awkwardness and ambiguity” (198).
- 4 Jean Baudrillard describes consumerism as “*an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs*” (200; italics in original).
- 5 Brands from popular culture such as Microsoft, 7-11, and Staples become the vocabulary that characters in *Microserfs*, *Generation X*, and *The Gum Thief*, for instance, use to tell stories.
- 6 See Veronica Hollinger’s “Apocalypse Coma.”
- 7 Toulouse refers to the nineteenth-century French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who, because of his numerous health issues and resultant halted growth, suffered ridicule and alienation at the hands of others. The subjects of his paintings were often given a sinister or foreboding aspect, created by heavy lines and jarring shadows.

WORKS CITED

- Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict. London: Verso, 1996. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. London: Cape, 1970. Print.
- Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.
- Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St Martin's, 1991. Print.
- . *The Gum Thief*. Toronto: Random House, 2007. Print.
- . *Microserfs*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995. Print.
- . *Player One*. Toronto: Anansi, 2010. Print.
- . *Souvenir of Canada*. Dir. Robin Neinstein. National Film Board of Canada, 2006. DVD.
- . *Souvenir of Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002. Print.
- . *Souvenir of Canada 2*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. Print.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984. Print.
- Digby, Susan. "The Casket of Magic: Home and Identity from Salvaged Objects." *Home Cultures* 3.2 (2006): 169-90. Print.
- Gregson, Nicky, and Louise Crewe. *Second-Hand Cultures*. Oxford: Berg, 2003. Print.
- Hashimoto, Atsuko, and David J. Telfer. "Geographical Representations Embedded within Souvenirs in Niagara: The Case of Geographically Displaced Authenticity." *Tourism Geographies* 9.2 (2007): 191-217. Print.
- Hollinger, Veronica. "Apocalypse Coma." *Edging into the Future Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002. 159-73. Print.
- Hutnyk, John. "Photogenic Poverty: Souvenirs and Infantilism." *Journal of Visual Culture* 3.1 (2004): 77-94. Print.
- Lacey, Liam. "Beaver Fever." *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] 26 May 2006: R7. *CPI.Q*. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.
- Lainsbury, G. P. "Generation X and the End of History." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 58 (1996): 229-41. Print.
- McGill, Robert. "The Sublime Simulacrum: Vancouver in Douglas Coupland's Geography of the Apocalypse." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 70 (2000): 252-77. Print.
- Ramsay, Nissa. "Taking-Place: Refracted Enchantment and the Habitual Spaces of the Tourist Souvenir." *Social & Cultural Geography* 10.2 (2009): 197-217. Print.
- Smith, R. K., and L. S. Olson. "Tourist Shopping Activities and Development of Travel Sophistication." *Visions in Leisure and Business* 20.1 (2001): 23-33. Print.
- Tate, Andrew. *Douglas Coupland*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. Print.

