

THE ECSTASY OF INFLUENCE:
DOUGLAS COUPLAND APPROPRIATES THE WORLD

THESIS

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by

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DEDICATION

A reading from *Microserfs*:

Let me talk about love.

Do you remember that old TV series, *Get Smart*? You remember at the beginning where Maxwell Smart is walking down the secret corridor and there are all of those doors that open sideways, and upside down and gateways and stuff? I think that everybody keeps a whole bunch of doors just like this between themselves and the world. But when you're in love, all of your doors are open, and all of *their* doors are open. And you roller-skate down your halls together.

And when you meet someone and fall in love, and they fall in love with you, you ask them, "Will you take my heart—stains and all?" and they say, "I will," and they ask you the same question, and you say, "I will," too.

To Misty

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EPIGRAM

This song is futuristic, so hardcore
Hey T.S. Eliot! Please shut the door
Because modernism is so passé
The postmodern revolution is here to stay
In the house tonight because of Frank Lloyd Wright
The bass goes “boom!” like dynamite
(Yo, Wright was a modernist!)
Yeah I know that, all right
But you can’t rhyme “Bob Venturi” with “dynamite”

See it’s *Guernica* Part II when I storm the stage
I draw fans like Warhol draws soup cans on the page
Did I say postmodern? Well, that was a lie!
I’ve been post-postmodern since junior high

—MC Lars, “Space Game,” *The Graduate*

CHAPTER 1: READING COUPLAND AND LETHEM

Of Hobbits and Hippies

In Douglas Coupland's *Shampoo Planet* (1992), Tyler, the protagonist, ponders which brand of haircare product to use from his vast supply; his choices include PsychoPath®, Monk-On-Fire®, and First-Strike®. He justifies spending so much time and money on these products by declaring, "Your hair is you—your tribe—it's your badge of clean. Hair is your document. What's on top of your head says what's inside your head" (Coupland *Shampoo* 7). Which is to say, the elaborate haircare products on Tyler's head say that he has no identity of his own without a corporate brand to direct him. Tyler has reacted to his hippie upbringing by avoiding anything that was not manufactured by a multinational corporation. He then constructs elaborate—but ultimately shallow—personal credos built on the premise that consumerism is the heart of the modern soul. Indeed, he is confident he will escape the despair of his small town gone bust after the local chemical plants close because, among other advantages, "I have a good car and a wide assortment of excellent hair-care products" (Coupland *Shampoo* 13). The character is the worst nightmare of anyone who suspects that large corporations invade our subconscious and form our identity.

One natural scene of conflict occurs when Tyler meets his biological father, Neil, a hippie stereotype who lives in rural California. The first-person

narrative describes Neil's home as a "cedar-shingled Hobbit-type house" (Coupland *Shampoo* 207; the reference is no accident and is examined further below). To get to the home, Tyler and Stephanie (his equally superficial girlfriend), have "to unlock two gates and pass three DO NOT ENTER signs . . . aided by an iffy map sketched by Jasmine [Tyler's mother] years ago which had the two gate keys taped to the bottom" (Coupland *Shampoo* 208). Neil funds his backwoods home and feeds his family (2 wives and 10 children) by selling illegal drugs and t-shirts with molecules of "mood-altering chemicals" printed on them (the latter is described as a "decoy business" [Coupland *Shampoo* 209]). While Neil's wives cook lunch, Tyler reports, "The scariest aspect of the kitchen is that there are no boxes or cans or other tokens of this nation's mighty food-distribution system—no recognizable brand names. No processed foods. No microwaves. No electricity. Nothing" (Coupland *Shampoo* 209).

The conflict here is fairly simplistic: Tyler, a ridiculous character, encounters an equivalently ridiculous setting in the opposite direction. More complex is the layered reference to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* via the initial description of Neil's "Hobbit-type house." The reader might suppose that Tyler's only exposure to Tolkien's work is second-hand; his first-person narration never mentions any engagement with art, and the only book he mentions is a self-serving autobiography of a conglomerate tycoon. His only plausible access to the Tolkien reference, then, is through pop culture awareness. It is worth noting that even before the recent, immensely successful film adaptations of *Lord of the Rings*, there were cartoon adaptations, books of art, and a large audience

of readers of Tolkien's books in the United States. We may therefore deduce that Tyler apprehended the concept of a Hobbit-type house from one of these sources, meaning that the reference seems, like everything he does and says, superficial.

The reference is not superficial, however, when one considers that Neil's hippie purity—no electricity, no respect for laws or social mores—has several points of contact with Tolkien's Hobbits. Hobbits, the focal characters of *The Hobbit* and the ensuing *Lord of the Rings*, live simple lives close to the earth and away from the more industrious races (Men, dwarves, and elves). Frodo and Sam, both Hobbits, are chosen among representatives of all the races of Middle Earth to carry the evil Ring of Sauron to its eventual destruction in the fires of Mount Doom—thus saving his world from domination by dark forces. Moreover, in Tolkien's novel, the principal hero is not Gandalf the powerful wizard or Aragorn the king of Men; the heroes are Frodo for bearing the Ring to the edge of Mount Doom and his friend Sam for helping him along the journey. The Hobbits are able to accomplish this task because they are pure (in Gandalf's estimation, anyway) when compared to the other races, especially the ambitious and self-serving race of Men, which was responsible for the Ring's continued presence in Middle Earth. The Hobbits' purity is based, in large measure, on their connection with the earth, and it is this aspect of Tolkien's novel, perhaps more than any other, that endeared the book to the hippie subculture and environmental movements of the Sixties and Seventies. Among these (primarily

young) idealists, Tolkien's books were held up as relevant to the struggle to reconnect with the earth.

Neil's home, by comparison, is formulated from taking the hippie connection to nature to a stereotypical extreme, much as Tyler is the stereotypical extreme of youth culture in the Nineties. There is no indication in Tyler's (admittedly biased) depiction of Neil that his biological father has any high ideals about community or the environment. Quite the opposite seems true—he hides himself in the woods, profits from selling drugs to presumably more urban people, and practices a particularly sexist form of polygamy (the wives do not speak, and neither seems happy with her situation). Neil has cut himself off from the mechanized world that Tyler inhabits, but there is little evidence that he shares a connection with the earth. Neil's drug business, polygamy, and disconnection from the urban realities around him are as satirical as the portrayal of Tyler. Neil is a grotesque parody of the high idealism of those influenced by Tolkien to embrace environmentalism and communes. Yet in *Shampoo Planet*, perhaps Coupland's most cynical novel, Neil is the closest that the contemporary, industrialized, branded world gets to the lifestyle of the Hobbits.

This reference, then, is multilayered. There is the layer of explicit textual reference to both a pop culture signifier and a predecessor work: the description of Neil's house *begins* with the moniker, "Hobbit-style house." Then there is the layer of the cultural response to the predecessor work: Neil's pursuit for purity continues his subculture's appropriation of *Lord of the Rings* as an ideological goal. And finally, there is the transplantation of the predecessor work into the

contemporary culture: Neil and Tyler are parodies, respectively, of the communal and environmental idealism of the Sixties and the spiritual emptiness of young people in the Nineties.

Douglas Coupland and Generation X

Shampoo Planet is not the subject of this thesis; rather, I hope to comment more generally on the work of its author. Coupland began his career as a novelist with *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), and his subsequent novels have examined various aspects of this generation's maturation in the Information Age. For example, *Life After God* (1994) meditates on this generation's spiritual emptiness and alienation, and *JPod* (2006) explores its awkward place in corporate hegemony. The two novels that I will focus on in this thesis have similar focuses: *Microserfs* (1995) examines community-building among low-level Microsoft coders, and *The Gum Thief* (2007) addresses whether true friendship can be made at a big-box office supply store (Staples). In these and other works, Coupland is chronicling the progression of the generation whose name he popularized—and that generation's children (arguably represented in *Shampoo Planet*). At times (such as in *Shampoo Planet*), he seems highly critical of his characters' attachment to superficial popular culture, using that same culture to form his criticism, as if he cannot escape it—as if it is the only language he can use to bring a mirror to his society.

Coupland is not the first to use popular culture as a language for forming an intellectual response to consumerism. He is, however, probably the most significant pioneer of the Generation X literary movement. Chuck Klosterman

pointedly self-identifies as a member of Generation X in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (2004) and prefaces the book of essays as follows:

Nothing can be appreciated in a vacuum. That's what accelerated culture does; it doesn't speed things up as much as it jams everything into the same wall of sound. But that's not necessarily tragic. The goal of being alive is to figure out what it means to be alive, and there is a myriad of ways to deduce that answer; I just happen to prefer examining the question through the context of Pamela Anderson and *The Real World* and Frosted Flakes. It's certainly no less plausible than trying to understand Kant or Wittgenstein. (n.p.)

Klosterman's appropriation of the phrase "accelerated culture," from the subtitle to *Generation X*, gives him away as a Coupland ephebe even though the predecessor and his works are not mentioned in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*.¹ In this passage, Klosterman gives self-deprecating critical weight to Coupland's project, as exemplified in the example from *Shampoo Planet*. Neither Klosterman nor Coupland claims that the use of pop culture is the only way to apprehend society, but both insist on its validity. Klosterman admits, elsewhere in the book, that his approach is self-limiting: in a footnote to the statement, "science fiction tends to be philosophy for stupid people," Klosterman admits, "As opposed to this essay, which tends to be philosophy for shallow people" (*Sex* 165). If your language is derived from superficial elements, Klosterman implies, then you are

doomed to superficiality, even if your words are ostensibly meant to criticize the superficiality of consumerist culture.

Case in point: although Tyler learns to appreciate his family and the faithful girlfriend that he dumped in favor of Stephanie, his salvation at the conclusion of *Shampoo Planet* is a job at an ambiguous conglomerate (helmed by the author of the aforementioned self-serving memoir). He learns the value of the people around him but remains ensconced in a world that affirms the importance of trademarked shampoo formulations. By using such a language, Coupland opens himself to the criticism he writes fiction for shallow people. The problem with this claim is the reality of a media-soaked Western world: people born in the mid-Sixties and thereafter have experienced a constant bombardment of content in the form of advertisements, TV, movies, and—beginning in the early Nineties—the Internet. Coupland seems to adopt a boldly realistic stance: he knows and accepts that his culture is superficial, so he embraces it in his fiction, weaving layers of appropriations that perform the dual functions of explanation and criticism.

This realism, however, is tempered with a *love* for what one appropriates—in other words, Coupland's appropriations are not all or even primarily ironic. The point is made somewhat clearer in *Life After God*: "I think the price [our generation] paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched" (273). A postindustrial, post-Christian narrator says this, but it may as well be Coupland himself; a similar narrator of the last story ends the book as follows: "I need God

... to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love" (359). The significance of such sentiments to the present discussion is that Coupland has evinced, in his fiction, distaste for the irony of Generation X and its descendents. Irony is posited here as the inherited mode of being for these young people, and Coupland acknowledges that idea over and over in his fiction—every time he sets Tyler up to be ridiculous, he confirms the veracity of this conclusion (for him, anyway). Acknowledgment should not be mistaken here for acceptance: the passages from *Life After God* reveal the distaste Coupland has for the dominance of this ironical mode of being. The characters' post-Christian felt need for God is tied to irony's scorching of love and the ability to love. Perhaps this is why Coupland's *Shampoo Planet* ends on such a hopeful note, despite the continued superficiality of its protagonist—he wakes up the girlfriend he returned to and tells her, "the world is so *alive*" (299). Tyler may be doomed to superficiality, but he can love despite and within his culture—the irony of his upbringing has not scorched away that capacity.

To unpack Coupland's fiction, therefore, requires a critical language that recognizes the necessity of base cultural elements in contemporary artistic expression and the further recognition that bitter satire and pejorative criticism are not the only plausible stances toward contemporary culture. Such a language may be found in the *ecstasy of influence*, a concept offered by novelist Jonathan Lethem. Just as the episode examined above from *Shampoo Planet* is a fusion of literary reference, popular culture reference, and original prose, Lethem's term fuses a particular, historical approach toward the freedom to appropriate

predecessor works with a legal theory built to address contemporary, pragmatic concerns. The ecstasy of influence also provides a rubric for understanding how literature can be motivated by a giving and even loving attitude toward one's culture (regardless of its high or low status) and predecessors.

Jonathan Lethem and Free Culture

Lethem throws down a theoretical gauntlet in his *Harper's Magazine* essay, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." The essay's construction is audacious: most of its words are taken from secondary sources without quotation marks and in-text citations. Lethem presents the essay as his own words, though he identifies his sources in a "Key" following the main text (making his claim that the essay is "A Plagiarism" either ironic or false). He even claims several anecdotes as events in his own life, only to admit in the "Key" that they never happened to him. In "The Ecstasy of Influence," Lethem argues that all art—but literature in particular—should be able to use all aspects of culture in its creation, including both predecessor works and elements of pop culture.

Before delving into these arguments, however, it is important to briefly situate Lethem in the free culture movement. This movement developed during the Nineties and in the years since 2000 to counteract increased copyright enforcement by the "content industry," a term used by free culture activists that includes the major film, music, TV, and media producers and distributors. In particular, Lawrence Lessig, arguably the leader of the movement until he left the study of copyright in favor of the study of political corruption (interrelated fields, to be sure), argues for a more robust appreciation of the "commons." In the physical

world, the commons includes public streets and parks; in the world of ideas, the commons includes Einstein's theory of relativity and writings in the public domain (Lessig *Future* 21). Lessig notes the real difference between physical and intangible notions of commons: the latter are "nonrivalrous," meaning, "[i]f you use the theory of relativity, there is as much left over afterward as there was before. Your consumption, in other words, does not *rival* my own" (*Future* 21). Though Lessig focuses on the public domain and the domain of ideas, the term nonrivalrous also fairly describes artistic expression; quoting Lessig's *Free Culture* does not decrease this intellectual resource—nor, for that matter, does piracy of the book *per se*.

Copyright, in Lessig and the free culture movement's conception, is not intended to police uses of the commons but to produce a tangible incentive for creating an intangible, nonrivalrous resource. Thus, the U.S. Congress was mandated by the Constitution "To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries" (Art. 1 §8). The key phrase for free culture advocates is "for limited Times," because it makes explicit their view that copyright is not a moral right of authors but a compromise for the good of society. Copyright is therefore a monopoly on certain uses of an artist's (or inventor's) creation—for example, derivative works, publication rights, and trademarks—to provide an appropriate incentive to create more art. Once the "limited Times" are expired (the terms are set by Congress), the work or invention is released to the

public domain, a nonrivalrous commons that anyone can use for any purpose (including commercial uses).

In the United States, furthermore, the copyright monopoly is extensive but not (legally) absolute: “fair use” of copyrighted materials is permitted under certain conditions for educational (e.g., photocopying materials for a class) and artistic (e.g., producing criticism, parody, and satire) purposes. The presence of the “fair use” doctrine in the *United States Code* (17 U.S.C. §107) presents a challenge to copyright holders who wish to aggressively restrict the number of uses available to the consumer in the Information Age. Every electronic use of a video, sound, or text file produces a copy, which is the basis for copyright law. Indeed, the most basic right asserted by American copyright law is that the content owner can restrict how to release content. Copyright law was invented and expanded primarily to halt or slow the flow of copyright piracy in the predigital world—unauthorized printing of books and maps. But a digital file is by its very nature a copy; even if I save this Microsoft Word file and open the same file a day later, I am creating a copy by the transfer of data from my computer’s hard drive to its random access memory (RAM). If I email this file or post it to a website, even more copies are created anytime other people open or download it on *their* computers. This aspect of digital file structure has been used by the content industry to assert their need and right to police the number of files that are downloaded and shared among consumers. The result is that digital files, though by nature easier to share than physical copies, have been saddled with more restrictions.

The consequences of such restrictions are far-reaching. Lessig explains:

[W]e come from a tradition of “free culture”—not “free” as in “free beer” (to borrow a phrase from the founder of the free-software movement), but “free” as in “free speech,” “free markets,” “free trade,” “free enterprise,” “free will,” and “free elections.” A free culture supports and protects creators and innovators. It does this directly by granting intellectual property rights. But it does so indirectly by limiting the reach of those rights, to guarantee that follow-on creators and innovators remain *as free as possible* from the control of the past. (*Free* xiv)

Free culture advocates like Lessig have become increasingly concerned with the danger of losing a fundamental aspect of our culture in the drive to protect intellectual property from digital pirates. Both affirm that digital piracy is real, and both affirm that content owners have a right to maintain the integrity of their copyright monopolies. Lessig and his fellow activists, however, argue that the post-Internet balance has tipped too far in the direction of content owners and away from the public and follow-on artists. Moreover, implicit in Lessig’s description of free culture is a broader view of fair use than many content owners would admit to. If we are living in a free culture, Lessig and others argue, then it stands to reason that even protected works—whether by copyright, trademark, or both—are free for use by the members of the culture that produced them. This view is buttressed by the presence of fair use in U.S. law. Fair use, the argument

goes, could only have arisen in a free culture and exists for the promotion of reasonable freedoms within that culture.

Lethem enters the argument at this point—where fair use within a free culture is affirmed by activists and challenged by content owners. It must be admitted, at the outset, that Lethem’s emphasis on written literature in “Ecstasy of Influence” seems tangential to the debate as it is framed by Lessig and others. Much of free culture activism has focused on the problems of restricting audio-visual media, mainly because fair use in text-based media is much more robust than in music or film. Repeating phrases from predecessor works is considered *de rigueur* in poetry and fiction, and academic texts (such as this one) are formed mostly from quotation and analysis of secondary sources. Mentioning trademarked properties is also an acceptable practice in most fiction and poetry, so long as it doesn’t become a derivative work.

Of course, there *are* instances where legitimate fair use in text form has been challenged by the long arm of the content industry. Lethem cites two such examples: Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* and Holly Crawford’s *Attached to the Mouse: Disney and Contemporary Art*. The authors and publishers of these books were sued, respectively, by the estate of Margaret Mitchell and the Walt Disney Company for copyright and trademark infringement. Both of these books survived their lawsuits and are still in print at the time of this writing. The eventual publication of these books is indicative of text’s ability to appropriate predecessor texts and pop culture signifiers. Would I be sued by the famously litigious estate of Martin Luther King, Jr. for using the phrase “I have a dream”?

And how often, realistically, does Coca-Cola or Johnson & Johnson sue a writer for a reference in a novel to one of their products (e.g., “He spilled his Coke all over his Band-Aid”)?

Lethem’s essay, therefore, is necessarily more about *attitudes* toward text than about legal cases. His contribution is the assertion that appropriation—broadly construed to include works of literature and signifiers of pop culture—is essential not only to making relevant art but to making *good* art in our contemporary environment and, to some degree, throughout the history of literature. The thesis statement for the essay, if there is one, must be the following:

Whatever charge of tastelessness or trademark violation may be attached to the artistic appropriation of the media environment in which we swim, the alternative—to flinch, or tiptoe away into some ivory tower of irrelevance—is far worse. We’re surrounded by signs; our imperative is to ignore none of them. (JL 63)²

Lethem’s thesis explicitly affirms the value of derivative art and evinces a concern that the argument for original art will leave us unequipped to understand the world we live in.

Lethem clarifies his position further: “Honoring the commons is not a matter of moral exhortation. It is a practical necessity. We in Western society are going through a period of intensifying belief in private ownership, to the detriment of the public good” (JL 67). “Private ownership,” in Lethem’s usage, includes an increasingly unreasonable belief in intellectual property as equivalent to real-

world property—a belief that is unreasonable and *not* pragmatic. He quotes, for the general amusement of his readers, Jack Valenti’s infamous yelp of terror, “I say to you that the VCR is to the American film producer and the American public as the Boston Strangler is to the woman home alone” (JL 64). Such a claim is based on the absurd notion that music and film piracy is equivalent to stealing a handbag—the stated position of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), a position that Lethem describes as “ethically bankrupt” (JL 64). Handbags, like DVDs but *not* like the film itself, disappear from the owner when taken (they are objects of commerce, not in the commons). If we go to the level of appropriation, further down the scale from piracy, we can emphatically state that “the appropriation of an article of ‘intellectual property’ leaves the original untouched” (JL 64). If I photocopied all of Lethem’s novels and emailed them to my two million best friends, that would possibly lead to fewer physical copies being sold; it would be morally wrong and illegal, but it wouldn’t diminish the presence of the artistic work in the world. And if I quote Lethem extensively but not completely in this chapter, I take even less from him. The words, the complete essay and all the works that he quotes, exist outside of my written interpretation. Once that fact is admitted, therefore, one must address the concern of free culture advocates—is it pragmatic for society to eschew appropriation in the name of originality or fighting piracy?

A possible consequence of the perception that all texts and trademarked pop culture elements are wholly owned by their copyright holders is that we would be forced to come up with completely original ideas and stories that are

divorced from the environment that birthed them. Lethem argues that this sentiment is ridiculous when asserted and impossible when tried. He appropriates an anecdote from David Foster Wallace, whose professor exhorted the class to write fiction that avoids “any feature which serves to date it” because “serious fiction must be Timeless.” The class responded that the professors’ own books feature electricity, cars, and modern English, and the “gray eminence” shot back that stories should not include “those explicit references that would date a story in the frivolous Now,” and amended himself further by stating that he meant the “trendy mass-popular-media” reference (JL 62). The extent to which this professor was talked down from his lofty, initial sentiment is instructive, and one wonders if his fiction ever mentions a Ford car or an Edison lightbulb.

Even if this professor avoided such “trendy mass-popular-media” references, it’s doubtful that he could if he was born later, in the post-boomer era. This is the critical space wherein Lethem and Coupland’s *attitudes* toward pop culture converge. These generations, including mine, were “born backward into an incoherent realm of texts, products, and images, the commercial and cultural environment with which we’ve blotted out our natural world” (JL 63). There *were* branded products before 1960, but people were not awash in them as they are now. If I am to understand my world and help others understand it through artistic expression, Lethem argues, I should not be ridiculed every time these bits of my media language make an intrusion into my prose. Indeed, I have a responsibility to myself and to my readers—who face the same world that I do—to use language we all understand.

This responsibility does not, in Lethem's view, "require the violence and exasperation of another avant-garde, with its wearisome killing-the-father imperatives" (JL 67). Despite his apparent admiration of avant-garde art (reproductions of avant-garde paintings accompany the essay) and his advocacy against the powerful content industry, Lethem does not endorse an antagonistic or revolutionary stance toward the contemporary, trademarked, consumerist reality he describes. Instead, he builds on Heidegger's concept of "enframing," whereby objects are evaluated only in their capacity to be useful. The Heideggerian response to enframing, according to Lethem, is to "resituate ourselves" in relation to objects in the world—such as pop culture signifiers and literary predecessors—and therefore "reveal the 'thingness' of objects" (JL 62). Though this position is not explicitly endorsed in Lethem's essay as meritorious or true, its essence is taken up in a later passage remarking on how globalization and marketed content ensure that "damn near *everything* presents itself as familiar." Lethem continues:

[I]t's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious art is going about trying to *make the familiar strange*. In so doing, in reimagining what human life might truly be like over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago, and appearance, artists are paradoxically trying to restore what's taken for "real" to three whole dimensions, to reconstruct a unequivocally round world out of disparate streams of flat sights. (JL 63)

The use of pop culture signifiers in “today’s most ambitious art” (though the former do not by themselves lead to the latter) entails an explicitly appropriative stance that accepts rather than denigrates contemporary reality. Moreover, because the stance is explicitly appropriative about such low art, it stands to reason that “today’s most ambitious art” would be equally comfortable and versatile in appropriating worthy predecessors.

Previous critics have described such a stance as *postmodern*, and Lethem seems to agree with this characterization. He describes T.S. Eliot’s quotation of a Spenser poem in *The Waste Land* and posits two possible responses: “grant the line to Eliot, or later discover the source and understand the line as plagiarism” (JL 61). “Eliot,” Lethem continues, “evidenced no small anxiety about these matters; the notes he so carefully added to *The Waste Land* can be read as a symptom of modernism’s contamination anxiety” (JL 61-62). By contamination anxiety, Lethem means an artistic aversion to admitting one’s debt to predecessors and a powerful assertion of one’s own originality. *The Waste Land* certainly is an example of *making the familiar strange*, but in the opposite direction suggested by Lethem. Eliot documents the degradation of society via citation, quotation, and incorporation of biblical, pagan, and literary works into his poem. In this sense, Lethem’s reading of Eliot’s fastidious footnotes as contamination anxiety makes sense—if the world is corrupt, then the poet is naturally anxious about being corrupted by it. Since his sources (especially those with profane origins) are worldly, Eliot cannot truly accept the appropriative aspect of his work as meritorious. Whether or not Lethem’s reading of *The Waste*

Land is convincing, the distinction that Lethem draws is important: “what exactly is postmodernism, except modernism without the anxiety?” (JL 62). The tone of this question is unnecessarily reductive, but the position he advances—making the familiar strange through rigorous and unapologetic appropriation—is the postmodern position by most reasonable accounts. He does not just endorse the postmodern position as his own, however; he makes a point of explaining his specific position by advancing the concept of *ecstasy of influence*.

Lethem’s term, appropriated from Professor Richard Dienst and “embed[ding] a rebuking play on Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’” (JL 68), is itself within the realm of postmodernism because it lacks (or convincingly claims to lack) anxiety about its derivative nature. Indeed, the essay itself parrots the structure of *The Waste Land* in its quotation without quotation marks in the text and precise footnotes describing all its sources. The key difference between Eliot and Lethem is that Lethem, for ideological reasons that should be apparent by my description of his position, seems to lack Eliot’s anxiety. Lethem nowhere states why he wasn’t content to merely describe “postmodernism” as a rebuke to the content industry instead of popularizing a new term. Certainly the terms postmodernism and *ecstasy of influence* seem somewhat synonymous; the latter, however, is a more specific iteration of the former concept. In other words, the *ecstasy of influence* is a postmodern mode of writing that is specifically concerned with incorporating all of one’s predecessors—sacred and profane, high and low, from the past and present—into contemporary works.

The Ecstasy of Douglas Coupland

As is evident from the example given from *Shampoo Planet* above, Coupland has been practicing the ecstasy of influence long before Lethem offered the term. The reference to Tolkien is offered without any apparent anxiety, and *Lord of the Rings* doubles as a pop culture signifier and a predecessor work. Similarly, Coupland's construction of Tyler as obsessed with his hair is consistent with consumer trends in the contemporary environment of the novel (and consistent with present trends, more than a decade later). I have not been able to find any specific evidence that Lethem is influenced by Coupland's work and will not make that argument. Rather, the following chapters will use the ecstasy of influence as a mode of reading Coupland's appropriation of pop culture (specifically) and artistic expression (generally).

Chapter 2 focuses on *Microserfs*, which chronicles the lives of Microsoft employees in the early Nineties as they leave their corporate home for an upstart called Interiority that is developing software called *Oop!* The novel is saturated with pop culture signifiers and engages the issues arising from the Internet's rise to prominence—disconnection from other people, lives lived online rather than “in real life.” The characters use pop culture as a language for understanding their world; as they form community based around their start-up, however, they come to understand themselves as people. No one in *Microserfs* becomes a Luddhite, but everyone in the novel learns who they are, for better or worse. I argue that the novel anticipates the contour of the present free culture debate. The characters' movement from the oligarchy of Microsoft to the anarchy of the

Silicon Valley is parallel to the free culture movement's desire for an anarchy built on Internet protocols over an oligarchy of industry controls.

Chapter 3 focuses on *The Gum Thief*, an epistolary novel centered around two Staples employees who exchange notes in their breakroom. Roger, a middle-aged divorcé, and Bethany, a twentysomething goth girl, develop a friendship through their written exchanges; letters from other characters, including Roger's ex-wife and Bethany's mother, are also featured in the narrative. Embedded within Roger's letters is a novel-in-progress titled *Glove Pond*, an intentionally mediocre rewriting of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—or of the classic film adaptation starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and directed by Mike Nichols. More significant than this appropriation, however, are the gift of inspiration from Bethany to Roger and the gift of artistic expression from Roger to Bethany. The artistic gifts exchanged in *The Gum Thief* create a small community of artists, much like the ecstasy of influence was formulated by Lethem to convince artists to embrace the ties among them.

Coupland's lack of anxiety about appropriating pop culture and predecessor works is the first step in establishing whether his works are consistent with Lethem's vision of an ecstasy of influence. To further develop the association between Coupland's novels and Lethem's vision, I will use theories from works that influenced the latter to better understand the former. My readings of *Microserfs* and *The Gum Thief* are derived from two texts that are aligned with Lethem's arguments in "The Ecstasy of Influence": respectively, *The Anarchist in*

the Library by Siva Vaidhyanathan and *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde. Vaidhyanathan opposes the anarchy of the Internet and open computing with the controls imposed by the content industry through law and other means. Hyde formulates a theory of creative giving that depends on gift cycles between fellow artists and their audience—artists and the audience give to and receive from one another. Gifts produce increase and sustain the arts over the long term. Vaidhyanathan is quoted in Lethem’s notes, Hyde in the main text of the essay; both books provide specific ways of expressing the admittedly hazy concept of the ecstasy of influence (at least, as expressed by Lethem).

I will conclude this thesis in Chapter 4 with a synthesis of the previous chapters and suggestions for further research. I offer these suggestions in the hope that others will take the methods or ideas presented here and apply them to other authors, and other books.

Notes

¹Klosterman mentions Coupland in passing, however, in a footnote in a later book of essays (*IV* 54). That same book also records a laudatory comment about Klosterman by Coupland before the title page (“Thank God Chuck lives the life he does and writes the way he writes about it”; qtd. in *IV* iii). And Coupland recently stated via Twitter, “Chuck Klosterman’s ‘Downtown Owl’ is an amazing book” (2:53 p.m., 16 Sep. 2009).

²Parenthetical references to “The Ecstasy of Influence” will be abbreviated as JL.

CHAPTER 2: READING *MICROSERFS* WITH VAIDHYANATHAN

Microserfs in Brief

The text of *Microserfs* is an electronic diary of Daniel Underwood, a low-level coder at Microsoft in 1993. The year is important: the early entrepreneurs from the Eighties are “the first generation of North American nerd wealth” (MS 28),¹ while the younger generation—who grew up using Microsoft products rather than making them—are Microserfs in Bill’s fiefdom. Bill’s last name is never mentioned, but any reader in the mid-Nineties and most readers today would understand the reference to Bill Gates (even though he’s now known more for being the world’s most powerful philanthropist rather than the world’s most powerful software tycoon). Daniel introduces himself in his diary as a Microsoft e-mail address, “danielu@microsoft.com,” rather than his name, demonstrating his subservience to Bill. When he stakes out his individuality in 7 *Jeopardy!* categories, Daniel’s list reinforces his bondage to Microsoft (“Career anxieties”), media consumption (“Trash TV of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s,” “Tabloids”), tendency to think in trademarked expressions (“Jell-O 1-2-3”), and technology obsession (“Tandy products,” “The history of Apple”) (MS 3). The remaining category, “Plant life of the Pacific Northwest,” seems to indicate an outside-of-work interest until Daniel makes clear that his natural explorations are limited to the Microsoft campus (e.g., “the Microsoft path that speaks of Ewoks and Smurfs

amid the salal, ornamental plums, rhododendrons, Japanese maple, arbutus, huckleberry, hemlock, cedars, and firs" [MS 27]). Other characters' *Jeopardy!* categories, as recorded by Daniel, exhibit similar tendencies—"My secret affair with Rob in the Excel Group," "Plot lines from *The Monkees*," "Bulk shopping," "C++," "SEGA Genesis gaming addiction," "Xerox PARC nostalgia," "Things HAL said in 2001" (MS 9-11, 32).

Daniel and his coworkers' lives finally change when Michael, the most intelligent among them, announces his departure from Microsoft to develop software called *Oop!* Daniel and coworkers all join the start-up company, eventually named Interiority at Daniel's suggestion (MS 127). Interiority serves as the company name, the title of one of the novel's sections, and an adequate description of the novel's action. Daniel and his coworkers become close friends, develop romantic relationships, and discover their true identities—via real-world (Bug's exit from "the closet") and computer-mediated (Susan's online community of feminist nerds, Chyx; Michael's online-then-real-life discovery of his true love, Amy) means.

Coupland's Prescience

Coupland's *Microserfs* does not explicitly concern itself with copyright and trademark laws; in fact, the author seems hardly concerned that its pages are so fully saturated with the intellectual property of other creators (especially, but not limited to, large multinational corporations). In the opening paragraphs, the narrator refers to the "*Bloom County*-cartoons-taped-on-the-door index" as a marker for sensitivity and pleads to the then-CEO of Microsoft, "Bill, Be My

Friend . . . *Please!*" (MS 1). The second-to-last paragraph in the novel contains a reference to the bottomless pits in Warner Bros. cartoons: "we emerged on the other side of the cartoon holes fully awake and discovered we were whole" (MS 371). The characters use pop culture as part of their everyday language without apparent anxiety. A reviewer of a later Coupland novel writes, "A follower of the theories of Harold Bloom, for instance, would read Coupland's books for signs of anxious sparring with his literary predecessors. The problem is, Coupland does not seem to have these anxieties" (Blincoe para. 2). Using one of Bloom's favorite illustrative techniques,² we could replace "literary predecessors" with "large multinational corporations," and the statement would be equally accurate. Ecstasy seems far more appropriate than anxiety in this context, because Coupland evinces an understanding, in the above quotes, of pop culture's usefulness as a mode of both humor and profundity.

This aspect of Coupland's oeuvre generally and of *Microserfs* in particular—the role of pop culture appropriation—attempts to capture the mood of the moment in which he wrote the book and shows impressive prescience. The former is shown most effectively by dates. The copyright date is 1995, and the stated duration is from early fall 1993 through January 17, 1995. The dates indicate the extent to which Coupland wants the book to be a chronicle of a particular moment in cultural history, and his success in this goal is beyond the scope of the present analysis. I am interested instead in the extent that *Microserfs* encapsulates the present debate over copyright controls between free culture theorists and the content industry—a debate that accelerated at least 5 or

6 years after it was published, and a debate that seems out of the novel's immediate conceptual scope. The characters in the novel move from being Microserfs in Bill's bondage to a well-rounded, accidental community of independent nerds; as they change, the *nature* of their appropriation changes too. As the quotes above indicate, their early appropriation is an expression of their entrapped state: they are either pessimistically ironic ("Bill is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that molds. A force with thick, thick glasses" [MS 3]) or weirdly apocalyptic ("The construction of hardware and software is where the species is investing its very *survival*" [MS 61]). Once the opportunity to strike out on their own arrives, their appropriation becomes reflective ("To a *one*, computer technicians spent huge portions of their youth heavily steeped in Lego and its highly focused, solitude-promoting culture" [MS 82]) and critical ("we analyzed the Gap, trying to make ourselves feel better about our vague mood of consumer victimization" [MS 268]).

This change has a parallel in free culture theory: Siva Vaidhyanathan's opposition between the anarchy of open protocols and the oligarchy of corporate control, as explained in *The Anarchist in the Library*. Coupland's Microserfs ineffectually chafe at or wholly embrace their reliance on the pre-eminent oligarchy of 1993-1995, Microsoft. Their later appropriation is anarchistic in the sense that Vaidhyanathan intends—it embraces the openness of pop culture to them for reflection or criticism. Coupland's *Microserfs* anticipates the contours of the free culture debate, therefore, through an emphasis on open and unanxious appropriation of pop culture.

Sons and Daughters of Anarchy and Oligarchy

Vaidhyathan's key observation is that the Internet has already fundamentally changed society, but not only in the obvious ways: the Internet, as the subtitle to his book proclaims, is *hacking the real world and crashing the system*. The book focuses not so much on the effects of restrictive copyright on creativity but rather its effects on society. The first and most important example is music—he paints a vivid picture of himself as an impoverished student buying some music but taping (and accepting tapes of) other music. According to the current, stated policy of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), he was effectively a thief, despite his frequent music purchases. “If I cared less about music,” Vaidhyathan states, “I would have recorded fewer cassettes, but I would have purchased fewer albums. Before the rise of peer-to-peer music distribution, I don’t remember anyone asking these questions” (SV 42).³ In other words, the acts of copying cassettes and purchasing records existed side-by-side in an ecosystem that the public simply did not think about. Vaidhyathan explains the progressively extreme strategy of the content industry to show that the debate has changed so that once basic activities—for example, copying and sharing music alongside a profitable music market—are now questioned or openly opposed when transplanted into the digital context. Throughout *The Anarchist in the Library*, Vaidhyathan expands his vision to what he perceives as the wider implications of a public policy of copyright control—lawsuits against whistleblowers, restrictions on library privacy, and loose facts in the debate about global terrorism.

Whether Vaidhyanathan is correct about the long-term implications of copyright policy remains to be seen; his major contribution to the free culture movement, however, is describing the underlying ideologies behind the present debate: the anarchy of open networks and the oligarchy of copyright controls. According to Vaidhyanathan's definition, "Oligarchy governs from, through, and for authorities" (SV xi). The content industry (and, to some extent, Western governments) have developed and promoted an oligarchical "blind faith in technology as a simple solution to complex social and technical issues," also called "techno-fundamentalism" by Vaidhyanathan (SV xiii). The ideology behind "techno-fundamentalism," if the term is to be deemed acceptable, is that protection of intellectual property against all forms of piracy is essential to the continuation of a free culture. Vaidhyanathan quotes then-CEO of Time Warner Richard Parsons: "This isn't about a bunch of kids stealing music. It's about an assault on everything that constitutes the cultural expression of our society" (SV 22). Cultural expression will "atrophy," according to Parsons, because intellectual property is threatened by a kind of theft—downloading music, films, and other copyrighted digital files. Vaidhyanathan counters that such "property talk" is "a closed rhetorical system, a specific cultural instrument that extends a specific agenda or value." The effect of this system is to "shut down conversation. You can't argue for theft" (SV 22). It becomes impossible to argue for theft not because corporations control or suppress freedom of speech but because the underlying ideology "rests on the widely held assumption that unfettered private control of resources not only produces the most efficient of these resources but

enables some larger public good” (SV 22-23). The content industry’s argument for oligarchy, in short, is attractive because it appeals to the assumptions of market capitalism.

Set against this oligarchy and arising its ire is the anarchy inherent in the open architecture of the Internet. Vaidhyanathan rejects the hypothesis that the present situation is just the onward march of technology: he affirms, through Internet inventor Tim Berners-Lee, that the underlying structure of the Web is intentionally and not inevitably open. Berners-Lee, according to Vaidhyanathan, “did not claim ownership or control of the protocols,” i.e., the electronic parameters that allow computers to talk to one another over networks. Berners-Lee describes the Web as “like a market economy” in that its users “need . . . a few practicalities everyone has to agree to, such as the currency used for trade, and the rules for trading.” Thus, “When two computers agree they can talk, they then have to find a common way to represent their data so they can share it” (qtd. in SV 33). Anarchy—open architecture that allows but does not inherently enforce controls—was part of the Internet’s design, not an inevitability. More importantly, openness defines the nature of the Internet. To remove openness from the Internet, Vaidhyanathan warns, “would change the Internet so radically that it would no longer be the Internet. It might be a useful commercial communicative system. But it wouldn’t be the Internet” (SV 36).

This opposition between anarchy and oligarchy is generalizable beyond the narrow debate between activists and corporate lawyers because it apprehends underlying ideologies and explains how they operate in new

technologies. Vaidhyathan connects the Internet to classical anarchy: “organization through disorganization—anarchistic tactics generally involve uncoordinated actions toward a coordinated goal” (SV 3). For example, Vaidhyathan lists several “embedded cultural assumptions” underlying the original, failed Napster peer-to-peer music sharing service: “Culture is shared,” “Obscurity mimics anonymity,” and “Private, individual transactions can’t harm large, powerful institutions” (SV 20). The peer-to-peer architecture of Napster allowed users to embrace these assumptions in the context of sharing music. Therefore, open protocols “make anarchistic activity possible” (SV 3), even to people who do not read anarchist political thought—and more importantly, Vaidhyathan claims, anarchistic technologies like the Internet embody, enhance, and promote the ideologies that birthed them. The cultural assumptions underlying Napster “did not emanate from peer-to-peer file-sharing systems,” but communicative technologies like Napster “reinforce, amplify, revise and extend their ideologies. By using them, you change your environment” (SV 20). Using the Internet, according to this view, changes the culture by embodying anarchistic tendencies. Yet as the balance of *The Anarchist in the Library* argues, the countertendency of oligarchy to press back with law and online controls could still remove openness from the Internet and eliminate the potential for the technology that Vaidhyathan believes is essential in a globalized society.

Bill’s Campus Oligarchy v. the Steve-less Valley Anarchy

A key assumption of the foregoing analysis of appropriation in *Microserfs* is that in Coupland’s novel, Microsoft—ruled by the omnipresent Bill—is an

oligarchy and the Silicon Valley—then without its major charismatic personality, Steve Jobs—is an anarchy. The assumption is acknowledged almost explicitly by Dan on multiple occasions.

Microsoft's oligarchy is driven by its charismatic leader, Bill. Dan wonders if "Microsoft's corporate zest for recycling . . . is perhaps a sublimation of the staff's hidden desire for immortality. Or maybe the whole Bill thing is actually the subconscious manufacture of God" (MS 16). He reflects on a conversation about the supposedly inevitable artificial intelligence "Entity" and writes, "Maybe we like to believe that Bill knows what the Entity will be . . . I mean, if it weren't for the cult of Bill, this place would be deadsville—like a great big office supply company" (MS 35). There are plenty of examples of Bill-worship in *Microserfs* that are standard hero- or executive-worship, but these latter two are exemplars of a culture particular to Microsoft in the novel. There is irony and humor in the characterizations, and the tone is not meant to be taken entirely straightforwardly. In wondering about the ontological status of recycling at his workplace, Dan both is satirizing the environmentalism of West Coast tech elites and is a satire of the sort of geek-hipster-intellectual who would wonder about such things. But the obsession with Bill in the early pages of *Microserfs*—he is mentioned every few pages, usually in terms of how transcendent he is in comparison to the rest of the employees—indicates that Dan's characterizations are correct on some level. Or at least, they are true to Dan and his coworkers (e.g., Bug alters his route through the Campus in hopes of Bill noticing him [MS

27], and Michael says after meeting Bill, “People forget that he is medically, biologically, a genius” [MS 31]).

What is surprising about this rendering of Microsoft’s corporate culture is that little is made of the company’s market dominance or many governments’ accusations that it was actively violating antitrust laws. Certainly these are the aspects of Microsoft that most animate someone like Vaidhyathan, who has never, to my knowledge, evinced any concern about hero-worship or the subconscious manufacture of God in that corporation. Coupland does not, in other words, resort to the most obvious ways in which Microsoft is or was an oligarchy in the real world and to most people. Yet the cult of Bill accomplishes that purpose in a far more subtle way, and one that is consistent with Vaidhyathan’s work. The characters’ devotion and subservience to Bill is either a motivation toward their work-and-sleep lifestyle or a natural outgrowth of their personality. The ideology of Bill-worship (“Bill, Be My Friend . . . *Please!*” [MS 1]) and the subservient ideology of Microserfs are in a dialectical relationship, much like Vaidhyathan’s characterization (in the opposite theoretical direction) of the ideology inherent in Napster and the behaviors that follow thereafter.

Silicon Valley, similarly, influences the former Microserfs, because, as Dan laments: “*Nobody rules here in the Valley. No Bills. It’s a bland anarchy. It takes some getting used to*” (108). The use of the word “anarchy” here is somewhat deceptive—Dan is not commenting on the explicit ideology of opponents of corporate oligarchy, such as the free software movement or opponents of software patenting. Rather, this observation follows a conversation about Apple,

then in the interregnum between the past and present (at the time of this writing) tenures of company cofounder and visionary Steve Jobs. Dan characterizes Apple's corporate culture as follows: "Apple people are all trying to get laid off so they can get the layoff financial package—so everybody's trying to be as *useless* as possible. It's a shock, let me tell you" (MS 107). Todd describes the environment as "all so . . . anti-*coding*" (MS 107), and it certainly contradicts the drive to ship products at Microsoft, each shipment memorialized with an indestructible award trophy inscribed as follows: "EVERY TIME A PRODUCT SHIPS, IT TAKES US ONE STEP CLOSER TO THE VISION: A COMPUTER ON EVERY DESK AND IN EVERY HOME" (MS 47). Apple in 1993-1995 is "anti-*coding*" when compared to Microsoft because it fails to either ship product and make profit (the capitalist motivation) or advance the computer age (the purportedly ideological motivation). The distinction drawn by Coupland is *not*, therefore, between the actual monopolizing practices of Microsoft and the actual legal, cultural, and technological opponents of said practices. Coupland draws a finer, almost mystical distinction between the spirit of both places—to recast it in Vaidhyathan's terms, between the underlying ideologies of the two places. Dan is shocked to find that the Valley lacks any semblance of the ideology he has become accustomed to over a period of several years.

Dan's pessimistic view of the Valley is not, however, entirely accurate. The Valley lacks a leader, but not every company is as useless as the former Microserfs believe Apple is. Indeed, as Michael's start-up gets started in earnest, Dan and his coworkers soon start working just as much as they did under Bill's

gaze. On Christmas Eve, they “get off work early (7:00) to shop, but we all came back in around 10:00 and started working again, until around 1:00. Slaves, or what?” (MS 206). The real difference—and the ideology that makes the Valley an anarchy for Dan and his friends—is their emotional proximity to one another because of the absence of an overwhelming charismatic leader. According to Dan, “*Oop!* isn’t about work. It’s about all of us staying together” (MS 199). They were disconnected from each other at Microsoft and, to a certain extent, disconnected from themselves.

Bug Barbecue is the exemplar of this attitude. He begins as a bitter Microsoft devotee, eventually announces that he is gay, and attempts to enter the San Francisco dating scene. In a drunken, confessional conversation among the Interiority staff, Bug says:

I was so busy geeking out that I never had to examine my feelings about anything. I jumped into one of those little cartoon holes they use in old Merry Melodies, and I just came out the other side, and the other side is *here*. Didn’t you ever wonder where the other side was? . . . I never *had* to get paid. . . . I just wanted to leave the old me behind and start all over again. (MS 318)

Characterizing the Valley or Interiority (or both) as a cartoon hole emphasizes the uncertainty Bug and everyone else embraced in leaving the “Bill-o-centric” culture of Microsoft (Dan uses the cartoon hole image, as I’ve quoted elsewhere, and applies it to himself and his friends [MS 371]). Moreover, the demonstrated

effect on Bug—and the effects described below—are indicative of the Valley’s Bill-less, blandly anarchistic ideology.

Love and Appropriation

No one is more beholden to oligarchy in the early pages of *Microserfs* than the narrator’s girlfriend, Karla. Specifically, Karla needs and desires the oligarchy of technological determinism to make sense of the world around her. The monologue wherein this aspect of her personality is most apparent is in response to the shallow bodybuilder Todd, who tells Dan that “*Dominating as many broad areas of automated consumerism as possible . . .* doesn’t seem to cut it anymore.” Then, seemingly a propos of nothing, Todd asks Dan about the morality of working for Microsoft:

What we do at Microsoft is just as repetitive and dreary as any other job, and the pay’s the same as any other job if you’re not in the stock loop, so what’s the deal . . . why do we get so *into* it? What’s the engine that pulls us through the repetition? Don’t you ever feel like a cog, Dan? . . . wait—the term ‘cog’ is outdated—a *cross-platform highly transportable binary object*? (MS 60)

Karla walks into the room, “look[s] at Todd square in the eyes,” and delivers a monologue that would not be out of place in defense of a dystopian government. She reminds Todd that he is “a member of *humanity*,” a designation that computing and the World Wide Web have made meaningful. Then, Karla acknowledges that humanity is “trying to dream our way out of [our] problems and we’re using computers to do it.” The phrase “trying to dream our way out” is

important—humanity’s problems, unspecified in any greater detail, are not solved by “*broad areas of automated consumerism*” and computing. These technologies, according to Karla’s reckoning, induce a dream state wherein we can escape (“dream our way *out of*”) their effects. Karla claims that the “construction of hardware and software is where the species is investing its very *survival*” (MS 61)

Karla is proposing the use of automated consumerism as a way of solving the myriad problems of humanity. The word “survival,” italicized in the text, is ambiguous: just as Karla does not enumerate humanity’s problems, she does not explain what surviving or not surviving means to her. The clash of ideologies is important here. Todd is openly questioning a perceived oligarchical ideology about culture—he perceives that he is trapped by consumerism and his work at Microsoft. He ties the two together somewhat uneasily—he remains, at this point in the narrative, remarkably shallow—but is able to voice a specific complaint: the aspects of his life that he finds entrapping rob him of his moral clarity and drive. He is not practicing open rebellion or even subtle criticism but is asking whether the present oligarchy that he perceives is his only choice. Karla acts as if his questions are a sign of weakness or loss of vision. Her reminder that Todd is a member of the human species takes a dark tone in the context of her side of the conversation. She is criticizing—almost attacking—him for not realizing that their assistance in the production of Microsoft products is a high ideal in itself. This is not necessarily an oligarchical sentiment, because there are many people, past and present, who have high ideals and work for large software companies. What

makes Karla's response to Todd disturbingly oligarchical is that for her, technology itself will solve problems, not the utility of technology for specific solutions.

The most that Karla can articulate is that she and her friends "are the fabricators of the human dream's next REM cycle. We are building the center from which all else will be held" (MS 61). Karla's appropriation of "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats affirms the narrative's judgment of her as beholden to oligarchy. The context of the appropriation is as follows: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (ll. 3-4). Karla explicitly rejects anarchy here by inverting line three of Yeats's poem. Microsoft products will ensure the center is held and anarchy cannot be loosed upon the world. Karla is not explicitly promoting the supremacy of the computer industry; she is promoting the inherent good of computing regardless of consequences to those who produce it and without specifying how computers should be used. The computer itself will initiate the dream of humanity. Karla's stated belief is analogous both to consumerism as Todd describes it—i.e., morality is unimportant in a world where acquiring and producing things is considered a social good—and to Vaidhyanathan's description of how an ideology can shape habits and behaviors. It is not clear from the narrative whether Karla ever realizes how beholden her perspective is to the corporate drive to ship and sell products; it is clear, however, that the oligarchy around her has formed her personality in its own ideological image. While she remains employed at Microsoft, Karla never indicates a conscious awareness of where her beliefs come from.

Karla's transition out of praise for oligarchy is accomplished through the anarchy of a human relationship—her problems are not solved by dreaming her way out via computing but by embracing the anarchy of love. Dan makes the nature of their relationship, for him, clear in monologues that sound vaguely romantic but describe a specific condition: the breakdown of inner barriers between them. Karla, a practitioner of shiatsu massage, declares a belief that bodies hold memories, "I concluded that another viewpoint on memory was to see our bodies as 'peripheral memory storage devices'" (MS 66). This belief does not put her in conflict with the oligarchy of computing—she is, after all, describing the "concept of body as hard drive," in Dan's words (MS 67)—but it provides the opening for her oligarchical point of view to be decimated by touch and emotion with Dan. Dan provides the first indication that something will change when Karla massages his chest and "**bang** out of the blue I started bawling So I guess I have memories hidden away that I don't think about" (MS 77). This scene is the first time we see Dan admit to tears, and it foreshadows a later moment when Karla finally rejects the safety of oligarchy.

She changes permanently when she admits to Dan an episode (seemingly isolated) of anorexia. After recovering from the self-starvation, she says, she threw herself into work, but "work *became* [her] life" (MS 100). She describes a turning point as when Dan offered her food and she actually wanted to eat. After she begins her revelation, Dan narrates, "She was fetal and I had my left hand underneath her feet," and later, "Her neck rested on my other arm. I pulled the blankets over us, and her breath was hot and tiny, in little bursts like NutraSweet

packets” (MS 100-101). Human sustenance begins her journey to this point, and human touch completes it. She had thought that work—and the object of her work, advancing the future of computing—was the best answer to her distressed state and, by extension, for humanity in general. Dan subverts this flight to oligarchy not through a competing ideology but through kindness. But the subversion does not set Karla on an anti-computing, anti-oligarchical stance. She concludes, “I thought I was going to be a READ ONLY file. I never thought I’d be so . . . interactive” (MS 101), confirming that she remains a computer nerd via the appropriation of computing terms as a metaphor for her emotional state.

READ ONLY is a control, not a protocol—a restriction on what one can do with a file, while interactivity (a buzz word of early computing and the Internet) occurs when two or more parties interact directly. “READ ONLY” represents not only Karla’s previous unwillingness to open up about her past but her tendency toward monologue and pronouncement over dialogue and listening (the latter is represented by “interactive”). The difference in capitalization between “READ ONLY” and “interactive” is an artifact of older operating systems that expressed commands and warnings without recourse to lower-case letters; it also bespeaks the difference between oligarchy (READ ONLY) and anarchy (interactive). All caps is a command; sentence case, value-neutral; and lower-case, diminutive. Computing seemed like the solution for Karla’s distress at the time when she needed it, but, using Vaidhyanathan’s terms, the ideology of oligarchy at Microsoft changed her behavior. She became a READ ONLY file because of the corporate environment of command and conquer at Microsoft. She became

interactive through listening (value-neutral) and submission (diminutive) to communion with others.

One-Point-Oh and One-Point-One

The soon-to-be-former Microserfs leave Silicon Valley in a quest to be “One-Point-Oh,” or “To be the first to do the first version of something.” Being One-Point-Oh “is what separates the Microserfs from the Cyberlords” (MS 89). Yet the soon-to-be-employees of Interiority seem to have blocked out their debt to predecessors in their claims to One-Point-Oh status (a mental block, notably, that is not unlike Karla’s failure to recognize Microsoft’s negative effects on her for so long—i.e., she had no idea how fully she had appropriated the corporate culture around her). The first and perhaps most important mental block is that in terms of computing, none of them are One-Point-Oh—all grew up in the shadow of “the first generation of nerd wealth” (e.g., Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Steve Ballmer). They are quitting One-Point-Oh (Microsoft) to start, at minimum, One-Point-One (Interiority). The difference between One-Point-Oh and One-Point-One is ideological as well as cultural—One-Point-Oh is the status that the technological oligarchy has claimed for itself, thus placing itself in a superior position in relation to follow-on creators. One-Point-One means embracing a counternarrative of continuity with the past and is inherently anarchistic because it builds on oligarchy but takes a different ideological stance. Microsoft is One-Point-Oh and part of the economic power elite; Interiority is One-Point-One and a possible, eventual competitor to Microsoft (and other elements of the technological power elite). None of the Microserfs show any evidence of

changing their self-perception from One-Point-Oh to One-Point-One. Even so, the experience of forming Interiority leads them to an understanding that they, as individuals, are all One-Point-One in relation to the culture around them, especially pop culture.

One-Point-One is especially relevant to this particular start-up, because Michael owes the concept of *Oop!* to Lego, a major worldwide intellectual and marketing property. The derivative relationship between *Oop!* and Lego leads the soon-to-be-former Microserfs into conversations about Lego's influence on their past memories and present vocations. In these conversations, they begin the transition to a state of communal anarchy in relation to their appropriation of culture. Bug Barbecue complains that "kids nowadays don't have to use their imagination" to use Lego, since they are now packaged with instructions and guiding pictures. Dan says that he could only build monicolor structures, and Karla says that washing a set of Lego in the bathtub ruined it forever (MS 76). Bug, Dan, and Karla are content to admit their indebtedness to Lego but restrain their observations to the realm of personal memory.

A more sophisticated—and derivative—conversation precedes Daniel and his friends' departure from Microsoft. Abe explains a "Theory of Lego" in front of a Presto Log Fire, while the group eats "Soylent Melts" ("Jack cheese and jalapenos microwaved onto Triskets"). According to Abe, Lego is "a potent three-dimensional modeling tool and a language to itself," similar to computers in its uselessness without an intended function (e.g., "to use an Excel spreadsheet or build a racing car"), binary ("either connected to another unit of Lego or . . . not"),

and anticipatory of the future digital reality and its attendant derivation of the “organic to the modular: a zebra built of little cubes” (MS 82). Abe’s Theory of Lego reveals the chain of appropriation and learning required to become computer savvy. One must understand that certain objects only have potential with a specific, intended use; things or concepts (such as numbers) either exist absolutely or they do not; and incomplete (or pixelated) reality is a valid method of perception. One may add to this list Bug’s complaint about Lego kits with instructions. Lego as marketed to the Microserfs requires discovery of a specific, intended use, just as programmers and hackers are required to understand how software and hardware can meet previously unmet needs.

Restated according to Vaidhyanathan’s terms, Lego as produced when these characters were young had an ideology that was analogous to the development of computer software and hardware. Bug can complain about Lego kits with instructions because they disrupt this ideology by removing the requirement or incentive to create an original use for the unconnected Lego pads. Abe’s Theory of Lego describes two movements—the effect of Lego’s underlying ideology on the young Microserfs and the latent ideology of the young Microserfs in their love of Lego. Abe never delineates whether Lego was the prime influence on their childhood or whether their childhood personalities drove them to use Lego in a particular way. All he notes is the high incidence of Lego use in these particular ways among future programmers, and Dan narrates that the group’s silence during Abe’s monologue represents their assent: “Nobody was disagreeing” (MS 82).

As noted above, this passage is also highly derivative. Abe's monologue and Dan's narration are peppered with pop culture references. Lego itself—not the incorrect term “Legos,” but the always singular “Lego”—is the most prominent reference. “Soylent Melts” is a reference to the 1973 dystopian science fiction film *Soylent Green*. Abe's Theory ends with one of the novel's more obscure references: Lego allows “Cape Cod houses digitized through the *Hard Copy* TV lens that pixelates the victim's face into little squares of color” (MS 82-83). To create cheese snacks based on a 1972 Charlton Heston science fiction film and to relate Lego houses to the pixelated shots on *Hard Copy*, which was mostly shown at late or weekend hours, require a certain kind of mental dexterity and an openness to the anarchy of appropriation.

The characters' openness to anarchistic appropriation develops quickly as Interiority, *Oop!*, and each other take more of their time. Perhaps the most significant example of this change is a conversation the former Microserfs have about the Gap clothing store. Dan's narrative mentions Gap in passing a couple of times before the conversation, always in relation to how the clothing store seems to denote conformity. Microsoft employees, he writes, “went through Gap ribbed-T mania together” (MS 15); later, he records Karla saying “Everybody [in Silicon Valley] looks so Gappy and identical” (MS 146).

Conformity is one of several aspects of Gap that Dan and his friends analyze after realizing that “*three* of us visited the Gap independently of one another” (MS 268). More specifically, the group agrees that Gap conveys a sense of placelessness and timelessness to the wearer. Susan offers the

following: “Kids in Armpit, Nebraska, go into a Gap with pictures in their heads of Manhattan, . . . while kids in Manhattan go into the Gap with a picture in their head of Armpit, Nebraska.” Dan, picking up on this idea, says that “Gap clothing . . . allows you to erase geographical differences and be just like everybody else from anywhere else” (MS 268). Temporal differences are also washed away by Gap campaigns that appropriate Balanchine and Andy Warhol, Bug says: “the Gap permits Gap wearer to dissociate from the *now* and enter a nebulous *then*” (MS 269). Thus, the Gap wearer in this view not only blends into crowds unnoticed but could blend into any crowd, anywhere where Gap clothing is available and popular—and perhaps more insidiously, in any space of *time* wherein Gap clothing is available and popular.

In unpacking the effect of Gap on their culture, the former Microserfs are noticing that the choice in clothing and other consumer products—a putatively anarchistic concept—is another force for homogeneity and hence of oligarchy when backed by “the dark forces of amoral, transnational, bar-coded, GATT-based trade practices” (MS 270). Gap bubbles up from their subconscious to show them that “this is *all* that democracy’s rilly [sic] been reduced to: the ability to purchase the illusion of cohesive citizenry for \$34.99 (belt included)” (MS 269). This realization leads them to the conclusion that they should be “dweebs” about clothing, i.e., not conforming to the oligarchy that Gap represents. They are indecisive on *how* to be dweebs, though, suggesting that at that point in the novel, none of the characters truly knows how to live in the new reality they have created together. What is clear, however, is that they have made a transition

away from the easy (for them) oligarchy of Microsoft to the messy anarchy appropriate to the budding Internet Age. These characters not only embody the debate about free culture; they embody the movement's hopes for its influence—Vaidhyanathan and others want to influence their readers in a similar way that Interiority influences the former Microserfs.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have focused on Vaidhyanathan's argument that ideology and action are intertwined: ideologies cause certain actions to occur, and certain actions reinforce and advance compatible ideologies. This is a sophisticated, moderate view of a free culture debate that has been unfortunately driven by the oligarchy's highly charged, sweeping assertions regarding the peer-to-peer revolution. The content industry contends that downloading copyrighted materials without payment to the rightsholder is always and everywhere driven by thievery. Jack Valenti once stated in Congressional testimony, "Brooding over the reach of the American movie and its persistent success . . . is thievery: the theft of our movies in both analog and digital formats" (qtd. in SV 90-91). For Valenti, downloading is an imposition on his industry from criminals—but these criminals make up a huge proportion of the American and world population, making the content industry's narrative shaky at best. When so many people are so persistent in breaking the law—and they often forget that digital copyright infringement carries a fine of \$250,000 for each file, movie, song, episode, whatever—one must ask whether enforcement of the content industry's copyright claims is reasonable or even possible. Vaidhyanathan may or may not be correct

in his suggestions for future and present reforms—all squarely within the contours of free culture theory—but his argument engages the complexity of the problem. Vaidhyanathan's work also avoids the apocalyptic overtones of some other free culture theorists, such as Cory Doctorow, who asserts: "Technology giveth and technology taketh away Surely we're at the end of the period where it's possible to exclude those who don't wish to pay" (78). If complex, persistent ideologies are at work, Vaidhyanathan's analysis suggests, policy solutions can be offered in a climate of realism and debate, not panic and demagoguery.

I have suggested that the subtle relationship between ideology and practice is the dominant link between *Microserfs* and free culture theory and, furthermore, that Coupland's novel thereby anticipates the central tension of the present debate over the control of culture. I have not suggested, however, that Coupland (in this novel, anyway) ever evinces an explicit concern for the fate of culture in an age of corporate oligarchy. That is, Coupland did not enter the legal debates about technology at the time that *Microserfs* was written. Coupland certainly did not lack material, yet he took no position on whether Microsoft was or is a monopoly, and he mentions the U.S. government's antitrust lawsuits only once.⁴ He makes no mention of the battles then raging over the use and abuse of software patents, copy protection, or licensing. That is, Coupland eschews mentioning the real ways in which Microsoft represents oligarchy in favor of a spiritualized entity based on Bill Gates who inspires psychological weakness in his employees and not fear in the marketplace. He equally eschews the real

ways that opponents of Microsoft and similar corporations attempted to forge alternative software models in favor of a Bill-less, bland anarchy, epitomized by Apple's then-impotence.

There are pragmatic reasons for Coupland to employ this strategy. A novel is quickly dated and irrelevant when understanding it depends on knowledge of specific, timebound public policy debates. One can appreciate the devotion to Bill even in the unlikely event that a reader, who is at least 25 years old, anyway, cannot identify the source. One can understand the role of Bill in the lives of *Microserfs* and how they are prone to submit themselves to him (Him?). Coupland's Bill is a far more potent character than the real life Bill-Gates-the-tycoon. His absence from the Valley demarcates it as a place wherein the *Microserfs* are free to become One-Point-One, subtle anarchists in their companionship with and care for each other. Therefore, when Coupland compares Bill-o-centric Microsoft to Bill-less Silicon Valley, therefore, both accessible to readers then and now. And because oligarchy and anarchy still animate the copyright wars, at least in Vaidhyathan's reckoning, Coupland has ensured the continued relevance of *Microserfs* in the present day.

But the most important way that Coupland ensures this relevance is through personal relationships. I have described a contrast of competing, underlying ideologies. These ideologies become evident, however, through the extension of relationships within a small group of people. This aspect of *Microserfs*, ultimately, explains why Coupland does not mention then-raging public policy debates. Not only do the debates fizzle as concerns change, but

they are largely impersonal on the national and international scale. Corporations have distinctive traits but not personalities. When one speaks of corporate and governmental relations, one is inevitably bogged down in press releases and other forms of posturing. The personal development of Coupland's *Microserfs* shows the contours and contradictions of the underlying ideologies employed in the novel.

Notes

¹Paranthetical citations to *Microserfs* will be abbreviated as MS.

²In *The American Religion*, Bloom substitutes "Mormonism" for "Kabbalistic" in a passage from Moshe Idel: "The focus of the Mormon theurge is God, not man; the latter is given unimaginable powers, to be used in order to repair the divine glory or the divine image; only his initiative can improve Divinity." (102).

³Paranthetical citations to *The Anarchist in the Library* will be abbreviated as SV.

⁴Dan reports: "[I]f you cherish your own personal time, you will not get into a discussion with [Bug] over the famous Look-&-Feel lawsuit or any of the FTC or Department of Justice actions" (MS 12).

CHAPTER 3: READING COUPLAND WITH HYDE

The Gum Thief in Brief

The Gum Thief is an epistolary novel between two employees of a Staples store in Vancouver. Roger is a bitter fortysomething who is recently divorced, and Bethany is a 21-year-old goth girl who has dropped out of community college and lacks a direction for her future. They begin corresponding after Roger leaves his diary in the breakroom; the diary contains two entries of cynical despair and one wherein he pretends to be Bethany. His take on Bethany is judgmental and relies on a negative stereotype of the goth aesthetic: "I'm the dead girl whose locker you spat on somewhere between recess and lunch. I'm not really dead, but I dress like I want to be" (GT 6).¹ Bethany, though understandably taken aback at Roger's characterization of her, proposes that they write to each other while not acknowledging it in public. She explains why: "It'll make life interesting, which is a supreme challenge in this place" (GT 18).

The correspondence that ensues leads to a fully-developed friendship by the end of *The Gum Thief* (there is never a hint of a romantic relationship or sexual tension between Roger and Bethany). Roger's bitterness derives from the awareness that personal tragedy has not made him a better person. When he was a teenager, he survived a car accident that killed four of his friends; within the five years previous to the narrative, his son died in a car accident, his wife

was diagnosed with spleen cancer (but went into remission), and his marriage fell apart after he had a tryst with a fellow actor in a community theatre company. When he begins writing, he is “learning to cope with the fact that it was both my laziness and my useless personal moral code that cheated me out of seizing new opportunities” (GT 2). Bethany is not bitter like Roger, but she is equally lost. She fumes about her job: “I can’t believe the government even classifies what we do as a job. A job is something you can do for life. A job has some dimension of hope to it . . . Staples must die” (GT 17). Both Roger and Bethany experience a number of life-changing events over the course of their correspondence. Roger begins writing a novel titled *Glove Pond* that is an inept rewrite of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,² makes peace with his divorce and limited custody with his daughter, and quits Staples in frustration and angst. Bethany quits Staples for a trip to Europe with her then-boyfriend, experiences a nasty breakup in Paris, abandons the goth aesthetic briefly, attempts suicide, and re-embraces goth (and herself) in her last letter. *The Gum Thief* is not, however, a story in which everyone discovers his or her true self at the end. Rather, Roger affirms and Bethany implicitly accepts that age brings limited—but important—self-knowledge: “And when it happens, you might not be thrilled with who it is you are, but at least you’ll know” (GT 256). This self-knowledge is just enough for Roger to conclude that life, for all its tragedy and boredom, “is short, and yet it’s long. Being here is such a gift” (GT 258).

Introduction

It is appropriate that Roger ends his last letter to Bethany with the realization—perhaps acquired while he was writing it down—that life is a gift. Giftedness and gift-giving are pervasive in *The Gum Thief*—to use Vaidhyanathan’s terms, they represent the novel’s underlying ideology, much as anarchy and oligarchy (and the tension between them) are the underlying ideologies of *Microserfs*. And like *Microserfs*, both the underlying ideology and much of the novel’s narrative action are driven by relationships rather than events. Events are catalysts for change but do not constitute the story—the story’s constituent elements are Bethany and Roger’s friendship, Bethany and Roger’s development toward “figur[ing] out who [they] are a *little bit*” (GT 256), and Roger’s artistic expression in *Glove Pond*. The key to each of these elements is gift-giving—the literal exchange of letters and entries of *Glove Pond*, as well as the emotional exchange of friendship and shared experience. This gift-giving is best explained using the terms of Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*,³ which describes creativity as necessarily bound to creative gifts to and between artists. Roger’s newfound, stated capacity to view life as a gift is driven by a cycle of gift-giving from Bethany to Roger and back to Bethany. Bethany gives Roger a narrative space and an audience for *Glove Pond*; Roger returns *Glove Pond* to her. The latter gift of *Glove Pond* represents an increase of Bethany’s gift (she is both muse and audience, after all) through Roger’s inherent (though limited) artistic giftedness and generosity.

The Gift Exchange

The Gift by Lewis Hyde is an historical, ethnographic, and spiritual meditation of how creativity is derived from gift exchange—it is not a work of political or social commentary like Vaidhyathan's *The Anarchist in the Library*. *The Gift* contributes to the discussion about free culture but was not, like Vaidhyathan's book and Lethem's essay, written as part of the present debate over copyright control. Hyde's first edition of the book was published in 1972, long before computers and the Internet had fundamentally changed the "real world." Hyde has been cited favorably by Lawrence Lessig and Lethem,⁴ because he formulates a theory of giving that coheres with the aims and assumptions of free culture theory. That is, Lessig, Lethem, and Vaidyanathan all assume that artistic expression—trademarked, copyrighted, or dedicated to the public domain—is a gift from creator to the audience and to other, follow-on creators.

Hyde's analysis fundamentally depends on the distinction between gift and commodity exchange while recognizing the appropriate place of both. A gift, for Hyde, "establishes a feeling-bond between two people." When this distinction is applied to creativity, art is considered to be a gift first to the artist and then to the world. "Works of art," however, "are drawn from, and their bestowal nourishes, those parts of our being that are not entirely personal, parts that derive from nature, from the group and the race, from history and tradition, and from the spiritual world" (LH 197-98).⁵ Art "is drawn from" a place that cannot be acquired by the artist by merit or effort and is appreciated in a "bestowal" of a new gift to

the reader, viewer, and listener. This sense of an artistic gift may be immediately familiar to anyone who has felt a flash of inspiration in a moment of creative exertion, but Hyde does not rely on the reader having had that experience. Underlying Hyde's understanding of creative gifts is a sophisticated understanding of gifts, gift exchanges, and gift cycles drawn primarily from religious, spiritual, and folk sources.

According to Hyde, gift exchanges may be derived from a desire for some sort of *increase* of a natural resource, spiritual favor, or stronger community. An extended example will help to elaborate this important point, which is essential to understanding Hyde's application of gift-giving to creativity. Hyde describes an American Indian tribe who present the gift of a feast and a ceremonial copper to another tribe, thus placing the latter under the obligation to present a return gift. The initial gift of 1000 trade blankets is declared, via a complex ceremony, to be insufficient until it has reached 3700 blankets. The first tribe accepts this gift, but the "receiving chief, on his own, announces that he would like to 'adorn' his guests" with 200 more blankets given individually to the first tribe's representatives and then an additional 200 blankets for the tribe. These blankets are given without any of the dialogue that has marked the ceremony thus far—they are pure gift beyond the "gift value" that the copper retains through its previous passages. Thus, "The next time [the copper] is given away, people will remember how it grew by four hundred blankets in its last passage" (LH 40). That is, its value as a gift increased through the generosity of the recipient, and the

“feeling-bond” between the two tribes is substantially stronger than if the second tribe had only given the 3700 blankets.

If we apply this idea to a creative gift, then the increase occurs when a gifted (by talent or inspiration) artist produces a work that can “reproduce the gifted state in the audience that receives it.” Suspension of belief, for Hyde, is when “the work [induces] a moment of grace, a communion” (LH 196-97). The work of art, like the copper and blankets, “is a witness to the increase in feeling” from the artist to the audience (LH 43). When considered this way, it matters little whether two, three, or three hundred people are involved in the exchange—what matters is that the movement from person to person (or even from giver to receiver back to the original giver) is accompanied by a generosity of spirit that helps to sustain the recipient—physically, spiritually, emotionally, socially.

Another important aspect of this generosity is the gratitude from second to third party. In the example given above, the gift of 400 additional blankets is a kind of gratitude, though a relatively simple one. Other gifts, however, are agents of transformation and necessitate gratitude as a response. Teachings based on gift exchange—Hyde highlights Alcoholics Anonymous—operate in this manner. The twelfth and last step of the program is “to help other alcoholics when called to do so,” out of gratitude. The 12 steps *end* with gratitude because the teachings must be “‘in passage’ in the body of their recipient between the time they have been received and the time when they have sunk in so deeply that they may be passed along” (LH 58). Once this process is complete, the labor of gratitude becomes a necessity. A gift, according to Hyde, “isn’t fully realized until it is given

away,” and “[t]hose who will not acknowledge gratitude or refuse to labor in its service neither free their gifts nor really come to possess them” (LH 63). A recovering alcoholic cannot give of himself or herself until the completion of steps 1 through 11; once those 11 steps have been completed, though, gratitude compels one to give back to others who are still “in program.”

Hyde writes:

We could speak of artists’ lives and artists’ creations in a similar fashion. Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. (LH 59)

The connection between Alcoholics Anonymous and art is that inspiration must be lived through and then given out of gratitude in the form of the completed work. Sustaining and increasing the gift of inspiration requires that the recipient shed himself or herself of narcissism. To provide an example of this process, Hyde examines the Roman *genius* or Greek *daemon*, a “personal spirit which could be cultivated or developed.” One is expected to offer sacrifices to one’s *genius* or *daemon* to ensure that one stayed “sexually potent, artistically creative, and spiritually fertile” (LH 67). The *genius* or *daemon* “offers to us [the fullness of our undeveloped powers] as we grow, which means we choose to labor in its service.” A person who undertakes such a labor is the opposite of a narcissist, who “feels his gifts come from himself” and “works to display himself, not to suffer change” (LH 68). If the resulting work gives back to the metaphorical,

metaphysical, or spiritual source (depending on the author's point of view), then he or she has chosen gift-giving over hoarding.

Hyde identifies a number of mythologies that writers have formulated to offer sacrifices to their *genius* or *daemon*. Hyde writes that Walt Whitman believed his inspiration came from the "bestowals of his soul," Ezra Pound from the literary "tradition," and Pablo Neruda from "the people" (LH 190). Whether the labor of gratitude is from one's muse or genius (Whitman), literary predecessors (Pound), or community (Neruda), the commonality is that the gift moves through the artist to a third party—and often back to whatever gave the initial inspiration. Thus, Whitman, Pound, and Neruda, Hyde argues, demonstrate this principle by returning their art to their respective mythological places. The artist receives the copper of inspiration, in other words, and feels compelled by gratitude to return blankets upon blankets to the giver.

Caveat, or Another Gift Possible Gift Cycle Briefly Considered

The foregoing analysis focuses on the personal relationship between Roger and Bethany, and I must acknowledge that I am not choosing the most obvious example of appropriation or gift-giving in *The Gum Thief*. As I've noted, Roger's *Glove Pond* is substantially a rewrite of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, particularly the 1962 film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and directed by Mike Nichols (as demonstrated by Roger's aforementioned references to these actors). The parallels are almost painfully obvious to the reader who has experienced both works—the plot structure and the basic traits of the four characters are parallel between the two works. Both

works begin with an older couple, a professor (Steve in *Glove Pond*, George in *Who's Afraid*) and his wife (Gloria in *Glove Pond*, Martha in *Who's Afraid*), arguing about their young guests (Kyle and Brittany in *Glove Pond*, Nick and Honey in *Who's Afraid*) who are on their way. In both works, the professor is a failure in writing and academia, and the professor's wife is shrill and angry. Both the professor and his wife are alcoholics in both works. Roger recasts Nick from *Who's Afraid*, a young biologist, as Kyle, a famous novelist, and Honey, a kindhearted but "hysterical" housewife, as Brittany, a naive but brilliant surgeon. The action of both works takes place almost entirely in the older couple's home, and their increasingly aggressive conversations are fueled by amounts of alcohol that can only be described as fantastical.

Importantly, however, the climax of *Glove Pond* is an inversion of *Who's Afraid* that depends more on the context from Roger and Bethany's friendship than Albee, Nichols, et al. for its narrative effectiveness. In *Who's Afraid*, George and Martha have invented their son, and George's exorcism of the boy's toxic presence from the marriage constitutes the climax. In *Glove Pond*, there is initially a strong suggestion that Roger will repeat the central plot device of *Who's Afraid*—i.e., the nonexistent boy. After mentioning their son in conversation, whose name is said to be Kendall, Steve and Gloria hunt through a neighbor's backyard for toys to display (GT 161-63). The name of the boy is a deviation, because George and Martha's boy is never named in the play or film; the particular name is that of Roger's son, who died in a car accident. One comment by Steve reinforces the deviation from Albee, Nichols, et al.: "Gloria, Kendall was

a boy" (GT 162). The use of past tense in this statement, unheard by Brittany and Kyle, introduces the first of two dramatic ironies regarding this character—the reader can now be fairly certain, through both the comment and knowledge of Roger's son, that Kendall in *Glove Pond* existed but is dead. The second dramatic irony is dependent on a detail from Bethany's life—that her stepbrother Devon hanged himself with a "twenty-five-foot orange extension cord from the leave blower" (GT 109). Kyle, convinced at the end that Steve and Gloria have invented their son, looks in Steve's desk: "He opened the drawer, but its contents made no sense to him." In the drawer, he finds "a bright orange twenty-five-foot-long extension cord" (GT 266). The melding of Roger and Bethany's lives into one narrative simultaneously reinforces and reduces the importance of Albee, Nichols, et al. to the creation of *Glove Pond*. Albee, Nichols, et al. provide artistic inspiration in the form of Roger's novel, but unlike *Who's Afraid*, *Glove Pond* is not a self-contained narrative. Roger leaves the ending of his new creation highly dependent on personal details of what he and Bethany have shared with one another in letters. Kyle's discovery of the extension cord is an example of dramatic irony in which the reader's knowledge is gained by an outside source, i.e., the letters between the correspondents outside the *Glove Pond* narrative. Indeed, the novel would make no sense without the surrounding narrative of letters. The structure of *Glove Pond*, therefore, shows that the relationship between Bethany and Roger is far more important—to Roger, to the narrative—than the influence of Albee, Nichols, et al. on Roger.

From Bethany to Roger

The movement of gifts from Bethany to Roger is a narrative instance of Hyde's description of creative inspiration—i.e., something from outside the self or id. Bethany gives Roger a creative space, which he uses to compose *Glove Pond*, and an audience. Roger ponders and reveals the nature of Bethany's gift throughout *The Gum Thief*. The first such pondering occurs when he defends his interaction with Bethany to her mother, DeeDee: "I thought muses were a stupid concept from the past, but they're not. She helps me write, and I don't know why" (GT 85). Later, Roger tells DeeDee, "Bethany inspires me to do something new. At the moment, writing keeps me sane" (GT 157). Roger's inspiration is possible for a number of reasons—first and simplest among them, they share a sense of hopelessness that is mainly derived from their present employment situation. Bethany has "reached the point where I look at my shadow, and it feels like a ball and chain anchoring me to this stupid store in this stupid suburb in this stupid new century" (GT 28). Later, Roger asks DeeDee, "isn't it sick how [Bethany]'s ended up dead-ending here at Staples too, even though our lives are so different?" (GT 157). A common attitude toward Staples draws them into friendship and trust. Bethany is Roger's muse because they understand one another, and his artistic expression helps to keep both of them sane in the doldrums of office superstore employment.

Another important reason that Bethany is a muse to Roger is that the creative space she gives him via their correspondence draws him out of his

narcissism. Before they have begun corresponding, Roger explains his vision for a never-written novel:

Glove Pond was to be populated with characters like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, movie stars from two generations ago, with killer drinking problems, teeter-tottering sexuality and soft, unsculpted bodies *Glove Pond's* main characters . . . drank like fish, screwed like minks and then caught each other in the act of screwing strangers like minks. (GT 5)

Roger's desire, in other words, was a book in which peoples' ugliness was on display, amplified beyond belief. After Bethany suggests that he and she exchange letters, he begins writing exactly this novel, which begins "[Gloria, based on Taylor:] 'You're drunk again.' [Steve, based on Burton:] 'I'm always drunk, you combative harridan. Shush'" (GT 20). The early sections of *Glove Pond* are rather narcissistic, derived mostly from Roger's sense of personal failure (hence Gloria's reply to Steve, a failed writer like Burton's character and Roger before Bethany, "Don't shush me, you failure of a man. You manfailure" [GT 20]). Despite the narcissism inherent in the early sections of the novel-in-progress, or perhaps because of it, Bethany immediately loves *Glove Pond*. She comments, "Steve and Gloria's lives are so small. I can't believe how small life can become. I sit on the bus and the world becomes as small as the dot at the end of this sentence." At the heart of Bethany's observation about the smallness of her life is the anxiety that, while she has done nothing of consequence, "the rest of the human race has been out there designing microchips and collecting

money for orphans in faraway lands” (GT 28). Life has not become small for everyone but for her in particular. The appeal of *Glove Pond* (for both Bethany and the sympathetic reader of *The Gum Thief*) is, indeed, Roger’s narcissism, his relentless focus on himself. This aspect of the novel explains, though it is not stated, why he begins writing it directly for Bethany. Had he written *Glove Pond* for a general audience, it would have been nearly masturbatory when removed from the context. The act of writing it to Bethany elevates it because of their common sense of entrapment at Staples.

In this way, Bethany is Roger’s primary audience (her mother, DeeDee, also reads it, though her role in the novel’s development is less significant). His characterization of her as muse is therefore significant, and it is similar to Hyde’s example of *genius* or *daemon* as an image of creative inspiration. Using this rubric, Roger is not totally devoid of narcissism. He at least partially “works to display himself” and is hesitant “to suffer change” in his desire for a totally depraved novel that reflects his sense of failure. Even so, he recognizes that his newfound gift of creativity does not come from himself but from Bethany. He keeps writing, giving back to the *genius*, *daemon*, or muse that originally gave him creativity. His writing is, then, a gift in itself.

From Roger to Bethany: A Shared Eschatology?

The movement of gifts from Roger to Bethany completes a gift cycle. In particular, his incorporation of Bethany’s point of view in *Glove Pond* is an increase of the gift—creative space and an audience—that she has given him. The first apparent increase in Roger’s artistic gift from and to Bethany is a series

of scenes in *Glove Pond* that ponder the apocalypse from three characters' perspectives.

Bethany first inspires Roger to meditate on the apocalypse via criticism of his work. *Glove Pond*'s Kyle says that the main character in his first novel, a *roman à clef* based on Roger's own life titled *Two Lost Decades*, "doesn't believe in the Apocalypse" (GT 70). Bethany comments, "That's wrong. How could you possibly be alive . . . and not figure out that some kind of end is near?" (GT 70, 73). Bethany then explains her vision of the end of the world. She will be at a Sunday afternoon barbecue, grow "sick of too many people and of standing in the sun for too long," and sit outside the house, "wishing it were nighttime and that I hadn't come to the party" (GT 73). A fly dies in front of her, "the world becomes quiet," and she realizes that everything on earth has died—except her. The people around her are frozen dead, she hears planes and cars crashing, and the telephone does not work. She feels sick: "All of the organisms in my body that aren't 'me' have died too" (GT 74). So she waits for the inevitable, looking into the sun.

Roger responds with a continuation of *Glove Pond* that contains the apocalypse according to Kyle, Gloria, and Steve. Kyle, who has been writing a love story set in Staples and is a former unnamed "office superstore" employee, states, "the office superstore was a slow-motion end of the world in progress." The products sold there would end up in landfills, the ashes from their incineration "soaking up extra heat from the sun and hastening the total meltdown of the polar ice caps." Animals would die off, the flora and fauna would

grow unmanageably high, “And yet people would still be buying presentation portfolio covers, extension cords, Bankers Boxes and, on impulse, gum” (GT 77). Gloria ponders “the massive industrial base” necessary to produce a single tube of lipstick and then wonders, “What if everybody on earth suddenly turned stupid? What if we couldn’t make lipstick or anything else? That would be the end of the world, wouldn’t it?” Everybody would forget how to do everything. “Made-up” lines enter her mind: “*Oh humanity! How tenuous is our plight!*” (GT 80). Steve, finally, is explaining the plots to his five critically acclaimed but financially unsuccessful novels when he sees a vision wherein “everybody on earth suddenly became a genius.” The nouveau geniuses would demand better food (“placing undue strain on the food industry”) and make good stock investments (“because everybody would make millions, all of the world’s currencies would collapse”). Finally, since geniuses do not work in food service, “starvation would become rampant.” At the end, “between hunger pangs,” people would read Steve’s novels and “find them lacking” (GT 82-83).

Roger incorporates aspects of Bethany’s apocalypse into his characters’ visions. The most striking aspect of Bethany’s apocalypse is the lack of world events preceding it—it just happens, and she is the last witness of humanity. She is not the last survivor, but she is the only person who *notices* what happens to everyone and everything else. One reading of her apocalypse, therefore, is that she is expressing a metaphor for how she sees her own death—not a literal end of the world, but the end of her world. The characters in *Glove Pond*, similarly, relate their visions back to themselves.

Kyle's apocalypse is derived from his bafflement at his wife's adoration of Steve's five novels. Kyle describes the books as "neither trendy nor timeless nor contemporary nor passé." His description emphasizes that they are generic, refusing to fit in any customary literary mode of the past or present. Steve writes that the "office superstore" is "brightly lit and sterile," but contains within it the implements for degrading the world. For Kyle, Steve and his writing "inhabit[s] some parallel time stream where time [doesn't] exist" (GT 76). Yet Kyle's hyperintelligent wife adores Steve's novels; as she listens, Brittany is "twirling the ends of her hair like a cheerleader flirting with a jock" (GT 77). Steve's novels and the office superstore are distinctive only in their indistinctiveness, and Kyle's apocalyptic vision evinces a belief that both are generic to the point of being actively pathological (respectively, for his marriage and the natural environment).. Therefore, the end of the world for Kyle occurs when the equivalent of Steve's novels in the real world—office superstores—take over nature and society.

Like Kyle, Gloria reacts to Steve's monologue on his five novels, but she sees what would happen if everyone were as dependent as she is on others. Earlier, she has told Steve why she refuses to clean: "Worrying about that is so middle class First I'm dusting—and before you know it, I'm out selling matches on street corners" (GT 35). Watching Steve, her only financial and emotional support, she considers the end of the world as the moment everyone forgot to do all the things that are provided for her. Before the reader can think she has any anxiety over her lack of contribution to the world, she imagines the apocalypse as "a play starring Gloria" (GT 80). Gloria casts herself in this

dramatic role to emphasize her self-perception as unique and gifted, though she would be essentially the same as everyone else on earth. Hence her next thought: “her inability to remember her lines as Lady Windermere” in her local community theatre (GT 80).

Steve’s apocalypse has many of the same concerns as Gloria’s, but is focused on his rivalry with Kyle, the younger and more successful writer. The specific causes of the end of the world after everyone becomes a genius—the breakdown of the food industry, the devaluation of money—are, as in Gloria’s apocalypse, indications of Steve’s self-perception of uselessness. Steve prefers students who never demonstrate critical thought, who would ask “if they would be graded on attendance and then [sit] like drugged houseplants for the remainder of the semester” (GT 82). His preference indicates that, like his wife, he gives little to the world; he reinforces this conclusion by his inattention to his own “loving dissertations” and his mental focus on his own vision of the apocalypse. The end, for Steve, does not come with global warming or the breakdown of society but when the new geniuses pick up his novels and “find them lacking.” The passage ends with a vision of Kyle, “in between the time spent translating Chaucer into Mandarin and developing a perpetual motion device, . . . throw[ing] the first stone” (GT 83). Steve never indicates whether he means that he would be stoned literally or whether the stone would come in the form of devastating criticism; but it hardly matters: either would be the authoritative end to his career.

From Roger to Bethany: A Gift Cycle

The apocalyptic visions in *Glove Pond* are, by their juxtaposition with Bethany's vision, reactionary. They can be considered giving, and an increase of a previously bestowed gift, when one considers how Roger developed them. He begins with Bethany's stated belief in the apocalypse. Bethany does not explicitly state why she has a belief in the apocalypse, but the end of her vision, when she is describing her own death, gives a clue: "I feel happy to be joining everyone else wherever it is that they've all gone. People never mention that as the upside of death, do they?" (GT 75). Earlier she explains that she embraced the goth aesthetic in response to an impressive string of deaths starting with her best friend and climaxing (though not ending) with the suicide of her stepbrother Devon, which she witnesses. Bethany concludes, eventually, that it is "snobbery" to relegate dead people to "'filler' status, unable to be taken seriously," especially since "growing old is as much an invention as electricity or birth control pills" (GT 54). As a character, Bethany depends on the reader's understanding of the goth girl as a character type but avoids the negative stereotype of a privileged teenager who embraces this subculture out of blind rebellion. Writing as Bethany, Roger makes this assumption about her before he knows her well. He-as-she writes, with evident mockery: "I wish I were dead most of the time" (GT 6). Unlike the stereotype, however, Bethany has a reason for being goth, and her reason informs her understanding of the apocalypse. The end of the world is a space where everyone enters death simultaneously, the place that she has pondered for much of her life.

The apocalyptic visions of Roger's characters affirm his newfound understanding of Bethany and her reasons for ruminating on death. Specifically, the apocalypse comes to each *Glove Pond* character personally—they each imagine how their lives as currently lived must end. To Bethany, the primary focus of most apocalyptic literature (how the cities will explode, degrade, or sink) is of little importance. She *notices* planes and cars crashing in the distance but is more concerned with entering into the human community of death quietly and with dignity. Kyle, Gloria, and Steve notice the physical destruction of the world in their visions but are primarily concerned with how the end of the world affects them in particular. Of course, there is a fundamental difference in tone between these sets of visions—Bethany is somewhat solipsistic in her unconcern for worldwide death, but she is not selfish like Roger's creations. Even so, this is an increase akin to Hyde's tribe who add blankets to show their generosity. Roger's fictional visions validate Bethany's vision through their explicit incorporation into the narrative that they both deeply care about, as writer and audience. He has given up his preconceptions about her and gives her point of view a hearing in his narrative. She asked him to write her secret letters in the breakroom, and he extends the gift of understanding through artistic expression.

The artistic expression, moreover, is also an increase. As noted above, Roger views Bethany as a muse, and his desire to write to her is akin to sacrificing for one's *genius*. Coupland's invocation of the word muse is significant, in particular, because *The Gum Thief* replaces the spiritual object of inspiration with a human audience of one. The exchanges of letters and

especially *Glove Pond* form a narrative of inspiration, expression, and appreciation. Hence the utter selfishness of Roger's fictional apocalyptic visions—he is not parodying his friend but giving her more of what she loves in *Glove Pond*, i.e., the “smallness” of Steve and Gloria's lives. Roger makes evident that he is not parodying Bethany by using the three apocalyptic visions to develop his characters more than any of his previous scenes. The visions make plain the rivalries between Kyle and Steve, Steve and Gloria, and (to a lesser extent) Kyle and Brittany. The rivalries first explored here lead to more specific appropriations from both Roger and Bethany's lives, as stated above. To restate the gift cycle in Hydean terms, Bethany gives Roger a copper of inspiration—i.e., a creative space and a receptive audience. In return, Roger gives Bethany heaps of blankets out of his newfound sense of generosity, in the form of a narrative that incorporates and validates their shared experiences.

Conclusions

In the previous chapter, I used the word “appropriation” to describe how the characters in *Microserfs* interact with their culture. In this chapter, I have used the concept of gift-giving to describe how the characters in *The Gum Thief* interact with each other. The primary difference between the two novels, in my analysis, is the directness of contact with the appropriated or giving party and the appropriating or receiving party. The *Microserfs*' source of understanding themselves, each other, and the Bill-less or Bill-o-centric societies around them are cultural elements fundamentally disconnected from them. They do not have a hand in producing their sources outside of consumption. They rely on pop culture

to provide a rubric for self-knowledge. Culture is a gift to them, and they provide an increase of the gift through their follow-on interactions: pop culture is the first party, the characters are the second party, and their fellow companions are the third party. Their gift cycle is allowed by their anarchistic ideology, but it depends on receiving something they cannot possibly control in any noticeable way—mass media, computing trends, the early Internet. Roger and Bethany in *The Gum Thief*, however, “appropriate” primarily from each other. Each “labor” of friendship and artistic expression directly influences the next gift. *Microserfs* celebrates the gift of culture; *The Gum Thief* celebrates the artistic community that supports creative expression.

In terms of Coupland’s *oeuvre* and its relation to the ecstasy of influence, *The Gum Thief* is therefore a more significant contribution than *Microserfs*. The latter novel is relevant to present debates, but the former provides a model for the literary community that coheres with Lethem and others. Hyde is particularly relevant here. Aspects of Hyde’s theory of creative gift-giving underlie or are parallel with the assumptions and conclusions of many free culture theorists. For example, Hyde states that “it seems correct to speak of the gift as anarchist property because both anarchism and gift exchange share the assumption that it is not when a part of the self is inhibited and restrained, but when a part of the self is given away, that community appears” (LH 120). Hyde’s application of anarchist theory to gifts is akin to Vaidhyathan applying the same theory to Internet protocols. Hyde, however, describes the reality that underlies Vaidhyathan’s arguments: art is driven by communal giving. Similarly, *The*

Gum Thief describes the artistic community that would allow the type of mass media appropriation assumed in *Microserfs*.

This is not to say that Vaidhyanathan and *Microserfs* are inessential—they are complementary to, respectively, Hyde and *The Gum Thief*. Both critics emphasize the communal nature of their subjects, but they are using different critical methodologies—Hyde uses anthropology and storytelling, Vaidhyanathan uses politics and culture. Thus, the theorists arrive at complementary conclusions, just as the two novels I have examined in this thesis provide complementary aspects of the ecstasy of influence. Vaidhyanathan and *Microserfs* demonstrate the visible aspects of the ecstasy of influence—how influence or lack thereof affects one’s political culture and personal norms. Hyde and *The Gum Thief* demonstrate that art is best formed in a community of givers. Both of these perspectives—the political or cultural and the spiritual or relational—are essential to the ecstasy of influence, and both novels are essential to understanding how Coupland operates within this theoretical mode.

The Gum Thief, interpreted via Hyde, is primarily (though not exclusively) an example of *how* the ecstasy of influence operates rather than an example of ecstasy *in vivo*. Coupland reinforces this distinction via the appropriation of Albee, Nichols, et al. and its subordination to the personal relationship between Roger and Bethany. Coupland’s appropriation is obvious enough that most of his readers will recognize it on some level. Yet Coupland makes the book fundamentally *about* how Bethany gives Roger a chance to befriend her and Roger abandons his selfishness in favor of giving her art. Indeed, it is significant

that Roger's conversion is from bitter diarist to inept-but-giving writer. Roger's literary techniques matter, but the giving spirit that enables and impels him to write matters far more.

Notes

¹Parenthetical citations to *The Gum Thief* are abbreviated as GT.

²The novel-in-a-novel's debt to Edward Albee's play and Mike Nichols's film adaptation are explained briefly below, but I note here that a number of other influences for *Glove Pond* could be cited. One of the two main characters, Gloria, is playing Lady Windermere in a production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, suggesting that the wit is owed in part to Wilde. Several reviewers have identified *The Information* by Martin Amis as a possible source (e.g., "Much amusing bitchiness [between the characters in *Glove Pond*] ensues, as though Martin Amis's *The Information* had been crossed with Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, by an inept writer" [Poole para. 8]). Shakespeare is mentioned conspicuously several times in *Glove Pond*, suggesting that Roger's characters are Shakespearean clowns given their own play. Despite these other influences, however, Albee's play and Mike Nichols's film (particularly the film) are the primary sources for *Glove Pond*.

³I use the 25th anniversary edition of *The Gift*, subtitled *Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. The book was originally published with the subtitle, *Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*.

⁴Lessig cites Hyde's book as his favorite example of academic literature "with a rich understanding of the differences between commercial and sharing

economies" (*Remix* 147). Lethem uses several of Hyde's sentences in "The Ecstasy of Influence" and notes in the key, "Above any other book I've here plagiarized, I commend *The Gift* to your attention" (69).

⁵Paranthetical citations to Hyde's *The Gift* are abbreviated as LH.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

A Brief Digression, or Explaining the Epigram

While he was writing *Owning Culture*, Kembrew McLeod “happened to be listening to a lot of old country music” In his “casual listening,” he “noticed that six country songs shared *exactly* the same vocal melody.” McLeod reports: “There were no recorded lawsuits stemming from these appropriations” (qtd. in JL 69). McLeod finds a concrete example of what he was examining at the time—the transmission of art from artist to artist in the form of a gift. I, too, found examples of what I was researching in my musical entertainment—specifically, in nerdcore hip-hop.

Nerdcore emerges from a confluence of ostensibly disparate cultures: indie and mainstream hip-hop, nerd culture, pop culture, and online communities. Like Coupland’s *Microserfs*, nerdcore rappers tend to see all of these cultures as collective a gift to them, to be appropriated at will. Topics of nerdcore songs include pinball machines (“Tilt” by Beefy), table top gaming (“Hassle: The Dorkening” by MC Frontalot), Twitter (“Magnificent Seven” by Dual Core), and typefaces (“Battlefont” by Schäffer the Darklord). At least four nerdcore albums are concept remixes of background music from 8-bit video game systems (i.e., *Nerdrap Entertainment System* by ytrcracker, *Mega Ran* and *Mega Ran 9* by

Random, and Supercommuter's eponymous debut album). Also, an ethics of artist-to-artist and artist-to-audience sharing persists in nerdcore. Artist-to-artist sharing is epitomized by the number of presumably uncompensated guest artists. Most albums include several tracks featuring fellow rappers or singers, and MC Lars has (perhaps ironically, perhaps sincerely) criticized a past collaborator for demanding compensation (MC Lars paraphrases mc chris: "I want three grand for that verse, or I'll sue' (It's true)" ["Where Ya Been, Lars?"]). Artist-to-audience sharing is epitomized by nerdcore rappers' encouragement of presumably illegal downloading. The first track on MC Lars's *The Graduate* is titled "Download This Song," and Dual Core addresses their audience as follows: "If you ripped it and seeded it, this one's for you." If any genre (or subgenre) of music is unanxious about appropriating the culture and sharing art as a gift, it is nerdcore.

Anarchy, Oligarchy, and Gift-Giving in Lethem and Coupland

I bring up nerdcore hip-hop because it is representative of cultural changes in the past two decades that are of major concern to free culture theorists and activists—i.e., the insinuation of media, computing, and the Internet into every aspect of our shared cultural life. The Internet birthed this genre, written by and for people who, according to conventional wisdom, had no business listening to, much less producing, hip-hop. Yet our present age has removed such distinctions so quickly that theorists, activists, and industries have not fully processed the effects of the change. Indeed, one of the challenges of free culture theory has been to articulate how ideologies influenced by the Internet and computing have simultaneously become cultural assumptions by the

populace and have suffered rejection by the content industry. These theorists and activists have articulated the challenges and even suggested suitable policy changes, but the scope of their analyses have been largely limited to audio-visual media. This is not so much an error as a question of emphasis; the primary controversies that have animated free culture theorists and activists are related to music and film.

Before Lethem wrote “The Ecstasy of Influence,” little had been written about how free culture theory can or should be relevant to literary art. My analysis of Coupland, though primarily focused on explaining how the ecstasy of influence operated within his work, was partially undertaken to add to the literature an application of free culture theory to a written text. Over several months and drafts, I found that Coupland’s ideologies of appropriation and gift-giving in *Microserfs* and *The Gum Thief* demonstrate how an artist can fully embrace the major tenants of free culture theory without making that ideology explicit. Coupland suffuses appropriation and gift-giving into the relationships of his characters so completely that the novels do not feel ideological, yet they are representative of a particular view of literature that coheres with Lethem, Vaidhyanathan, and Hyde (not to mention nerdcore rappers).

Underlying the ideologies of anarchy and gift-giving posited by Vaidhyanathan and Hyde and the artistic stance of the ecstasy of influence posited by Lethem is a rejection of *the anxiety of influence*. I have thus far avoided this term and will not dwell on it overlong—the details of the theory are not relevant to the present analysis. It suffices to quote and examine Bloom’s

thesis for his landmark book, *The Anxiety of Influence*: “Poetic history, in this book's argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (5). A free culture theorist could agree to the first clause of that sentence (even one as ecstatic about his predecessors as Lethem), because it presents literary art as a series of relationships. The difference between Bloom on one side and Lethem, Vaidhyanathan, Hyde, and Coupland on the other is the assumption inherent in the second clause—that a canonical or strong writer must be in an agonistic relationship with significant predecessors. Part of the objection would be to the term “strong poet,” or a literary artist who has struggled with and “misread” a great predecessor in order to “clear imaginative space.” Clearing imaginative space is how Bloom believes writers become canonical—they are always latecomers and must find a way to subvert, rather than embrace, the predecessor. I would not dispute that this happens at least some of the time; Bloom presents convincing evidence regarding, for example, Wallace Stevens and William Blake.

The objection that I—following the lead of Lethem, et al.—have raised in this thesis is the *necessity* for anxiety in the post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic period. Put another way: perhaps Bloom is correct about literary history until the contemporary literary age—even then I have my doubts, but I am willing to cede the point at the present time. My analysis of Coupland's preference for anarchy and gift-giving—that is, the ecstasy of influence—demonstrates that writers can and do find ways to be “strong poets” (a term that would require significant

qualification in its new context) in the present age. The *ecstasy* of influence is one way of describing how writers can accomplish this task.

Coupland's decision to embed the ecstasy of influence in creative relationships underscores the compatibility between Lethem's concept and the two novels I have analyzed. Appropriating from Hyde, Mary Shelley, and others, Lethem claims that artistic inspiration depends on an anarchistic, giving community:

[M]ost artists are converted to art by art itself. Finding one's voice isn't just an emptying and purifying oneself of the words of others but an adopting and embracing of filiations, communities, and discourses. Inspiration could be called inhaling the memory of an act never experienced. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos. (JL 61)

For Lethem, creativity comes directly from the realization that inspiration and expression are void without influence from one's predecessors—hence the adoption and embracing of outside sources. Filiation, communities, and discourses could come from many places—one's culture, nation, mass media, religion—but the primary giver of influence remains art itself. Coupland demonstrates this principle in *Microserfs* through the movement from corporate oligarchy to creative anarchy and in *The Gum Thief* in the movement from solipsistic complaining to self-giving creativity. Taken together, the two books are profound arguments for the validity and continuation of ecstatic influence among artists of today and the near future. *Microserfs* and *The Gum Thief* are also

beneficiaries of ecstatic influence and appropriation. *Microserfs* revels in its timeliness—though Coupland eschews the politics of computing in the mid-Nineties, his portrait of twentysomethings and thirtysomethings in 1994-1995 is obsessively specific. A similar level of specificity is found in *Glove Pond's* heavy borrowing from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Coupland takes advantage of a freedom—to appropriate, remix, *be* influenced—that he assumes he already has in his role as a literary artist.

The example of Coupland is as relevant for free culture theory as the theory is to his writing. In some ways, the theory and activism of Vaidhyanathan, Lethem, Lawrence Lessig, and others have suffered by their own success. Lessig's Creative Commons license ("some rights reserved," others granted to the audience) has gained prominence as a means for facilitating commercial distributions. Cory Doctorow releases his books using these licenses, and musical artists as established as Radiohead and as (relatively) obscure as Jonathan Coulton have ceded significant rights to their audience and stayed financially afloat. The iTunes Store, Amazon.com, and most other digital music retailers have abandoned digital rights management (DRM) as unsustainable to their business model. Corporations as large as Microsoft, Adobe, and Google have embraced open programming standards. After a long litigation with publishers, Google Books finally offers a research library's worth of free previews and search capability on popular and obscure texts (indeed, it was indispensable in the composition of this thesis). Many problems remain—DRM remains in places where it ought not, and civil liberties are still threatened by overzealous

copyright lawsuits. But the success, in such a short period of time, of free culture theory in changing norms (if not laws) is so impressive that one must ask whether it will work itself into irrelevance.

My prediction is that free culture theory will continue to grow, though theorists and activists should consider new, more artistically-focused areas for future research. The tension between oligarchy and anarchy, hoarding and giving will always be with us, and there will always be a need for whistleblowing on copyright excesses. Even so, free culture theory and activism could serve its audience well by expanding beyond legal and cultural concerns about audio-visual media and toward positive or practical theories of artistic expression. Coupland and a vast community of artists, dead and living, ancient and modern, are waiting to be analyzed, considered, interpreted, and even inspired. And the latter is, after all, at the heart of the ecstasy of influence:

Don't pirate my editions; do plunder my visions. The name of the game is Give All. You, reader, are welcome to my stories. They were never mine in the first place, but I gave them to you. If you have the inclination to pick them up, take them with my blessing.

(JL 68)

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