

## Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*: A Study of Generation

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### I. Prologue: Douglas Coupland, His Works and Media

In 1991 a sensational novel was presented by a young Canadian artist, Douglas Campbell Coupland. The novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, describing the early 90's strange communal life of three young people in their late twenties, gave a shock to the baby boomers who seemed to regard themselves as forever young. For this was the first story that clearly shows the generation gap between the boomers and the new generation.

In this story, the main character and narrator, Andrew Palmer calls people of his generation "X generation". It means the generation who were born in the years around 1960 and lived through the beginning of the 90s. They damned the older people including the baby boom generation, just as the boomers had done the same in the past.

When this story gained popularity in America, the media that had practically been controlled by middle aged boomers started to misuse the term X generation. They were only interested in the post-baby boomer feelings of the young people, and started to adopt the term to represent the young people born from the end of baby boom generation to the boomlets in the 90s. In other words, they adopted the term to the people whom they could not understand. They made Coupland the guru of the "GenX". Moreover, the idea was used as a marketing tool, which Coupland despises. Since then he has rejected to comment on any X-like phenomena created by media.

The original X generation described in the story is more complicated than the baby boomers think. They have more complex generation gaps than the gap against the boomers, which are to be discussed later.

The problem of the generation gap between parents and children has been told since the late nineteenth century. In addition to this gap between parents and children, generation gaps between people from different cohorts, the beat generation or baby boom generation for instance, have been focused on since World War II, when social change accelerated to generate many characteristic cohorts in the highly industrialized society. According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, the latter interpretation of generation means "a group, born at the same time, of common experiences, interests and outlook".<sup>1</sup> This concept which directly relates with the historical change of society and the change in an individual life helps in the analysis of the social change.

This book, which is described as "A funny, self-conscious first novel"<sup>2</sup> by *Village Voice*, seems to me a statement in which Coupland, who is also a member of X generation, confronts other generations, especially the boomers. His experiences must affect this story, so the introduction of his biography becomes necessary.

Douglas Campbell Coupland was born in the Canadian NATO base in West Germany in 1961. His father was a military doctor. After he experienced the Cuban missile crisis, a trauma that often appears in his works, his family went back to Vancouver, where he grew up and lives now. The experience of the crisis was detailed in *Life After God* (1994).

He came to Japan twice in his twenties in 1983 and 1985. His first stay in Japan was six months in 1983 as an exchange student of Hokkaido Art College during his art school days. Between the stays, he graduated in 1984 and studied at Design Association of Europe in Milan on a scholarship. However, he suffered from serious depression and gave up his career as an artist.

He came back to Japan as a sort of a businessman in 1985. This time he stayed in Tokyo for eight months until 1986. Fortunately, he got a job at Magazine House via Japan-U. S. Research Institute of Business Administration. This stay was very meaningful for him. He experienced the craziness of the "bubble-Japan", which was caused by the strong yen rate, the accident of Chernobyl, and most of all, the fad of "*shin jin rui*" (p.56) which gave him the basic idea of Generation X. These elements of the Japanese eighties are reflected heavily in his first fiction. In the story, these experiences are told by the narrator.

Eventually he went back to Canada and resumed his art work in 1987, and at the same time, he began his writing career to manage the cost of living. He wrote about art and culture for Canadian magazines. When he found he had loved writing more than art work, he moved to Toronto, where he had hoped to be part of major Canadian art scenes. Coupland, a studio artist, who had never read books deeply or written anything for fun before, said the only person that influenced him was a modern conceptual and plastic artist, Jenny Holtzer.<sup>3</sup> She is an artist of message. She sends her message through epigrams decorated on walls, billboards or T-shirts. He started his writing for money, which meant he was very conscious of his readers. Because of the fact that he came from a completely different genre, and was free from the tradition of the literary world, he was able to make his unconventional writing style as shown in his books: a story with epigrams, cartoons, notes and numbers.

He finally decided to be a fiction writer in 1988. It was a good time to sell a book for there was still money left in America before the depression.<sup>4</sup> He contracted with St. Martin's Press and got the advance of \$22,500. According to him, the amount was "equal to annual income of a Seven-Eleven part time worker".<sup>5</sup> It encouraged him to leave his job and start to write his first story. From the fall

1989 to the summer 1990, he lived in Palm Springs, used this place as the setting of the story filled with rich retired people and wrote the "groundbreaking novel"<sup>6</sup> in poverty like the characters in his work.

This is a novel about the strange lives of three outsiders of the X generation. They live in Palm Springs, a desert area, at the end of 1990, when "all things seem to come from hell" (p.7). The main characters are Andrew Palmer from Portland, who is the narrator, Dagmar Bellinghausen from Toronto who has a double nationality, and Claire Bexter, a daughter of a rich man, from Los Angeles, and all of them in their late twenties. They call themselves the "POVERTY JET SET" (p.6). They had yuppie-like square jobs in the 80s. Andy worked at a publisher. Dag was in the line of marketing and Claire was a garment buyer, but they quit their "Pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause" (p.6).

They came to the desert known as a rich resort to be free from the established American culture or history, especially the middle class view of values, for they think there is no middle class there. They want the drastic change of their lives. Now they have "McJob"s (p.5); the men work as bartenders at Larry's Bar, and Claire works at Chanel, a designer's brand shop, in a shopping mall. They are living in bungalows in the poor side of the town, telling allegorical stories about their obsessions for their own therapy and evidence of their existence. They say; "We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert—to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process" (p.8). "Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them" (p.8).

They feel ambivalent about their past and future. They have anger and a sense of alienation from other generations, but there is no way for them to confront them. Though they condemn the past, they long for the affluent past they can't experience. This kind of frustration and sentiment emerge in their frequent mentioning of the things in the past.

The story is divided into three parts. Part one is mainly made of story telling and the explanation of their past through the recollection of Andy about a picnic in "a failed housing development from 1950s" called "Hell" (p.14). Part two is from Dag's disappearance to "Nuclear Road" (p.70) and the "trinitite panic" to the love affair involving Tobias, Claire's "YUPPIE-WANNA-BE" (p.91) lover from an East Coast rich area, and Elvissa, a good friend of Claire from a poor white family of Tallahassee. Part three includes episodes of Christmas holiday, Andy's home coming and disappointment, the end of Claire's love and the New Year's Eve party of Bunny Hollander, a fossilization of the 50s. On New Year's Day, they leave for San Felipe to look for change and accomplishment of something they had been unable to fulfill. Andy follows obsessively the other two, who are planning to build a strange hotel there, although he can't understand why he's following them. The

story ends in Calexico, where he tells about the accident happened an hour before: Andy got jostled by mentally retarded children in the burned fields of the Salton Basin. There is no mentioning whether or not they could get out of America.

This book was not favorably accepted by the publisher, so only 10,000 copies were issued for the first edition without proper advertisement in 1991. At that time, he lived in poverty in Montreal, writing his second book, *Shampoo Planet*. It was the sequel book about "Global Teens" after X generation.

Despite the poor treatment, the good reputation of *Generation X* spread among the young people mainly by word of mouth. More than 100,000 copies of the book were sold by the end of the year. Finally, the sales reached 300,000 by 1995. "It was an unusual sale for anyone's first novel in the genre of literature",<sup>7</sup> Kenji Kazama says in his essay, 'The New Generation of the End of the Century'.

He came back to Vancouver and published *Shampoo Planet* (1992), *Life After God* (1994), *Microserfs* (1995), and *Poraloids from the Dead* (1996). His works keenly describe the life in the late twentieth century from the viewpoint of his generation. With some special techniques I mentioned before, his works became more than just fiction.

*Generation X* gives us good reflection of the society where the generation has been involved. In this paper, I would like to discuss this story as a kind of a study on the new generation, and analyze who the original X generation are. In order to make Xers' characteristics clear, I am going to discuss their conflicts between themselves and others who appear in the novel. It will show not only the characteristics of X generation but also those of the whole youth who share a similar background. What *Generation X* is, will also be discussed. The study of X generation, the youngest, unique generation old enough to be a spokesman for themselves, must give us a new perception of today's society.

## II. Who are Generation X (Comparisons between X Generation and Other Generations)?

This chapter is for us to understand the original X generation through comparisons between themselves and other generations along with Andy and his GenX friends.

There are two big objects that they feel to be generation gaps. One is their senior generations. They include the generation of their parents and the generation of their elder brothers, the baby boom generation. Another is their junior generation, the Global Teens.

Generation X shows complicated feelings, mixed up with envy and hate toward other generations. From the next paragraph, I would like to discuss their relation with each of the three generations.

### A. X generation and Global Teens

First, I'm going to discuss the relationship with the Global Teens. They are

the object of Andy's generation gap. The representation of this generation in the book is Tyler, a younger brother of Andy. He is five years younger than Andy. Like Andy calls his generation X generation, Tyler labels his generation, Global Teens.

Andy says, "Tyler's friends live in bubbles" (p.138), and discriminates against his generation. According to Andy, the characteristics of the Global Teens are as follows:

- ①Many of them are already in their twenties.
- ②They always live their lives together.
- ③They can be "sucky" for GenX: "no drugs, no irony, and only moderate booze, popcorn, cocoa, and videos on Friday nights". (p.106)
- ④They live with their parents because of ridiculous rents for flats. They use the saved money for the finest labeled wardrobe.
- ⑤They are the victims of marketing, and believe the fraud of racial harmony and globalism presented by markets.
- ⑥They refuse to work as employees, and hope to start as owners.
- ⑦They think their lives will end at twenty five. When the time comes, they want to work at big, stable companies, IBM, for example.
- ⑧They want stability.
- ⑨They don't feel compunction about eating their friends if they are in crises.

Why does Andy think these two generations are different despite they are thought to be one generation? What is the gap lying in these five years?

## 1. Two Generations and Labels They Gained

First of all, I will introduce to you how they are regarded by society.

As I mentioned before, the term "generation X" is the most popular expression to designate the young people of the 90s. In this paragraph, I will present some other labels given to them. Most of them are given by the older generations. The labels explain how the younger generations are thought.

A lot of labels have been used to call the young people. We have known these terms: "New Lost Generation", "late generation", "zero generation", "MTV generation", "twentysomething", "repair generation", "blank generations", "twentynothing", "nowheres", "simply numbs", "burnouts", "techno babies", "videos", "cyborgs", "cyberjunks" or "cyberpunks", "nerds", "dweebs", "remotes", "boomers not", "mall rats", "junks" and "13th generation". Thus they have too many names.

## 2. Historical Gap

I think that the label "twentysomething" is important because it's a term given in the first article focusing the unique characteristics and their own view of values.<sup>8</sup>

Until then, the media had hardly paid attention to them in light of the huge number of boomers, and only their negative images had got ahead of them: they are too indifferent, realistic and have hostility toward the boomers.

According to the article, "twentysomething" means a band of 48 million people who were born between 1961 and 1972. It includes both Xers and Global Teens. They explain senior people of this band who were born between 1961 and 1964 are the baby boomers though they feel gaps with them. Because of the gap, they are counted as "twentysomething". X generation, who were born in the early 60s are not pure post-baby boomers. Some of GenX's gap toward Global Teens result in the boomer side of them.

On the other hand, Tyler is a member of the Global Teens. They are those who were born in the latter half of the 60s and are pure post-baby boomers. This is the historical time-lag, the gap that divides X generation and Global Teens.

In the story, the time-lag is revealed as emotional gaps. For instance, X generation shows unusual fear of nuclear weapons, and they have the memory of the Vietnam War. These two elements of the turbulent 60s are what Tyler cannot share.

Let me analyze these two remains from the past. The first one, the fear of nuclear weapons is revealed especially in the chapters, "New Zealand Gets Nuked, Too" and "Monsters Exist". I would like to introduce two episodes that express their fear of nuclear weapons. For example, Dag is obsessed by "Bomb anxiety" (p.70). He disappears to the "Nuclear Road" and tells the reason for his disappearance as a story of "Otis", which may be a reflection of himself, who lives in Palm Springs to avoid the nuclear fallout. He goes on a trip to conquer his "Bomb anxiety". He tries to check the real scale of the nuclear test in the 60s because he feels that the explosion on the picture postcard looks too small for him to be scared the whole life long. As a result, he finds that "*atomic bomb mushroom clouds are much smaller than we make them out to be in our minds*" (p.70). However, as soon as he gets comfort, he suffers from a brand-new fear. He is given a new observation on the image of "friendlier" (p.70) explosion. When he sees new yuppie houses like malls in disguise, he thinks that "If people can mentally convert their houses into shopping malls, then these same people are just capable of mentally equating atomic bombs with regular bombs" (p.71). In this way, he falls back into the serious "Bomb anxiety".

The second episode is Claire's "trinitite panic". The beautiful green sand, a souvenir from Dag, was a new substance made from the sand melted by the heat of the first nuclear test in Alamogordo. When she knows it might be radioactive, she shrieks, "Radioactive!" (p.76). The cry so scares Dag that he ends up scattering the sand in her houses. The writer describes the way of the "invasion" of the sand; "Within moments, countless green glass beads explode like a cluster of angry

hornets, shooting everywhere, rattling down the floor, rolling into cracks, into the couch fabric, into the ficus soil — everywhere” (p.76). This description reminds me of the nuclear explosion. I feel such persistent descriptions show the degree of their fear of nuclear weapons and power.

After the accident, Claire moves to Andy’s house because of the fear of radioactivity. She explains the reason, “I can’t live here any more! I have to move! My perfect little house — I live in a toxic waste dump —” (p.76). She curses Dag; “Oh my god. It’s plutonium ! You brought plutonium into house. You are *such* an asshole” (p.76).

The motif of perishing by nuclear bombs often appears in their bed time stories and other works of Coupland, in addition to these two chapters. Their extraordinary fear of nuclear weapons must be their trauma as the baby boom generation who grew up in the days with the Cold War in its peak. The Cuban missile crisis happened in 1962. The childhood boomers were scared by the event. They were forced to do evacuation drills in school, for instance. For Andy and Xers, a “thermonuclear cloud” was the “cloud I’d been dreaming of steadily since I was five, shameless, exhausted, and gloating” (p.176). Coupland experienced the crisis in the basement of NATO in West Germany. His fear overlaps the characters.

Contrary to the Xers’ fear, Tyler, a Global Teen, seems not to have much fear for it. He doesn’t pay attention to Andy’s story about the end of the world by nuclear weapons. He replies slightly “hmmm” (p.142), and ignores him, reading *Vanity Fair*. This indifference to nuclear weapons shows one of the gaps between GenX and Global Teens.

The second remain of the past is the memory of the Vietnam War. This memory is not owned by Global Teens. This gap is seen from a conversation between Tyler and Andy in ‘Welcome Home From Vietnam, son’.

“Andy, I don’t get it. I mean, this is a cool enough place and all, but why should you be interested in Vietnam. It was over before you’d even reached puberty.” (p.151)

“I’m hardly an expert on the subject, Tyler, but I do remember a bit of it. Faint stuff, black-and-white TV stuff. Growing up, Vietnam was a background color in life, like blue or gold—it tinted everything. And then suddenly one day it just disappeared. Imagine that one morning you woke up and suddenly the color green had vanished. I come here to see a color that I can’t see anywhere else any more.” (p.151)

“Well, I can’t remember any of it.” (p.151)

“You wouldn’t want to. They were ugly times.” (p.151)

The Vietnam War started in 1965 and ended in 1975. The peak of the war was from its start to 1968 while the U. S. Army did aerial bombardments. It was an event big enough to dye his whole childhood days out for Andy. On the other hand, Tyler was too young to remember it. Here we can see the second gap. Xers didn't join the war directly, but they are on the edge of the baby boomers obsessed by Vietnam.

Thus Xers can't share their feelings completely with the others. I think this complexity makes them something special.

#### B. X Generation and the Previous Generations

Andy says, "I'm just jealous how unafraid of Tyler's friends are of the future. Scared and envious" (p.106). Thus X generation has the feeling of the futurelessness. Where does this feeling come from? It maybe necessary to discuss the problems given to them. For X generation, the previous generations are the worst generations who passed the huge number of problems to them, so they are called the "repair generation". They damaged Xers' future. At the same time, they are the object of Xers' envy because they are the generations who had experienced the rich, historical past that Xers could not experience. Xers feel ambivalent about these generations. Here the conflicts between Xers and the previous generations are to be discussed.

When we look at relationships between Xers and the senior generations, I think we should attach importance to Dag's view. Dag is the most aggressive person of the three. He sensitively reacts to the "chucky" things concerning with the past and future of America. I think he represents the Xers' anger in the most radical and visible way. For example, not knowing what to do with his anger, he destroys cars with such stickers which say: "WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN" (p.5) or "*Ask Me About My Grandchildren*" (p.115). He also represents Xers' confused feeling like; "I don't know, Andy, ... whether I feel more that I want to punish some aging crock for frittering away my world, or whether I'm just upset that the world gotten too big - way beyond our capacity to tell story about it, and so all we're stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers ... I feel insulted either way". (p.5)

#### 1. X Generation and the Baby Boom Generation

I am going to reveal in this section the gap between X generation and the baby boom generation.

##### (1) Intra-generational Gap in the Baby Boom Generation

In this paragraph, I'm going to discuss this problem as an intra-generational



gap of the baby boom generation. A dictionary explains that "Intra-generational gap" is a condition in which a generation doesn't have the same behavioral pattern and view of values, and can't keep continuity.<sup>9</sup> I think the gap between X generation and the boomers comes under this case.

We have already known Xers belong to the baby boom generation in number. Generally speaking, they were 77 million people who were born between 1946 and 1964. Those years were of the affluent society based on the post-war cold war system. The number occupies one third of the whole American population. They were quite different from previous generations, and felt a serious gap against their parents. As a result, they gained too many labels like today's young generations: "war babies", "Spock babies", "children of Disney", "Sputnik generation", "Coke generation", "Pepsi generation", "rock generation", "hippies", "disco generation", "flower children", "greening generation", "Woodstock generation", "Kennedy's children", "narcissism generation", "me generation", "yuppies" and "DINKS". They attempted a cultural revolution. They also attempted a social revolution through the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the student movement in America by the power of number in the 60s.

Then, what kind of problems divides them? Dag regards the baby boomers as the ones who "won in a genetic lottery" (p.21). In the story, Martin, Dag's 40 year-old boomer ex-boss, is attacked as a symbol of his generation. Dag says that he is, like most ex-hippies, a yuppie, and he has "no idea how you're supposed to relate to those people" (p.20). Martin gives as good as he gets; "I just don't understand you young people" (p.20). Here we can see the gap.

It is said that the most important dividing line is 1955.<sup>10</sup> The first half of the boomers, especially its oldest group, are the typical baby boomers. They were the darlings of the counter-culture who directly participated in the movements in the 60s. People say that they, who grew up in the extremely affluent and conformitive society, wanted confusion and change. When they grew up, they exercised the counter-culture, symbolized by "sex, drugs & rock'n'roll". They destroyed the established view of values. However, the Vietnam War and the oil shock gave the decisive blow that put an end to the good economy. After their hopes had been shattered, they went back to the straight world in the seventies while there were still good jobs. They got good jobs and became yuppies. They are the "lucky generation". The year 1974, a year after the oil shock, is symbolized by their favorite setting of the story, "Texlahoma". Andy explains "It's a sad everyplace" of permanent 1974 "where citizens always get fired from their jobs at 7-eleven" and "where the kids do drugs and practice the latest dance..." (pp.39-40).

The only thing they left behind was the huge numbers of problems they could not solve. In addition to these problems, they proved that both the big movements and the government are powerless. It caused the distrust for politics and group or

mass movements of the next youth. Claire says, "no one believes the government" (p.77).

Compared with the first half, the latter half of the boomers had to grow up in the confusion of the turbulent 60s. However, they were only "a little" too young to enjoy the exciting history. For Andy, the Vietnam War was "the only times I'll ever get—genuine capital History times" (p.151). He continues "And *hey*, it's not as if I got to see much real history, either—I arrived to see a concert in history's arena just as the final set was finishing" (p.151). Thus, they have the feeling of the lost history, in addition to the feeling of futurelessness.

When they graduated and began looking for jobs from the late 70s, America suffered from triple troubles, inflation, stagflation and unemployment. The actual wages of middle class families "never grew ever again" since 1974 (p.40). From 1979 through 1995, 43 million jobs were cut for restructuring companies.<sup>11</sup> It is said that the eighties was a "bubble" decade. From 1983, the business environment began to improve unprecedentedly because of Reaganomics. However, the good jobs had been occupied by a number of older boomers. The junior boomers, especially Xers who were on the edge of the boom, were rewarded only the leftover jobs, and worked in "the junior getto" (p.20). Xers were the only group who were paid lower salaries in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> In 1985, America became a pure debtor nation for the first time in 71 years. The stock market crashed in 1987, and they were directly involved in the depression from the end of the 80s. While *Generation X* was being written, America recorded the worst economic growth, 0.7%.<sup>13</sup> Thus they were given only trauma as the boomers. Dag represents their anger toward the elder boomers who eroded their fortune in the story:

When he quit his job, he cursed at Martin.

"...do you really think we *enjoy* hearing about your brand new million-dollar *home* when we can barely afford to eat Kraft Dinner sandwiches in our own grimy little shoe boxes and we're pushing *thirty*? You'd last about ten minutes if you were my age these days, Martin. And I have to endure pinheads like you rusting above me for the rest of my life, always grabbing the best piece of cake first and then putting a barbedwire fence around the rest. You really make me sick.'" (p.21)

Claire's "yuppie wanna be" Xer lover, Tobias describes this situation "*started running out*" (p.90). Coupland names this feeling, "BOOMER ENVY", and adds a note like this: "Envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births (p.21)". This feeling is common in so-called "Xers". However, I think the original Xers' "would-be yuppies" feeling must make their anti-boomer hostility stronger. When Global Teens

came, the wealth "had run out".

Furthermore, the elder boomers made the existing problems more complex, and gave new troubles to them through their "revolution". Affirmative action created a new trouble of reverse discrimination to white youth. They can't be wild because they fear AIDS, a "boomer disease". There is no stable view of value that they rely on because the elder boomers had broken it. Akio Nakamori calls this situation "the hell of relativity".<sup>14</sup>

Xers have different solutions for these problems from the boomers. They resort to individual ways, for example, individual volunteer activities. In the story, Claire tries to "liberate" racks of elk alters with her own way. Instead of trying infeasible social revolution, they try to solve practical small problems. The elder boomers criticize that Xers are opportunists without understanding why.

In general, the latter half of boomers, who grew up in the confusion and could not get affluence like their elder brothers, are strongly inclined to materialism and conservatism. The story also tells the majority of X generation are "SQUIRES" who make family, and pursue the "Eisenhower-era plenitude" (p.135). I think the three Xers' strange life in the desert is their challenge to find something exciting in the changeless conservative world where they chased materialism and stability in the 80s.

Dag had appreciated the bubble in the eighties. He lived well as the young men appeared in *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) did. Looking back upon his life in the eighties, he tells how he had been "the boy in the baseball cap driving the convertible" (p.24), "high on his own cleverness and ascribing darkness and greed to human endeavors" (p.24). Eventually he suffered from sickness caused by such a decadent life and dropped out from it. His life before Palm Springs was detailed in the chapters; 'I Am Not A Target Market', 'Quit Your job' and 'Dead At 30 Buried At 70'.

Dag began looking for his new life. Martin complained about this kind of Xers' life style before:

"'No workplace is ever okay enough. And you mope and complain about how uncreative your jobs are and how you're getting nowhere, and so when we finally give you a promotion you leave and go pick grapes in Queensland or some other such non sense.'" (p.20)

Martin, with "BLEEDING PONYTAIL" (p.20), no longer understands their life searching for a new view of values although he had been a hippie himself.

Thus they have quite different backgrounds from the first half of the boomers. These differences must cause the Xers' post-baby boomer feeling. They are the "unlucky generation". I feel this gap might be mostly beyond the matter of

intra-generational gap. It's dangerous to define these 19 years as one generation.

X generation is the dangerous changeling which appeared in the transition period of America between the pure baby boomers and the pure post-baby boomers.

## (2) X Generation and New Lost Generation

David Leavitt, born in 1961, had tried to represent these changelings in the middle of the 80s. He called them "New Lost Generation", and wrote an essay on the New Lost Generation for *Esquire* in August, 1985. I can't help feeling its insufficiency after reading *Generation X* with their sequel experiences. However, I'd like to introduce his idea briefly because it well explains the background of people who were born around 1960.

- ① They regard themselves as "late generation" against the elder boomers who fought in the 60s. They get irritated about the fact they could not participate in it directly.
- ② They had already been disillusioned in their early childhood.
- ③ They are younger than TV, but too old to be called "computer generation".
- ④ For them jets are familiar.
- ⑤ They grew up in the worst family situation with the rate of divorce beyond 40%.
- ⑥ They love stability, neatness, self-protection, staying at a particular position and hate danger.<sup>15</sup>

So-called the New Lost Generation novelists appeared in the 80s, including Jay MacInerney, Michael Chabon, Bret Easton Ellis (His novel, *Less Than Zero* gave the label to "zero generation") and others are treated with contempt and denounced as "Brat Pack" by critics and scholars. Tatemura somehow finds its meaning in their "feeling of loss" in his essay.<sup>16</sup>

The feeling of loss is common in the works of these novelists including Coupland. In the works of the New Lost Generation novelists, the feeling emerged as the common decadent setting of the 80s materialism world, and influenced their stories, but the cause of the feeling was not clear. Without thinking about their past and future, the characters, almost in their high teens or early twenties, live in the world as a matter of course. When they touch their past, it just emerges as a part of sentimental nostalgia concerning their childhoods. They just live by moment, filled with anxiety. They never think about the reason for decadence. Kenji Kazama says "they lack a sense of history",<sup>17</sup> and divides them from Xers. I can't agree with him because I feel a kind of continuity between them.

I think X generation is the "grown up New Lost Generation" in the 90s. The three Xers of the story are outsiders who try to conquer the 80s' bubbly life. Reaching their thirties, they grow up enough to look for the reason for their feeling of loss. The excessive direct expression of their anger might give an image

of lack of Coupland's power of expression. However, I have high opinion of his ability to describe his generation frankly, and it is easy to understand for everyone. I can't understand the idea denouncing something just because it's pop and easy.

In the story, Coupland critically tells the nonsense of the 80s' life as the Xers' experience like the characters of the novels of the new lost generation. I am going to finish this point with Coupland's speech that shows his negative view of the decade of yuppies.

"The awkward point of the 80s was we had too much money. Everywhere, Toronto or New York, can be said so. It was really the worst. I couldn't bear, you know. Of course, I did not concern at all. I felt so bad when I saw how people were changing. I think I had already written somewhere. There was nothing good for us. Let's keep it in our minds."<sup>18</sup>

"It's hard for future generations to believe that there was so much money in the 80s. It was shocking and crazy as a science fiction. In short, the 80s had finished. It's. . . well, I was relieved when it had ended. we finally have original senses in the 90s."<sup>19</sup>

He also tells about his view of the twenties.

"I don't know anyone who wants to return to his twenties. My twenties was really bad. . . . If I don't call it was depressed, it was always one of these; worried, lonely or despondent."<sup>20</sup>

"Where should I live? What should I do from now on? That's kind of questions. We need money to live, but how can we get? What do I create with it? They are the important questions that we have to struggle with in our twenties, ahead of general questions, love or human relations."<sup>21</sup>

I believe that these ideas are reflected in the story.

## 2. X Generation and the Parents' Generation

Here I would like to discuss the relationship between Xers and the parents' generation.

### (1) Gap between X Generation and the Parents' Generation

Needless to say, the parents of Xers are the parents of the baby boomers. In this story, the three Xers' parents, the owners of Larry's Bar, "Fill'n' Irene" (p.111) and Bunny Hollander, a realized American dream, represent the parents' generation. They grew up in the great depression era and went through WWII. They are afraid of change and have their old view of values. For example, Andy's

father complains about the rioting young men who want change; "Give them all something to do. Satellite them Tyler's rock videos—anything—but keep them busy" (p.143). They are described as men eternally living in the 50s and criticized as the root of the problem.

Dag represents their gap against their parents:

"I try and talk about things like nuclear issues that matter to me with my parents and it's like I'm speaking Bratislavan. . . . Sometimes I'd just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of *futurelessness*. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear." (pp.85-86)

They are the roots of Xers' trouble. The 50s of America was their age, and it was the age of the American dream. After the war, the parents' generation tried to regain their lost years. As a result, they made the baby boom in the affluent society. The boom was supported by a lot of factors after the victory, such as sense of freedom, confidence, the size of the country as well as economic prosperity. For example. During the 50s, the average family wage increased \$5000.<sup>22</sup> The dollar was the strongest currency. America had 40% shares in the GNP of the world, and 14% shares in the amount of export.<sup>23</sup>

This pro-creation ethic caused conformism, and the core of the conformity was the middle class. Their life style was "American way of life". The cold war and the media supported it from another side. Thus unprecedented consumerism prospered. It's this kind of culture that the three Xers try to conquer. Their money, material oriented culture was just a prey of the marketing department. The extremely unwholesome culture and its waste polluted the human heart and the environment. The war of "justice" caused the cold war, the fear for the nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. The baby boomers had created the counter-culture against the affluent society, but it was a "rebel without cause" living in the affluent society.

In addition to these problems, they easily divorced. Claire is the representative victim of the collapse of the family. Her parents divorced again and again. Her father lives with his fourth wife, and her mother lives with a new husband. She thinks about the family as follows:

"You know, I really think that when god puts together family, he sticks his finger into the white pages and selects a group of people at random and then says to them all, 'Hey! You're going to spend the next seventy years together, even though you have nothing in common and don't even *like* each other. *And*, should you not feel yourself caring about any of this group of strangers, *even for a second*, you will feel just dreadful.'" (p.36)

Coupland adds the data: The rate of unmarried men from 25 years old to 29 years old increased to 42% in 1987 from 19% in 1979. As the same, the rate of single women increased to 29% from 17%. More than 50% of them denied the kind of marriage their parents had (p.181).

Xers were born in the 60s and have been living in the declining society where "potential disaster"<sup>24</sup> is in hiding. For the X generation, the first generation who cannot expect success like their parents, those affluent years were nothing but an old tale. Coupland explains that 65% of American youth between 18 and 29 years old think they can't expect the life like the previous generations in 1990 (p.183). The parents can be the object of Xers' envy. The feelings appear in the title of the chapters; 'Our Parents Had More' and 'Why Am I Poor'. They are the roots of Xers' futurelessness. Xers' rebel is a "rebel with cause".

## (2)Admiration for the Parents' Generation

Xers have ambivalent feelings, anger and envy, for their parents' generation. They came to the desert to be free from the past American culture, but they live in the situation filled with the past. They miss it. The inconsistent complex feeling is shown in the words of Andy.

But I can see that, like myself, Dag is torn between smugly cherishing the bizarre joke-telling remnants of Mr. MacArthur's era, and the desolation of living in a future civilization cluttered with sullen, aura-free unfunny yuppies and depopulated of Bob Hope jokes. (p.114)

In the story, there is a lot of mentioning of the 50s' production, Elvis, black telephone and so on. Contrary to the negative description of their parents generation, they love the old fashioned things. They admit that sometimes nostalgia can be "a tranquilizer in an otherwise slightly-out-of-control world" (p.112). Claire and Dag's strange hotel in Mexico is going to become somewhat like the 50's hotel. I guess these things cover their fear for the change and future. It is interesting that we see their limit of liberation there.

I think admiration for Elvissa shows Xer's view of the 50s. She looks like the girl in the 50s. Her real name is Catherine. Andy explains that she has a big head like "Elvis-oidal Mattel toy doll" (p.88), and conversation with her has a 1/10 second "time lag" (p.88). She wears an old fashioned swimsuit, and sells some aloe products. She is not a beautiful girl, however, she fascinates the other 4 Xers in the story. She is Claire's best friend, and the object of Dag's one-sided love. She has an affair with Tobias who is a symbol of "life's not" being "fair" (p.80) and leaves them. Probably, she is the living tranquilizer. At the same time, she is a

symbol of lost years that the three long for, but impossible to get.

### (3) Distance from the 50s

Xers, who live in the worst years after the bubble, think the American dream of the 50s seems to have gone, and their future is in the dark. There are some interesting emphases in the story to convey the feeling.

The first is the way the three Xers drop out. The three's lifestyle is in direct descent from the beat generation in the 50s to the hippies in the 60s. The three Xers are the new wave of bohemianism. They hate materialism and look for a "disengagement" in their wandering.

Although Xers resemble their ancestors, they are different in detail. The beat generation and hippies used hard drugs, alcohol and sex for their "disengagement". On the other hand, Xers don't use the extreme ways. Like beatniks, they have communal life but live in separate bungalows. They are more individualistic.

Now, Xers cannot afford to have the lifestyle of previous bohemians in the declining society and they have already known the barrenness of that kind of lifestyle. It resulted in AIDS, drug addiction and alcoholism. They have also known the nonsense of group and mass activities. Their lifestyle inclines to be stable as well as the majority of X generation. To emphasize the Xers' distance from the affluence of the past America, Coupland seems to describe the Xers' lives in the poverty ghetto of nostalgic Palm Springs. It is where old people buy their youth, and young people sell their youth to get wealth.

The second is the collapse of Andy's family. His family is described as a 1950s model big family in the chapter named 'Define Normal'. He has three sisters and three brothers. Except for Tyler, who still lives in his parents' big house, which is "a museum of fifteen years ago" (p.133) in a suburb of Portland, the children are independent now. In the house, a symbolic family photograph that was taken 15 years ago is left. It looks "dated" but "*perfect*" (p.133), and the children had tried to live up to it.

However, Andy wonders "how *did* we all end up so messy?" (p.136). This year, they stop trying to be *perfect*, and quit "normality-wise" (p.134). Not only Tyler and Andy but also other sisters and brothers have their own troubles, and their futures seem to be blind. Deirdre is in struggle with her bad marriage. Dave sells alternative records and does Ecstasy though he should have been a scientist. Kathleen runs a "lucrative feminist dairy farm up in the allergen-free belt" (p.135). Susan "panicked" and "went into law" (p.135), and married a yuppie lawyer. They work all day leaving their child alone. Even cheats on his wife, and uses too much coke.

In this way, this year, only Andy goes home for the Christmas holiday. Why does Coupland write in this story about this sad Christmas holiday, and the



inevitable breakdown of his family because of "time shift"? He seems to be attempting to tell us of the end of the American dream and the blind future through the case of Andy's family—the sad reality of the American way of life.

The last is the relationship between the two representative youth stories, *Generation X* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. *Generation X* is reviewed by *Cosmopolitan* as "a modern-day *Catcher in the Rye*".<sup>25</sup> It seems that Coupland is conscious of the story written in 1951.

I can see some similarities between the two stories. First, the stories are about the wandering of young outsiders who feel gaps against other generations. Second, the time setting in both stories is December. Third, they both have a scene of "fields" with children. Fourth, they represent youth feelings and gained huge support.

*Generation X* begins with Andy's recollection of the eclipse seen in the "green" fields in the late 70s. It also ends in flashback of the accident in the "burn-out" field. In the climax of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden, the main character, mentions the fields of rye.

However, the episodes of the fields are completely different. I think Coupland intentionally made the difference to show the change of the world. To make the difference clear, I am going to compare these stories.

In the highlight of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden explained his dream to his sister Phoebe:

"Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—Nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy."<sup>26</sup>

A teenager, Holden, hoped to protect children as a "catcher" in the rye. In the 50s, he could have an innocent dream though the innocence resulted in his mental illness. The mood of the paragraph is bright. Contrary to Holden, in the end of *Generation X*, Andy is "crushed" by the "mentally retarded children" in the scorched fields near the boarder on the way to Mexico. Children come to heal Andy's injury.

Suddenly I was dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace, each member wanting to show their affection more than

other. They began to hug me—too hard—as though I were a doll, unaware of the strength they exerted. I was being winded—crushed—pinched and trampled. (p.179)

In this story written in the 90s, Andy, almost thirty years old, explains the experience was “*pain*” (p.179). The story ends in his words “I can’t remember whether I said thank you” (p.179). Then what does this difference mean?

Generally speaking, American people have a positive view of the future. The children, the symbol of the “future”, are also thought to be good. However, the children in *Generation X* are “mentally retarded children”. The “mentally retarded children” may suggest the defective future. In the 50s, Holden hoped to catch the “future”. However, Andy is crushed by the “defective future”. Andy’s negative attitude toward the children also suggests the lack of mental richness in the declining American society. It is possible to interpret this ending scene as symbolic of the anxiety and the blind future of American society in the early 90s. The suspended ending also indicates the instability. The Xers’ distance from American dream is seen here.

#### C. New Generations Linked by Nothingness

Through the analysis, it may be said that the X generation are historical strays caught between the boomers and Global Teens, who are quietly, but certainly have been hit by the change of the post-war America. X generation are characterized by the ambivalent feelings toward rich, historical past and the feelings of futurelessness. The feelings come from the comparison between the past rich America and the poor present America given to them.

I have focused on the difference between X generation and Global Teens before. However, Global Teens, who have the similar background by being born after 1960, share the similar feelings with X generation though the two generations are different in detail. Both two generations are “late” for wealth, historical past, and fear the future. This is the roots of their post-baby boomer feelings.

Although Andy thinks Global Teens don’t fear the future, Tyler shares the feeling of futurelessness. Moreover, he shows jealousy for everything:

“I just get so *sick* of being jealous of everything, Andy.... And it scares me that I don’t see a future. And I don’t understand this reflex of mine to be such a smart ass about everything. It really scares me. It may not look like I’m paying attention to anything, Andy, but I am. But I can’t allow myself to show it. And I don’t know why.” (p.150)

As for the “*History*”, X generation “remember” the 60s, but the two generations are

similar in the point that they could not join it directly. They also share the feeling of the lost history.

Therefore, they are made in a lump. What they share is "nothingness". Since *TIME* featured "twentysomething" in 1991, the elder people have tried hard to define these young people. Many opinions arose and disappeared. In 1997, *TIME* (6 June) presented us the ultimate idea of their characteristics. It explained that characteristics of "generation X" is inconsistency and formlessness.<sup>27</sup> In my understanding, they are hard to understand because they share the nothingness. Without decisive experiences, they can't have common view of values. As a result they react in many ways to an affair, and make too many inconsistent figures. The previous generations could build worthy generations because they had dominant view of values that came from the matters of life and death in their "*History*".

Because they have nothing, the Xers have to tell "tales" of their generation and make lives stories worth telling before the generation disappears in "history". Though the story telling starts as a therapy, it results in the re-construction of their identity. *Generation X* is a kind of identification of X generation in which they "cough up a bit of diseased lung" (p.13).

I think *Generation X* is a fascinating story that represents the social condition and the youth feeling through the perception of the young outsiders like *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I have mainly discussed the grim side of American youth, but I do not want to conclude that their future is completely dark. Now 1990 ends with the nostalgic party of Bunny Hollander, and a new year has started. Coupland gives a suggestive title to the last chapter, 'Jan. 01, 2000'. When we look back at the story, we find a chapter named 'December, 31, 1999'. In '1999', the old world had perished by the nuclear bomb in the bedtime story of Dag. I guess these chapters and the opening scene of the eclipse seen in "green fields" are related: "green fields", "explosion" and "black fields". They remind me of the change.

Here comes the new age for the young generations. I guess "so many new and wonderful tropisms" (p.177) activated by the fire in the "carbonized fields" in the first day of the new year indicate the faint hope in the squandered world after the bubble. I conclude that *Generation X* sends a positive message that "LESS IS A POSSIBILITY" (p.144) to young generations who have nothing.

### III. Epilogue: Generation X, "Generation X" and Japan

Almost a decade has passed since this book was written. During then, the condition of America has changed for the better. The social condition encircling the young generations also changed, and they seem to have gradually regained cheerfulness. In 1997, more than 50% of young people in their twenties think that they will be richer than their parents, and 96% of them think their dreams will come true some

day.<sup>28</sup> Strictly speaking, these twenties don't necessarily include the original X generation, but they shared futurelessness in Generation X.

*TIME* says that "generation X" feel identified with Alanis Morissette's 'Hand In My Pocket'.<sup>29</sup> It is a song from her second album "Jagged Little Pill". The album was released in 1995, and 16 million copies have been sold by the summer of 1998. She was born in 1974, a member of the post-baby boom generations. The lyric of the song seems quite interesting in terms of studying "generation X".

'Hand In My Pocket'

I'm broke but I'm happy  
I'm poor but I'm kind  
I'm short but I'm healthy, yeah  
I'm high but I'm grounded  
I'm sane but I'm overwhelmed  
I'm lost but I'm hopeful baby

(chorus)

What it all comes down to  
Is that everything gonna be fine fine fine  
I've got one hand in my pocket  
And the other one is giving a high five...<sup>30</sup>

First six lines have several couples of contradictory words, "broke/happy", "poor/kind", "short/healthy", "high/grounded", "sane/overwhelmed" and "lost/hopeful". I think these lines show the complicated feelings of the post-baby boomers. These title lines also seem to contradict each other: "I've got one hand in my pocket", "And the other one is giving a high five". In other words, feeling gloomy, they act happily. These words overlap the story of *Generation X* that gives a tragicomical feeling.

However, the major, cheerful music and the optimistic words in the chorus part, for example "everything gonna be fine fine fine", show their regaining of the positive view of the world. This kind of cheerfulness is not seen in the story. Time has changed.

Thus, the American dream survived the long depression after the bubble. I think this positive thinking is the soul of America. Now, the X generation are in the middle of their thirties. They can finally get the benefit of the prospering business as the mainstay of society. Here is an interesting piece of information. The original X generation are not counted as "generation X" in *Newsweek* July, 1998. Their definition of "generation X" is people who were born in 1965 through 1976.<sup>31</sup> The definition suggests two things. One is the media have used the word "generation

X" for people they cannot understand in total disregard of the original meaning. The other is the original Xers occupy majority in the media, and they are not strangers any more. Someday they will be blamed by younger generations.

Compared with improved environment of American youth, Japanese young generations are facing the terrible economic condition like Xers. As I said before, Coupland's idea of X generation is heavily influenced by Japanese *shin jin rui* in the eighties. Andy explains those young generations as follows: "that's what the news papers call people like those kids in their twenties at the office—*new human beings*. It's hard to explain. We have the same group over here and it's just as large, but it doesn't have a name—an X generation—purposefully hiding itself" (p.56). When this term won the buzz word prize in 1986, Coupland had been working in Japan. This term was used by Japanese baby boomers called "*dankai*" to categorize the young generation beyond their comprehension in the bubble 80s. Coupland applied this idea for his generation in the 90s' depressed America.

Although the two young generations are similar in the sense that they are different from previous generations, Japanese "*shin jin rui*" is different from Coupland's X generation, the production of the declining society. For the term "*shin jin rui*" was a kind of disparaging word given from older people to the new generation which were the production of Japanese affluence like the American baby boomers. The 80s' "*otaku*" movement proposed by Akio Nakamori was the defiant answer to conservative older generations from the young men.

In 1992, this new translation of *shin jin rui*, *Generation X*, came back to Japan. At that time, the book was almost ignored. However, when Japanese economical decline was decisive around 1994, Japanese media started to pay attention to the idea. The concept generated by the bubble Japan came back to depressed Japan via America, so there is a time lag when Japanese media use the term, "generation X". They applied it from high-teens to low-twenties at 1997.<sup>32</sup> It's ironical.

It is said that Japanese young people are indifferent to their generation, and to the criticism from other generations. They never resist the shameful labels, like *buru-sera* generation, which means a generation that sell their wears for the sex industry. They are extreme examples of indifference. They neither pay attention to society nor to themselves. I think not only the Americans but Japanese young people should read *Generation X*, and think a little about the society they are in. The book must be the best text for it. *We*, those who belong to "generation X" after all, should be angry sometimes.

## Notes

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4. 江口, ヴァンクーヴァー 183
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23. 本間『国際情報大辞典』 889
24. Bruce Bawer, "The Literary Brat Pack" In *The Eighties* Ed. Gilbert T. Sewall (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997) 214 (In the essay, he quoted words from the Leavitt's essay "New Voices and Old Values" appeared on the first page of *New York Times Book Review*, 12, May 1985. I cited leavitt's words from Bruce's essay because I could not obtain the original issue.)
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26. J.D.Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Penguin Books, 1958) 179-180

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