

I'M SO BORED WITH THE U.S. – AND BEYOND:
THEORIZING THE EMERGENCE OF POSTMODERN SLACKERS
AND GLOBAL GENERATION X CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

The generation which came of age in the late 1970s through the 1980s has often been described as a cohort of slackers, lazy layabouts who shamelessly rejected the previous generation's passionate attempts at revolution. I argue instead, however, that Generation X, as Canadian writer Douglas Coupland termed it, is responsible for a revolution of its own, but its lack of resemblance to any previous social upheavals has caused it to be misunderstood by many. The failure of the youthful rebellions of the sixties and the shallow response to this of the eighties – selfish materialism – prompted this new generation to abandon both group movements and self-advancement; rather, many members of Generation X found that rejection of received ideas and identities – particularly those based in and created through traditional appreciations of and relations to time and place – allowed them to create identities and modes of living which are meaningful and viable in a global postmodern world, attitudes that take advantage of the fragmentation of identity experienced in the postmodern era rather than fighting the general lack of connection brought about by the cultural and economic realities of the period. Through passivity, inaction, acceptance of mediocrity and boredom, the preference for the individual over the community, and their ability to deftly negotiate the rapid increase in world consumer capitalist economies and global information and communication technologies, postmodern slackers have disassociated themselves from systems of any sort: religious, economic, political, familial, or cultural. As a result, these young men abandon the accepted *de rigueur* “accomplishments” of adulthood such as marriage, family, home, and career, instead opting to create identities, homes, families and careers out of a hodgepodge of cultural detritus, including both high and popular culture. They accept this fragmentation of identity as a matter of course rather than allow it to produce significant anxiety, as in previous generations, and as a result, are acutely prepared to thrive in the global postmodern era even as they redefine the meaning of success.

EPIGRAPH

“I prefer not to,” he replied in a flute-like tone. It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did. – Melville

But the world isn't a wonderful place full of exciting opportunities. It's generally dull and fucked everywhere. – Chatterjee

No matter how boring or mediocre it might be, this was my world. –Murakami

Somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? –Melville

INTRODUCTION

JUST SAY “NO”

You see, no one, but no one, is remotely interested in your generation. – Chatterjee¹

The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of yuppie culture and attitude among the affluent in many nations thanks to technology-related economic bubbles of money and post-hippie, post-Vietnam war consumerism. Yet recent college graduates often found the status- and image-conscious work world they were expected to join lacked meaning for the individual; the corporation, the system, fed off of their strivings and expected near-total devotion in return. Not surprisingly, this era spawned many alternative narratives (what might be called resistance narratives if there were a stronger sense of collective action or any significant activity, period), wherein characters ultimately refuse to be “plugged in,” but rather choose to seek their own ways and identities outside of the corporate and governmental hamster wheels. What might seem anomalous after the vocal protests and movements of the sixties and seventies is that these refusals to participate remain on the level of the individual and are unaccompanied by strong political and economic rhetoric or the need or even the acknowledgment of community. Rather, these characters’ primary reactions to the world they have inherited are boredom and passivity. This character is now commonly known as the “slacker,” a name which, however fitting, is highly negative and dismissive in ways which refuse to acknowledge the inevitability of the slacker’s appearance as a response to the failed collective

¹ p. 319

revolutions of the sixties, the mindless fashion-conscious fun-seeking of the seventies, and the further demoralization – even dehumanization – of the “Greed is good,” self-absorbed, corporate-sponsored attitudes of the eighties. The slacker has thus given up on both the individual and the collective, on both the rhetoric of revolution and submission to the system. This is rejection, not rebellion; it can even be argued that with the proliferation of media attention on the rebel, true rebellion is no longer possible because it has become pervasive; it has lost its meaning and its force. Rebellion is now just another option and one with as many rules and limitations as membership in the dominant paradigm requires. The slacker finds both of these options problematic, and as both require action and dedication, he falls into a state of inaction which, he feels, absolves him of responsibility and commitment. Slackers are not looking to reinvent the world or reform the system in general but only to construct a manner of existing in this world that works for them as discontent individuals.

Slackers’ approaches to identity creation and life are important because they provide alternatives to traditional approaches that hold onto outdated metanarratives, essentially denying the massive economic and cultural changes which happened over the course of the twentieth century; rather than effectively adapting, the status quo expectations for life and identity formation attempt to retrofit the world to these expectations. Instead, Generation X – through passivity, refusal to participate, acceptance of the society of spectacle, and an embrace of fragmentation – has found ways to negotiate the global postmodern world without either negating personal principle or dumbly pretending that change has not and is not constantly occurring. This ability to

continually adapt actually makes Generation X ideally suited to survival and success in this world. When connections are constantly severed – often against the individual’s wishes – a dependence on these connections can lead to severe depression and the feeling of being lost which then can impede one’s ability to function and create meaning. By devaluing traditional forms of connection to place and time – home and authority – the slacker has less invested in a volatile market; he can therefore move his investments around with ease and little disruption, allowing him to continue creating meaning and maintaining his identity when all around him shifts.

It is tempting to see this trend as rather limited and limiting, as merely the spoiled apathy of middle-class American suburbia, but in fact, this is a global phenomenon with far-reaching implications for the understanding of what is now dubbed Generation X. The rejection of community did not entirely prevent a kind of quiet generational solidarity as evidenced by the emergence of these same characters across the globe, although many were likely initially unaware of the existence of the others. Rather than collectively deciding on a new approach to life and identity, this generation comprised individuals who each separately came to the same solutions, a more organic response than would have occurred with a more organized group plan. Interestingly, two of the earliest popular examples of the late-twentieth-century representatives of this character in literature – the Boku² of Haruki Murakami’s A Wild Sheep Chase (1982)³ and the

² Jay Rubin, one of Murakami’s primary English translators, has adopted Boku as a referential name for Murakami’s notoriously nameless narrators, and I will do the same. In explanation, Rubin writes, “the word Murakami uses for ‘I’ throughout is *boku*. Although the ‘I-novel’ is a long-established fixture of serious Japanese fiction, the word most commonly used for the ‘I’ narrator has a formal tone: *watakushi* or *watashi*. Murakami chose instead the casual *boku*, another pronoun-like word for ‘I’, but an unpretentious one used primarily by young men in informal circumstances” (37). Amitrano and Strecher also follow this convention. The language choice here is not insignificant, for it hints at an understanding of the change in

Agastya of Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August: An Indian Story (1988)– appear outside of the United States, the place most commonly associated with the slacker figure since the nineties thanks to books such as Douglas Coupland's Generation X (1991)⁴ and films such as Richard Linklater's Slacker (1991). Thus, this study goes outside of the geographical and temporal boundaries popular culture has generally recognized as the province of the slacker figure. In unexpected places and times, the slacker ethos emerged fully formed, destroying any claims to sole ownership to which the West might attest; before The Simpsons (1989) and Beavis and Butthead (1993), outside of suburban America, the slacker appeared in popular texts of Japan and India, suggesting that as a cultural inevitability, the slacker's birth is a consequence of a non-geographically-specific socioeconomic climate created through the effects of globalization. Rather than being an American phenomenon exported to the world as a commodity, the emergence of Generation X was a truly global event sparked by shared conditions rather than by any architect or example. Japan and India in the 1980s were taking many cues from the United States culturally and economically, but the prescience, particularly of Murakami, in recognizing the slacker figure before their Western counterparts is remarkable. It is also important to note that while Murakami's work did appear in the U.S. in 1989 to wide acclaim, his character was not immediately recognized as a slacker (most reviewers

the notion of subjectivity which underlies much of the postmodern era and specifically the emergence of the slacker figure.

³ As Hitsuji o meguru boken, A Wild Sheep Chase was published in Japan in 1982. Alfred Birnbaum's English translation first appeared in the United States in 1989.

⁴ It is worth noting that, although his characters and settings are American, Coupland himself is a Canadian, and thus, while his view is not entirely separate from what we might expect an American's to be, neither is it exactly coterminous.

called him “ordinary,”⁵ and Boku repeatedly calls himself “mediocre”), though perhaps other readers appreciated the novel precisely because of the undiagnosed slacker qualities of its narrator which seemed to fit with a growing disillusionment with the capitalist project of the eighties. Chatterjee’s work was not published in the U.S. until the New York Review of Books edition of 2006.⁶ While the group of works which fall under the heading of slacker literature shares much with older post-war coming of age narratives, including those of the Lost Generation and the Beats, it is distinguished by being the manifestation of a truly global subculture full of fellow travelers on a road to nowhere. While many critics have described this trend as rather limited, I argue instead that this is a global phenomenon and that examining this global quality is essential to understanding and appreciating its emergence and its value.

The two best nonfiction works I have found which deal with slackers are both written for popular audiences but are breathtaking in the breadth of their scholarship and the extensiveness of their bibliographies: Tom Lutz’s Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America (2006) and, across the pond, Tom Hodgkinson’s How to Be Idle: A Loafer’s Manifesto (2005). Even more recently, Jeff Gordinier, a journalist, published X Saves the World: How Generation X Got the Shaft

⁵ In his review for The New York Times (October 21, 1989), Herbert Mitgang erroneously designates Murakami’s characters in A Wild Sheep Chase as “yuppies,” a misnomer of both denotation and connotation, for both the stereotypical image of the young urban professional in a power suit commanding everything in sight and the alternative definition of a young upwardly-mobile professional are at odds with the actions, attitudes, and appearance of Murakami’s narrator who, while he initially possesses a white-collar professional job, abandons his profession and the company he casually formed with a friend, never claims to have had ambition, dresses sloppily, and works both sporadically (which he values for the leisure opportunities and the lack of commitment required) and behind the scenes. Also, while Boku appreciates good food, beer, and cigarettes, he does not have the materialistic bent so closely associated with yuppie, preferring detachment from both people and things.

⁶ Akhil Sharma’s delightful introduction does laud it as both a slacker novel and a modern classic of Indian literature (x).

but Can Still Keep Everything from Sucking (2008) which selectively chronicles the emergence of Generation X and attempts to take stock of its contributions, evolution, mores, and current status. Aside from a brief nod to the extreme Japanese *freetahs* in Lutz,⁷ these works focus almost exclusively on slackers and Generation X in the U.S. and the U.K. That no definitive scholarly work has yet tackled the topic could mean many things: that no one has deemed it worthwhile, that analysis of slackers seems obvious, that slackers are falsely seen as synonymous with the broader Generation X, that slackers' proper sphere is the popular and no university-press issued tome is necessary, or that those who might be writing such a work are otherwise occupied being slackers to quite get it finished (or perhaps to quite get it started). Thus, this study brings a theoretical and analytical approach to the study of the slacker as opposed to the historical and defensive postures taken by the above-mentioned works.

This study seeks to place the slacker in context to see why this figure developed in the ways it did when it did and to discover what it provides to the cultures which produced it. I argue that the slacker is an important antihero for the global era who emerged to express the otherwise unspoken (and often unpleasant) criticisms of the reigning socio-cultural milieu. The texts discussed here are but a sampling of possible texts, for the slacker ethos can be found in many other contemporary works of literature, cinema, and popular culture. Its pervasiveness makes understanding it a necessary part of making sense of this period and this generation. While I do not hesitate to reference other texts, I have chosen to focus on Murakami and Chatterjee based on the fact that

⁷ A phenomenon examined in much more depth by Michael Zielenziger in Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation (2006) where this character is called *hikikomori*; both terms include elements of hermitage and agoraphobia in their definitions and translations.

they are seen as touchstones in this discussion, are widely read in their own and other countries,⁸ and have captured a difficult demographic audience: the young male. Also, as precursors to the Western slacker, an analysis of these characters should allow for a more thorough understanding of their place in current popular culture and literature. In other words, to proceed, we must ask the questions, “Why does the slacker appear?” and “Why does the slacker appeal?” But first, who are the slackers?

⁸ In The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s, Viney Kirpal describes English, August as a “runaway hit” in India (xiv). Murakami has become a literary celebrity both in Japan and abroad. His novels regularly sell millions of copies in Japan and flirt with bestseller lists in the U.S. where his critical reception is more serious.

CHAPTER ONE

GUIDE TO IDENTIFYING THE SLACKER IN HIS NATURAL HABITAT

Who Are These Slackers?

. . . Negative Capability, *that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.* – Keats⁹

As I have worked to make sense of the emergence of the bored, disaffected, idle young men in end of the millennium fiction, I found “slacker” to be an all-purpose descriptor which found recognition in many quarters, but I shrink from the possibility of this designation becoming a limiter, narrowly including and excluding texts based upon arbitrary watermarks. Instead, it is important to understand that the mentality of the protagonists studied herein has become pervasive, touching many narratives – even global youth culture – with the slacker brush. As one hue may be important in a painting but may not dominate the work, the variations on the slacker narrative are many; some more prominent variations include the buddy slacker film (i.e., Clerks, the Bill and Ted films, Dude, Where’s My Car), slackers in the workplace (Microserfs, Office Space, Black Books), slackers negotiating love (High Fidelity, Reality Bites), slackers on drugs (Trainspotting and Almost Transparent Blue), and the texts wherein characters have many essential slacker characteristics but which are not, strictly, slacker narratives. For example, The Big Lebowski is anomalous for the Dude’s age and Fight Club for its energy, but both have strong connections to the slacker genre. There are even slacker

⁹ p. 336

handbooks, some tongue-in-cheek cataloguing like Sarah Dunn's Official Slacker Handbook, and others humorous yet serious in praising the elements of slackerdom like Tom Hodgkinson's How to Be Idle which has come out of his bi-annual publication The Idler.¹⁰ My definition may differ somewhat from other understandings in that these sources tend to over-emphasize the creative, geeky, über-intellectual, tortured Romantic genius which falsely, I feel, focuses on the individual's personal qualities or strengths and does not clearly address the underlying attitudes and philosophies which make such figures possible, interesting, and valuable. This overly individual approach also fails to tackle the question of why this attitude has become pervasive at this particular time and what the slacker might mean in a larger picture for a broader society. My approach also diverges in that I do not dismiss or denigrate the slacker because to do so would be to miss the point of his emergence. So, while the term "slacker" holds many negative connotations, I hope to show that the slacker's existence in cultural texts does have significance and value.

The figure of this study is generally represented in fiction by a young, male, well-educated, middle-class protagonist who has not previously been subject to discriminations or deprivations of any magnitude, and who, although he possesses the necessary cultural capital to be successful by the standards of the mainstream society, in the words of Melville's *Bartleby*, "prefers not to" strive for the expected accomplishments of middle-class adulthood: family, home, career. As a result of what I have termed the incomplete project of feminism, a double standard still remains which

¹⁰ Hodgkinson's online resource is <http://idler.co.uk>. His title pays homage to Samuel Johnson's eighteenth century periodical.

has, for the most part, prevented the acceptance of a female slacker; thus, most of the slacker figures I have found represented in literature, film, and television around the world have been male.¹¹ These characters are urban in provenance and global in experience and taste – cosmopolitan, if you will; they exude elements of romanticism and existentialism, and while they may be disillusioned with the world they are expected to join, to the point of being greatly bored by it and preferring not to participate in it as expected, they are neither nihilists nor entirely lacking hope, though this hope is incomplete, vague, nebulous, and not quite to be trusted. The slacker’s primary modes are passivity and inactivity rather than the problematic strivings (resulting in both concentrated contemplation and action) of Modernist and Beat cultures; in him, the anxiety of earlier periods has given way to a pronounced indifference. He is no longer a hero searching for something, but one content in his acknowledged mediocrity. And while he tends to change over the course of the narrative, to understand himself better, he does not seek to change the world, for he recognizes this as a futile – even arrogant – project. While this slacker identity is the only passably traditional form of identity he possesses (and even this is both too limiting and too vague), it is not a mantle he loudly or purposely proclaims; quite the opposite is in fact the case as the early examples of the slacker figure do not attach any labels to themselves or their (in)activities.

¹¹ Therefore, my use of the masculine pronoun throughout this essay is deliberate. Perhaps, males are still freer to be disconnected and uncaring towards social expectations than are their female age mates or social equivalents. Sadly, most women are now expected to do more than their predecessors without any other social or cultural obligations reduced, and thus, a double moral standard exists. A woman as dissolute as these men are would generally not be excused by the same amorphous pretexts such as looking to “find her way” or “find her self”; rather, she would likely be viewed as a slattern, suspected whore, or just the exception which breaks (rather than makes) the rule; she becomes a disappointment and a black mark on the reputation of all women. This is interesting and important but is an aspect which does not fit into the scope of this study.

Postmodernity

The slacker's approach to the world is fully immersed in the postmodern. As befits one who is part of a world culture of technology-, information-, and media-saturation which privileges appearances and surfaces (Jameson's "bewildering new world space of late multinational capital" [58]), the slacker does not make distinctions between high and popular culture. This leveling of distinctions also may seem to make the slacker somewhat crass, unafraid of the grotesque, or as some might prefer to see it, a realist, embracing even ugliness. Community ceases to be valued, and the slacker acts as an island,¹² floating around others who are more active than he and whom he can count on to enable his attempt at consequence-free passivity. While there is a population of slackers, and the slacker has become a figure with representations from many cultures, rarely do these individuals form alliances because to do so would take effort and ideology which slackers do not possess. A touch of cynicism is also in operation here, for the slacker does not trust groups and finds forming identity through others problematic. Family becomes a casualty; no relationships are privileged without a practical reason, and so the slacker is just as likely to form surrogate families out of varied friends and acquaintances as he is to keep in close contact with his birth family, but even these self-made networks are tenuous and easily abandoned. These surrounding characters are often much more proactive than the slacker and often propel any movement or plot in the narratives. Protagonist becomes a misnomer when applied to the slacker who is the central character of a novel, for he tends to wait for things to happen to or around him

¹² The 2002 film version of Nick Hornby's 1998 novel, About a Boy, begins with its main character, Will Freeman (a telling name), extolling the virtues of "island living."

rather than instigating anything. This emphasis on observation and patient waiting thus is not the laziness it first appears to be but is rather evidence of a thoughtful, careful, studied attempt to respond to the world as it is and of a general distrust which does not assume that the current system has the right answers. As such, boredom is another primary mode of slacker existence, one which he does not deplore or attempt to prevent or cure. The particular manifestations of boredom and means of dealing with it (or not, as may be argued) in these late twentieth-century works are indicative of the postmodern condition. The slacker himself is perhaps the most comprehensive representative of the conditions and realities of the postmodern era. He simultaneously demonstrates, lauds, critiques, and satirizes widespread notions of postmodernism. Perhaps shockingly, the slacker is more than just an apathetic loser; rather, he is a cultural critic, examining and reflecting upon postmodernity. His unique identity construction and socio-cultural place allow him the rare vantage of being able to comment on postmodern culture from inside and out.

Matthew Strecher, in "Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki," suggests that part of the problem for Murakami's protagonists lies in the fact that "the sense of identity provided through an easy, affluent culture is a bestowed identity, not one created through the real challenges of survival" (265). These slacker characters seem to have rejected both of these possibilities to some degree. They may take advantage of the ease allowed, but they do not rest in this given identity. At the same time, they avoid the "challenges of survival" and instead create identity from a lack

of investment in either of these paradigms. Their identities seem to arise from absence: absence of desire, absence of striving, and refusal to participate, for as Boku comments:

With the job out of the picture, I felt a surge of relief. Slowly but surely I was making things simpler. I'd lost my hometown, lost my teens, lost my wife, in another three months I'd lose my twenties. What'd be left of me when I got to sixty, I couldn't imagine. There's no thinking about these things. There's no telling even what's going to happen a month from now. (175)

This seems to be a decidedly postmodern attitude towards identity creation and knowledge in general; through nothing, something is created. But even that “something” has an element of uncertainty which is unavoidable for the postmodern individual and which requires a fluid, noncommittal attitude and approach to survive without resorting to the anxious strivings of Modernism. This quote also emphasizes the strong focus on the present which is essential when the future is ever more and is fully acknowledged to be unknowable, unpredictable, and mercurial and where the past is increasingly irrelevant; thus, the present becomes all-important. No figure other than the slacker has been as ready to accept these conditions and to value the present in a way others have long proclaimed – he lives *carpe diem*.

David Harvey explains in The Condition of Postmodernity that “the most startling fact about postmodernism [is] its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic” (44). Postmodernism’s inherently inactive, slacker, if you will, response to these features of modernity is essential to the understanding of the emergence, prominence, and acceptance of the slacker figure in postmodern culture: “It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the ‘eternal and immutable’ elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is” (44). This passive, casually

unconcerned acceptance of rapid change marks a dramatic shift from the busy history-mongering which was the Modernist response to the realization that these were the definitive qualities of the modern world.

Similarly, the spectacle, the representation of reality in place of reality, as Guy Debord argues in The Society of the Spectacle where “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation,” is another unavoidable aspect of the postmodern era. As might be expected, the slacker takes a less-than-wholehearted approach to this immediately problematic phenomena which is nothing more or less than “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production . . . it is the very heart of society’s real unreality” (Debord 13). The primacy of the spectacle encourages and perhaps even necessitates a degree of passivity, but at the same time, due to its presence in all aspects of life, the spectacle becomes a cyclical process, both creating and maintaining the “dominant mode” in such a way that dissent is ignored even emasculated. Slackers are both indebted for their very existence to the spectacle and yet are in opposition to it – an unresolvable tension: they cannot entirely deny or escape it, nor can they change or reform it; thus, passivity is the only viable position for them – by default.

Postmodernity is a response to a particular temporal, cultural, and economic set of circumstances which have become global. The “globality” of societies and therefore of their cultural productions is predicated upon their transformation into societies of spectacle. Understanding the postmodern this way helps to explain why these texts are global in nature rather than merely localized productions; it also suggests that these

characters are not merely relatable but relevant and that they not only can but need to be incorporated into a broad discussion which includes texts with a variety of origins.

Postmodern strategies for theorizing and inhabiting space challenge the delimitable borders of nations, even if they are, as Benedict Anderson claims, created through collective imagination. The French anthropological theorist Marc Augé recognizes this in his proposing non-places as the supreme locations of postmodernity as it marches into further excess, locations which are often both physically mobile and absent of distinguishing characteristics, locations which are as tangible as they are unreal, for they essentially take their (always temporary and shifting) inhabitants out of the world of classic logic and stability. Augé clarifies his terms and constructs as oppositional and cooperative, distinct yet inseparable and symbiotic:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity [the cultural and theoretical phase which goes beyond postmodernism] produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places. (77-78)

He then suggests the spaces of transportation, of birth and death (surreally antiseptic hospitals and clinics with little relation to everyday lived reality), of shopping (grocery stores and suburban malls which place further distance between consumers and producers), of commerce and communication (credit cards, cable and phone lines – the Internet is in many ways the perfect non-place) as the featureless non-places of “a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral” (78), eerie manifestations of spectacle which place “the individual in contact only with another image of himself” (79). The postmodern compartmentalizing of space into

disposable “single-serving”¹³ doses assumes the degree of disconnection which characterizes the slacker. He thus becomes proof that postmodernism is a way of living and not merely an interpretive theory or aesthetic movement. Whether this way of living is viable, productive, meaningful, or positive are not questions that the slacker ponders, for this is the way of living that has birthed and raised him; knowing no other, he finds a way to exist in the non-places of postmodernity through the floating passivity which earns him reprobation from those less comfortable with uncertainty.

The freedom from subscription to metanarrative, which Jean-Francois Lyotard sees as indicative of The Postmodern Condition, takes a similar dismantling¹⁴ approach to the concepts of time and history, to that which is received. Like Jameson, Lyotard implicates capitalism in the particularities of the postmodern, for “capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction” (74), and it is this lack of nostalgia which separates postmodernism from modernism, as I further argue in chapter three. Capitalism may also be a necessary condition for the emergence of Generation X, for it places great value on competition and individuality while providing an environment where a middle class whose primary productions are intellectual and intangible must continually adapt to thrive. W. T. Lhamon has recognized the “deliberate speed” at which cultural changes happened in mid-century,

¹³ The “clever” descriptor Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club narrator gives to everything in the world of business travel, including to the people temporarily seated next to one on planes (28; 31; but emphasized more in the film version).

¹⁴ By “dismantling,” I hope to evoke a multiplicity of meaning and connotation: to take apart, to uncover, to deny or remove the legitimacy of the power of the one who is disrobed.

and this speeding has, if anything, only accelerated, as Coupland confirmed when he subtitled his first novel “Tales for an Accelerated Culture.” This acceleration means that one cannot maintain strategies, methods, products, locations, or traditions merely because they worked in the past. In order to be relevant, then, constant change and adaptation, a refusal to become too attached to any one paradigm, are necessary. Thus, the slacker, who has recognized the need to live without concrete connections to places, ideas, or people is actually perfectly primed to succeed in this world.

No discussion of postmodernism would be complete without a nod to Fredric Jameson whose “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism” is treated as a bible for the theorization and critique of postmodern culture, economics, and aesthetic production. Jameson appropriately recognizes “the fragmentation of the subject” as free from the negative connotations of alienation due to the postmodern era’s insistence on simultaneity and multiplicity, on the simulacrum and the spectacle as self-constituting organizing principles which need look no further than the image, the surface, the tip of one’s nose for material (63).

Picaresque Satires

Slacker literature has a long and well-documented genealogy, the history of which is often intertwined with the literary genres of the picaresque and the satire. In fact, many contemporary slacker novels are dark satires taking the form of the picaresque to tell the story of another kind of outlaw. Although this lawbreaker’s offenses are not on the books anywhere, they tend to violate unwritten socio-cultural contracts in a ways that

are equally undesirable. The slacker's very existence is a slap in the face to the architects of the system and the millions of other compliant subjects, but it must be remembered that insult is not the goal or intention of the slacker who is merely trying to find a way to exist when the rules keep changing. In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault discusses the need of the state to create the "obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him" (128-129). This need is so vital that governments have created excuses to lock up those who do not conform by making undesirable activity (or inactivity, as the case may be) illegal, locking up the poor, the rebellious, the mad, the slightly out of the ordinary¹⁵ in attempts to either hide them from civilized view or retrain them by forced labor and structure to be "obedient subject[s]."

The lack of direct political commentary does not eliminate the political undertones of these works; thus, many of them are deeply satirical and deeply funny. Ian Almond sees Chatterjee's novel as the one which finally rang the death knell of the Enlightenment project in India, the spreading of secular Western thought as a consequence of the belief in progress; whereas previous Indian novels often featured an "Enlightenment missionary" who brings Western values and culture to bear on less enlightened situations, hoping to influence the conversion of others, Agastya, who with his Western education has the potential to be just another such ambassador, does not take up this project (or any) because it is a "game whose rules [he] no longer believes in" (112) and he sees "progress as not only naïve but faintly arrogant" (109), a value judgment which requires hierarchical views of culture to be true – something the late

¹⁵ For more on this, see Foucault's Madness and Civilization.

postmodern protagonist can no longer support. The satirical picaresque narrative, in its refusal to show development over time and in its repetitive nonlinearity, which is a refusal to acknowledge the authority of narrative form, is particularly suited to use when answering the question, “What does the missionary do when he no longer believes in his mission” (112)? He does nothing, and therefore, his story cannot be told with a traditional linear plot.

Because of the postmodern irrelevance of cultural distinctions, nothing is out of bounds for these authors or their characters. All previous “sacred cows” are fair game to be used, altered, satirized, and placed in conversation with the illegal, the scatological, and the mundanity of everyday life. Popular culture has now placed these characters in the forefront, marking what I argue is the end of the possibility for true rebellion as familiarity renders it impotent; witness the cultural ubiquity of The Simpsons and the pervasiveness of the “dude” dialect modeled on films such as Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure (1989) and Beavis and Butthead.¹⁶ By exposing the ridiculous aspects of mainstream life, slacker narratives provide the opportunity for others to come to similar revelations about themselves and the individual’s place and role in a larger, constantly moving society. This exposing without prescribing is essential to Generation X, who has seen countless self-help regimes fail – plans which attempted to provide a magic formula for success and satisfaction but which failed to take the postmodern focus on individuality and constant adaptation into account. Thus, slacker novels are models for what must be understood about life in the postmodern era, but they are models of

¹⁶ “Dude” dialect comes from West Coast surfer culture (Ostler 183) which exhibits many slacker tendencies, although the passion for sport marks surfers as separate from their more (or less) dedicated slacker brethren.

thoughts and attitudes rather than models of action, for if they did attempt to delineate twelve steps of action, those would immediately be out of date by the time any reader encountered them – even with the speed of communication technology and real-time streaming video on the internet. No recipe can be given, and thus not only must the satire exist on a theoretical level, but it cannot be constrained by linear plot, as is evidenced by the picaresque mode.

Thus, our noble protagonists are to be found operating in the vein of the picaresque; slacker narratives are told episodically with more emphasis on the character and his internal dilemmas than on any outwardly-focused, goal-driven, dramatic, or cohesive plot. The picaresque also happens to be an ideal way to tell the story of one who actually does very little; there are no heroic escapades to relate, only a prolonged litany of passivity, letting the world revolve around one without getting much involved oneself. Another element of these texts which emphasizes the theme of boredom is an almost mind-numbing attention to trivial details – Boku readily describes the contents of his refrigerator and the consumption of each cigarette or beer, and the mundane shopping in preparation for his trip to Hokkaido – and personal asides including many apparent non sequiturs, such as when Boku reminisces about his fascination with a dried whale penis as a child or when Agastya's thoughts wander from the subject of a conversation (usually with his boss, Srivastav) to contemplate a memorable English teacher from his secondary school days. The small things take on great significance in much the same way that popular culture is allowed to mingle freely with high culture, blurring the lines between what has been traditionally valued and what has not. These characters take in a wide

array of media and cultural productions without discrimination, forging from them identities full of shifting contradictions, “fragmented,” in Jameson’s term, but without the anxiety implied by the alienation recognized in and by Modernism. Ultimately, these works are arguing that current expectations and mores are hypocritical – even insensitive – to the nature of humanity, thus making these values ripe fodder for irreverence. These works argue for individual answers to the great questions rather than expecting religion, politics, family, home, career, nation, race, language, or other socio-cultural institutions to provide meaning. Capitalist motivations seem crude, and international influences are ubiquitous, calling into question the meta-narrative of the nation as the great arbiter of identity.

A History Lesson – Slacker-Style

Although he has many significant precursors, the slacker of the 1980s presents a new and important variant which has become a significant cultural representative whose existence and particular manifestation solidifies this era as both postmodern and as global, not only in its artistic production but in the very fabric of daily life. While the slacker may, in some ways, be an extreme figure, readers, viewers, and cultural consumers have found him to be relatable, communicating ideas which they may have even if they do not find themselves able or willing to act on them. Thus, the slacker plays an important role for venting many socially questionable impulses. On the other hand, the prominent image of the slacker has made similar life choices more acceptable than prior to the eighties. The slacker’s approach to life also seems to provide a way to deal

with the economic and cultural situation of an indisputably overwhelming globalized, technology and information-based world. This particular phase of capitalism has required changes in all manner of material and cultural production, and so it should be no wonder that it also requires its own storytellers, narratives, and heroes (or, arguably, antiheroes).¹⁷ Whether for better or worse, the slacker tale has been the most ubiquitous entry to fill this role.

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" provides an early prototype for the attitude of the postmodern slacker, although Bartleby's "preferring not to" is far more enigmatic. His subsequent demise – which can perhaps even be seen as an erasure – also reveals a pessimistic fatality, an impossibility of existence for the slacker in early capitalist societies, which is no longer accepted as the final result for the postmodern slacker who maintains a belief in the possibility of his inactive existence. The capitalism of Bartleby is still focused on the production of tangibles – hand-copied documents in his particular experience – whereas what Jameson terms late capitalism has separated the worker from immediate results and privileges intangible, intellectual products. Of course there are still blue-collar workers and craftspeople who do have a solid connection to the fruits of their labor, but the postmodern slacker is almost without exception of middle-class provenance which lends his refusals and ennui a non-mortal subversive humor.

Goethe's *Werther* is a Romantic influence on the slacker, while Gary Shteyngart argues that Goncharov's *Oblomov* is the ur-novel of slackerdom (NYTBR 2007).

Interestingly, Dostoyevsky's unflinching examinations of human contradictions,

¹⁷ For the development of this idea, I am supremely indebted to several enlightening conversations with Dr. Robert Bennett who has also been kind enough to oversee this project with the necessary incisive criticism, encouragement, and intellectual nudging.

complexity, and even evil influenced both Murakami and Bret Easton Ellis whose American Psycho takes a very different approach to 1980s social satire. Alberto Moravia's Boredom is much darker and more hopeless than contemporary slacker narratives, but its attention to "imperiled masculinity"¹⁸ is worth noting. Even the existential, plotless minimalism of Beckett's Waiting for Godot and the schizophrenic effusion of Pynchon have gone into the slacker recipe. The Crying of Lot 49's conspiracy theory insanity reappears in A Wild Sheep Chase, but while Pynchon's Oedipa puts great interest, energy, and effort into its research and unraveling, Murakami's Boku expresses no curiosity, merely waiting for information and action to come from others. Bukowski's shiftless Harry Chinaski has many admirably slacker qualities but is still too closely allied to the Beats, particularly demonstrated in his relationships with women, but most importantly in his overdose of hedonism and lack of any critique which reaches beyond himself. This broad spectrum of influence is not surprising considering that the creators of the well-educated, intelligent, and well-read slackers are themselves well-educated, intelligent, and widely-read. Slacker literature is thus not a rebellious rejection of all that has gone before, nor did it arise out of a vacuum. The economic, intellectual, and cultural roots are clear.

In Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s, W. T. Lhamon argues that, in the fifties, "Culture tilted toward youth," (8) and this tilting has not abated; if anything it has increased, but the youth culture of the eighties was even more conflicted about its inheritance, its role, its future. "Square" society was not vanquished by the fifties or sixties; rather, most of those advocating for revolutionary

¹⁸ This phrase comes from the back cover blurb describing the novel.

kinds of change capitulated to the system. Their children were not blind to this ideological abandonment, and taking it as perhaps an inevitable failure, the proven impossibility of sudden, large-scale cultural alteration, they rebelled not by trying again but by not trying at all. Perpetual youth became the order of the day, resulting in a generation for whom adulthood, with its requisite responsibilities and accomplishments, held little allure.

Lhamon begins by qualifying his analysis in an important way: “Because they diminish complexity, consensus agreements about an era are themselves serious problems” (1). This seemingly simple principle is, of course, vital to any discussion about an era or a generation or even a country, and thus, it must be emphasized that I do not mean to suggest by this study that all those born within the parameters of Generation X¹⁹ or all those living during the eighties and nineties were slackers or even that they had slacker tendencies or even that this mode of life and representation dominated the culture. I do suggest, however, that it would be unfaithful and untruthful to not examine the slacker figure and why he was produced by this particular era given the not-insignificant cultural space it held (and arguably still holds in the early twenty-first century among some segments of the population). So while the eighties saw the mainstreaming of punk rock, the birth of MTV and the VCR, Madonna and the female power suit (replete with ultra-masculine shoulder pads), and shared economic vicissitudes from the savings and loan collapse to the Japanese bubble economy, and hosted political drama from the Reagan Star Wars program to the end of the Cold War, it was a contradictory era of

¹⁹ The generation dates vary widely depending on the source, further emphasizing that Generation X is not purely defined by place or time but rather by attitude and method.

extremes and mediocrity, the dramatic and the lukewarm. Those wanting to rebel had much to choose from, and so perhaps the surprising cultural production of the eighties was the slacker, an often distressingly malleable figure who was able to cross international boundaries easier than Superman but who did not proclaim an agenda.

The nineteen-eighties are often remembered as a time of high-powered ambition, and so the slacker is obviously not representative of the decade, but his emergence in the eighties carries great significance and portended the promise of his prominence in the nineties, the unabashed era of grunge. An overly simplistic reading of Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho (1991) or the early chapters of Jay McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City (1984) might lead one to condemn the eighties as a soulless period of unchecked greed and hedonism, but of course even these works are deep satire and comically Romantic roman a clef, respectively. American Psycho belongs to the list of the most talked about unread books along with Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses, James Joyce's Ulysses (or Finnegan's Wake), and Herman Melville's Moby Dick, and Bright Lights, Big City was a runaway bestseller, bestowing the prodigy label on its young author, but neither foresaw the path of the next generation as fully as the slacker novels.

In her contribution to the Oxford University Press and New York Public Library-sponsored series on the seven deadly sins, the playwright Wendy Wasserstein playfully suggests sloth as the antidote to a culture full of self-help and self-improvement regimens designed to help one "do it all," i.e., successfully juggle family, home, and career while being thin, health-conscious, beautiful, and wealthy, something she posits results in depthless, thoughtless cookie-cutter automatons who contribute nothing real to the world

around them. The slacker goes beyond playful suggestions and illuminates these current trends as meaningless, soul-destroying, and life-sucking prescriptions which they reject through passivity and non-commitment. While this may seem a drastic response, a culture of all only perceives partial commitment as a failed and incomplete attempt at scaling its walls; only the lack of attempt demonstrates full rejection of its mores and values. Thus, the slacker may hold an extreme position, but it is the only viable response he sees.

Lhamon recognizes a “despair riddling the works” of many early twentieth century (modernist) writers which he argues the fifties began to overturn (64). An element of despair seems to have returned, particularly in early slacker works such as A Confederacy of Dunces (completed by the author’s death in 1969 but not published until 1980), whose protagonist is disgusted by his world and whose purely self-interested efforts always go awry; while in the postmodern, this despair is never fully given in to, it is also never fully replaced by hope. The postmodern slacker seems to be riding the fence in this (as in much else), generally assuming that things are going to go in whatever direction they will regardless of his interference (or lack thereof), and thus, he is not invested enough in the past, present, or future situations to ever truly feel despair. Again, a profound indifference rears its head; near-complete un-involvement is the preferred answer to any dilemma.

Erasing Time and Space

If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person? – Palahniuk²⁰

As might be expected, the journeys of these (anti)heroes are often crucial to this search for meaning; these journeys are both external – from urban to rural, from one abode to another – and internal, as in the exploration of identity and the past. Notions of home, nation, and the world, including the relationships between these concepts and the protagonists' relationships to these are vital to these texts and are invested in theories of postmodernism, politics, and history. Thus, this study will investigate late postmodern theories of space/place and time as they are exemplified in these slacker texts and will give some demonstration of the shift and its significance from Modern to postmodern approaches to these principles. Essentially, the slacker rejects paradigms and identities built upon reverence for place or time, home or authority.

Part of the effacement of time and space is the consequent disconnection from communities and relationships. While the Beats busily paired off (often multiple times, each, as in Kerouac's descriptions in On the Road, with the same fervency, hope, and good intentions as the first time) and recreated "home" wherever they went, however temporary, the slackers rarely even pretend to believe in the myth of the happy couple or the possibility of home as established or necessary crutches in a world moving ever faster with no promised stability. Slackers approach relationships – all interactions between people, not limited to romantic entanglements – with cynicism and skepticism; only one

²⁰ p. 33

of the novels I have read for this study, Microserfs, ends with the possibility of a lasting relationship, and that is one of the least convincing aspects of the novel, often only represented obliquely, and as might be expected, not something into which the protagonist puts much effort. In contrast, Murakami's A Wild Sheep Chase begins with the death notice of a girl with whom the narrator had had a brief, uncommitted fling eight years prior to the main events of the novel; he is recently divorced, not quite aware – nor overly concerned – that his lack of involvement is the likely cause of that relationship's demise; he then falls into a relationship with a woman only identified by her exceptional ears and three jobs who insists on accompanying him on his journey, whence he often proceeds to ignore her. She finally disappears before the denouement and Boku is not particularly distressed by this.

While the Beat pairing off was, often as not, counter to the cultural norm, encompassing promiscuity and homosexuality, it also included intense friendships, a return to “the classic American theme of male bonding” (Lhamon 9). The slacker cannot even do this effectively; although he may be surrounded by others and forced to interact with them regularly, he is not close to any nor does he indicate any desire for close companionship of any variety. The Beat focus on buddies exposes the values still placed on community and communal relationships, even the forging of new types of communities to further critique the larger society, but the slacker, who does not see the point of overtly commenting on society, also does not understand what his role in a community could or should be, and thus, he eschews community involvement altogether. Communities, after all, are predicated on commonalities of time and place, designed to

give the illusion of belonging, camaraderie, and permanence, both ordinary and resulting concepts which the slacker, as a supremely postmodern individual, has rejected as “incredulous” metanarratives which falsely attempt to categorize, shape, and define (Lyotard xxiv).

Sweet Boredom

Rather than immediately happen on an antidote to boredom, there could be some point in lingering and maybe finding some kind of meaning in boredom itself. . . . And without the ability to tolerate a certain degree of boredom one will live a miserable life, because life will be lived as a continuous flight from boredom. – Svendsen²¹

Most people, they're trying to escape from boredom, but I'm trying to get into the thick of boredom. – Murakami²²

The characters in these works often display a pronounced boredom, passivity, and inactivity as a result of their failure to find personal meaning and identity-creating importance from traditional activities and venues. Through what might be called an acceptance or even embrace of this boredom, the characters are finally able to make a break with the life-route planned for them and thus to discover meaning in and for themselves. This is, though, not presented as a philosophy or system to be replicated, for that would be anathema to the whole nature of these novels and their characters; one size fits all methods smack too strongly of consumer capitalism and the repetitive, boring, and even stifling world of corporate work and suburban life. Thus, no easy answers are given. Significant social, cultural, and economic changes occurred between the High Modernist period, the revolutions and rebellions of mid-century, and the late twentieth-

²¹ p. 141

²² p. 43

century global postmodern era which resulted in the distinctly a-political and non-communal nature of these fictions, including a heightened acceptance of both mobility – physical and social – *and* inactivity. Boredom and passivity are not new and neither are representations of them in literature,²³ but in the late twentieth-century, their prevalence and the changed attitudes towards them are what make this “slacker” genre worth examining.

In fact, it is this boredom which I believe to be the key to understanding these protagonists, the novels in which they appear, and thus the pulse of the generation from which they arise. In *A Philosophy of Boredom*, Lars Svendsen argues that boredom often occurs as a result of the realization of a lack of personally meaningful meaning, and thus a lack of identity which provides any sense of fulfillment. Thus, boredom in these cases leads to varied levels of introspection and even socio-cultural critique which often form the crux of these novels, culminating in what can best be described as epiphanies, though, as might be expected, not of a religious or strictly philosophical nature, for these young men have inevitably disassociated themselves from systems of any sort, religious, economic, political, familial, or cultural.

In *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that “Boredom provides a provocative literary subject partly because the internal experience of paralyzing monotony often impels its victims to dramatic action in an attempt to evade what they feel” (166). But, it is interesting to note that none of the characters whom Spacks discusses from her nineteenth-century primary texts resort to

²³ Samuel Johnson’s *Idler* and *Rambler*, by their very titles promote a slacker agenda. For earlier novels on boredom and passivity, few can rival Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov* (1859 in Russia) and Alberto Moravia’s *Boredom* (1960 in Italy).

dramatic action, nor do the characters in the novels I am discussing. Dramatic events may happen around them, may even involve them, but are not necessarily a result of their actions, evasive or otherwise. Murakami's Boku and Chatterjee's Agastya are both remarkably passive; along with Coupland's narrator, these characters prefer to float on the smoothest currents. Boku, particularly, wishes to be uninvolved in the wild sheep chase and only engages under duress. Even the acceptance of his role in the search is about as passive as any decision can be.

While Agastya finds plenty with which to occupy himself and his time (generally reading philosophy, listening to music, smoking marijuana, and masturbating), he is still operating within boredom for he does not really engage with the world around him or even with any of his occupations and nor does he care to be interested (either to find of interest or to take an interest) in this way. Spacks declares that two heroines of the nineteenth-century British novels by Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Emma and Helen, "recognize [boredom] as an enemy that demands considerable resources to combat" (180), particularly because of the potential boredom has to encourage transgression, moral and social. While Agastya has no great concern for morality (nor does he have any significant moorings in religion, as it is often remarked in English, August that his parents were from different religious and racial backgrounds, leaving him without strong ties to either), he does take care to not cross too many social lines, at least not so far that he can suffer any consequences. For not only does Agastya prefer to remain free mentally and in his personal life, he does not want to have to take any significant responsibility. Thus, he continually chooses not to make decisions or take

actions; in this way, if he is passive and has not done anything, he cannot be held responsible for anything.

Spacks' subjects work to resist boredom, while mine embrace it. Characters such as Agastya and Boku use boredom to resist what they see as the insidious nature of modern life and work, which are themselves notoriously shallow, repetitive, and boring, boring because of monotonousness, boring because they are expected and not original, boring the way clones and drone armies are, all in sync with an unseen drummer. Agastya and Boku fight one kind of boredom, one which is essentially choiceless and mindless, with a boredom of their own invention. They are not anxious to avoid boredom; they just want a choice in their boredom.

Svendsen argues that boredom and modernity go hand in hand (63), and if, as Jameson and Lyotard posit, postmodernity cannot be separate from modernity but is a concomitant aspect of it, then boredom is also inescapable in the postmodern. I would argue that what separates boredom in postmodernity from boredom in modernity are the different attitudes and responses which it elicits in each. For the citizen of modernity, boredom is a disease; it is to be lamented and fought; it is to be prevented by the "eternal recurrence of the new" (Svendsen 45). Postmodernity erases the stigma of boredom by recognizing it as a symptom of a lack of meaning, a lack of stable metanarratives, a lack of useful inherited constructions of identity. Boredom is thus an essential state for the slacker, representing the possibility of meaning in the presence of absence. Svendsen explains that "By awakening the mood of boredom, Heidegger believes we will be in a position to gain access to time and the meaning of being. For Heidegger, boredom is a

privileged fundamental mood because it leads us directly into the very problem complex of being and time” (115). In a similar fashion, mediocrity, which is embraced, heralded, and celebrated by the postmodern slacker, is a denial of the modern worship of genius, of Shaw’s Superman, and Eliot’s “individual talent,” and is another mark of the postmodern rejection of modern narratives and templates for identity and meaning. As Svendsen posits, “Another . . . chooses mediocrity, but this only works as a sort of passive resignation, a resignation to remain bored. Or could this be the ‘heroic’ thing to do – to accept the state of the world, to accept boredom?” (69).

Work Is for the Birds

The idea that idleness is good goes against everything we have ever been taught. Industry, hard work, duty, self-sacrifice, toil: surely these are the virtues that will lead to success in life?

Well, no. In the West, we have become addicted to work. Americans now work the longest hours in the world. And the result is not health, wealth and wisdom, but rather a lot of anxiety, a lot of ill health and a lot of debt. – Hodgkinson²⁴

The shift Lhamon recognizes from “time spent producing goods to time spent consuming them” (14) shifts yet again to a complete disconnection of the average middle-class citizen from the world of production and manufacturing. Time, in the fifties, merely moved from one category to another, but in the eighties, even these categories are compromised, and time seems to mean something different, if it is felt to have any significance at all. Arguably, time is hardly a concern of either Boku or Agastya and is only superficially at issue in Microserfs. Goods are produced elsewhere by others with little acknowledgment of this fact by the slacker whose culture now

²⁴ p. xiii

privileges production and consumption of information, entertainment, and advertising (which has now, as Harvey acknowledges, become the definitive art form of the postmodern period [63]), three elements whose boundaries are fluid; production and consumption often happen at the same time without distinction as to which activity is being performed. Time as an element of the economy means less to a group who are not looking for faster ways of producing widgets but for whom “work” generally consists of various non-commodifiable intellectual endeavors; for Boku, this is advertising and translation; for Agastya, pretending to administer his assigned district, essentially listening to a few petitions, signing documents without reading them, and appearing to be busy or finding excuses to leave the office; for Daniel of Microserfs, the code he writes is counted, but the aim is to create a program for entertainment, working to arbitrary deadlines which are rarely met. Although Daniel essentially lives at work, it is a workplace which effaces the differences between play and work, a place designed at all costs not to feel like a business whose goal is profit. He joined the company (and left for another) based on the assumption that he could earn a living without feeling as if he were toiling for a paycheck, so that he could still do what he wanted to do and not what some indifferent supervisor ordered. So, time, production, and consumption all shift in meaning from the modern to the postmodern in ways which call into question the current viability of these categories for at least the educated, comfortably middle-class sector of the population. This may seem to be anathema to a world which, as we experience daily, seems to assume that time is a precious commodity which needs new forms of efficiency and technology to manage, but the slacker figure has chosen not to join any worlds with

overly restrictive demands on his time, and his time is no longer divided between production and consumption, but merely is; therefore, this world of hurry is not his. More than anything, it is important for the slacker to feel like his time belongs to him.

This is not a new attitude towards work for, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “slacker,” meaning “one who shirks work or avoids exertion” has been in use since at least 1898, and Dr. Johnson paved the way for the slacker at least a century prior. According to his highly personal, idiosyncratic, and hilariously judgmental 1755 dictionary, Samuel Johnson’s etymology for the word *job* merely contains the note, “A low word now much in use, of which I cannot tell the etymology”; he defines it as “1. Petty, piddling work; a piece of chance work. . . . 2. A low mean lucrative busy affair,” and finally, as “3. A sudden jab with a sharp instrument,” connotations with which the late twentieth-century slacker would heartily agree. For Johnson, a job is not something to dedicate oneself to; it is merely the dirty means to a dubious end, something to be avoided if at all possible and, in a connection the slacker would be prone to make between the first two and the final meanings, an occupation which is likely to lead to pointless pain. For the slacker, anything he does not desire and choose to do (and that is very little, for both of these actions are almost beyond the ken of most slackers, whose inactivity is near-total) is a job, whether relationships, paid work, or revolution.²⁵

Another relationship between Johnson and the Bokus and Agastyas of the world resides in the contradiction between their dedication to the philosophy of slacking (or “idling” and “rambling” as Johnson termed it in his periodicals) and the fact that they still manage to accomplish something, to have an effect on their worlds: Johnson in his voluminous

²⁵ In the case of Murakami’s character, even curiosity is too much.

scribblings and status as an influential public intellectual, Boku in his final defeat of the sheep which, it is suggested, will result in the toppling of the Boss's massive political and media empire of influence, Agastya in the life-saving supply of water provided to a remote population. That these results can still be in line with a loafer's creed is consequent of their lack of connection to Johnson's definition of work. In Agastya's case, in particular, it should be noted that his IAS job is exactly the "low mean lucrative busy affair," which rewards those who appear to work by pushing the most pieces of paper across their desk, regardless of any real accomplishment. Agastya's peers, in fact, attempt to dissuade him from his decision to immediately provide potable water to an unimportant (politically, economically, and therefore, career-wise) tribal group, a decision which stems from his humanity and not from any recognizable work ethic.

So the slacker may appear to work and may even be lauded and paid for it. These texts do not present a total absence of work, but a different kind of work, a different relation to work, an oppositional attitude, and an ironic knowledge of wage/desk slavery. Even if they participate in the world of work, they maintain an ideological or philosophical detachment from the ideological basis of the corporation and the myths of the work-world. They do not look for or expect the existence of utopian escapes from the commercial, capitalist, consumerist construction of their socio-cultural setting, and so while they have not gone to the extreme of dropping out of cultures which focus on money, they reject those forms of earning which conflict with personal desires. They do not have to completely abstain from work to refuse to believe in capitalist, protestant arguments about the virtue of work or the rewards of work; they are no longer scared by

protestant warnings about the pitfalls of idleness, the special hellfire reserved for slackers. They have rejected the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps myth, the narrative of the American dream where hard work leads to success and therefore happiness. They recognize the empty promises and virtual slavery to the organization for the good of the organization for what they are. They do not expect any corporation or government agency to look out for their interests, and so, if they do not entirely abandon the work-world, they adapt their actions within that world to best suit their needs. Any apparent submission is likely an example of Michel de Certeau's notion of "la perruque," which, as "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (25) diverts and reappropriates time and power over time from the official, culturally-sanctioned authority by the seemingly non-revolutionary, submissive worker. Certeau continues that,

More generally, *a way of using* imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of 'popular' culture could be said to manifest itself – a dark rock that resists all assimilation. (18, emphasis in original)

In what could be seen as an immanently political move, the slacker becomes an expert at this manipulation, often aware but uncaring of its political implications. Submission, then, disguises a laid-back anarchy, as the television show, The Office,²⁶ regularly demonstrates. They do not want their jobs (or other means of acquisition) to define their identities, nor do they want to become synonymous with their sources of income. And thus it is particularly ironic that Agastya does find his IAS status attached to or even replacing his name. He is far from dedicated to his employment, and thus, this

²⁶ Both the British and American versions can be seen doing this on a regular basis.

nominalization emphasizes the distance between the fiction of a dedicated public servant and the reality of a barely disguised slacker (albeit, one who is willing to exploit his position, with its benefits and contacts, its assumed attitudes, at every opportunity).

Best Friends for Never

The traditional buddy narrative, à la Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady or Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, seems to be losing ground in literary fiction while at the same time it is a staple of over-the-top film comedy (think Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, Clerks [1994], or Ferris Bueller's Day Off [1986]). This distinction between what is portrayed in novels and what begins and ends as a screen-only depiction suggests a deep questioning of social relationships such that written works, as items of solitary reading, are more comfortable with the expression of this questioning. Films, as entertainment designed to be viewed in company, seem to perpetuate expected norms of the individual's relationship to community so that viewers are not required to explore this questioning together, for they cannot. Thus, the worlds of the slacker novels seem to have more verity to the reality of postmodern life than do the films. Palahniuk's Fight Club would seem to be about male friendship and community until the reader realizes that Tyler Durden and the narrator are one and the same, each desperately working to destroy the other. Hornby's novels High Fidelity and About a Boy do have male companionship but there is an uncomfortable and unavoidable hierarchy in these relationships, where the narrator is in a position of power over the other characters and finds himself still lonely in their company as a result.

The buddy aspect of the Beat or Modernist novels generally holds well throughout the majority of the text but is finally discredited or otherwise rendered distrustful or broken by the end. The postmodern protagonist has already begun (if not completed) this separation before the narrative even begins, fully aware of his inability to depend upon others to discover and obtain what he wants in life. This separation may happen involuntarily, but if so, it is often the result of the socio-cultural and economic environment of the postmodern period which requires movement and reinvention, fragmentation in all aspects of being. Thus it is that Murakami's Boku no longer trusts in friendships; they are fleeting and unable to offer him stability. The Rat, his business partner, and J, the bartender, all belong to his pre-questioning life. Chatterjee's Agastya finds that his Delhi friends suffer the same unnamable unease, and he, therefore, finds himself preferring solitude to their companionship. Even his new Madna acquaintances cannot become his friends as they each are shown to be different than their initial presentations suggest. Mohan's infidelity and subsequent mutilation is the most dramatic of these, resulting in the final breaking of Agastya and the order of the world as it seemed. As the benefits or the possibility of male friendship become dubious, so too do all possible connections to community as something to be desired, trusted in, or depended on. The postmodern slacker figure, thus, is forced to reject even the most basic of socio-cultural bonds, and as a result, all others can be called in to question.

Identity Pains

While the Beats espoused the import – even the sacredness – of the individual, in practice (as evidenced by their cultural self-representations), they demonstrated their ultimate reliance on the group: as a group, Beats opposed themselves to “Squares.” Their individual identities depended on their membership in the Beat culture and society. Not so for slackers – especially the early variants – for whom non-participation, by its nature, was an inarguably individual (non-)act/choice. As Jean Twenge so aptly recognizes in her sociological study of the post-X generation she labels Generation Me, the doings claimed by individuality and rebellion prior to the eighties were actually always mass acts – movements where individuals bonded into groups and then protested and created alternative cultures (culture being something that by definition cannot apply solely to an individual; culture requires community). The shift from group to truly individual attitudes and practices, she claims, occurred as a result of the way the children of the seventies and eighties were raised – to believe that individuality, personal happiness, agency, and self-esteem trump all, including community expectations (45).

After years of constant movement, speed, and searching after philosophical, religious, cultural, and pop-cultural cures for his malaise, Kerouac finally presents the possibility of retreat from the large, interconnected world of politics and society to a smaller, more inward and personal resting in Dharma Bums, a place where his alter ego, Ray Smith, can finally have a quiet, personal epiphany. But Kerouac cannot seem to represent this important three month period of solitude in his novel with more than a brief vague assurance that Smith does succeed in being alone without entirely losing his mind.

Kerouac spends more time describing the journey to the cabin and the procurement of supplies than he does narrating Smith's experience in the wild. This is in marked contrast to the detailed descriptions of mundanity both Murakami and Chatterjee give of their protagonists (and their activities and attitudes) when sequestered. Kerouac seems unable to fully relinquish his devotion to the gospel of speed – in the journey, in the rapidity of the cycles of change – while Murakami and Chatterjee (and their respective protagonists) remain untethered to any dogma which would prevent them from celebrating the time and activities which lead to epiphany. While Boku does leave the city for a remote, rustic abode similar to that which Ray Smith inhabits for a summer, Agastya's sanctuary of slacking and thought – while perhaps isolated from the megalopolitan city – is still in the midst of hordes of people and masses of responsibility: his room in the government-owned Rest House. No longer is isolation, a complete renouncing of society, required for non-engagement.

While Kerouac's dharma bums believe in the possibility of losing themselves in a mythic, primordial American West existing before civilization, consumerism, and suburbia defiled the supposed purity of the natural (both inside and outside of humanity), slackers no longer see this as possible or desirable; they do not aspire to fully escape the "evils" of modernity but are willing to live amongst them and even use them when necessary so long as they do not become immersed in and dependent on them. They are not slaves to technology, but neither are they averse to it.

Leading into the Rest

It has been argued that the Beats attempted to redefine the notion of America in a manner reminiscent of Walt Whitman. They provided alternative narratives to the Time/Life pictures of a happy, homogenous population reveling in the post-war success of modernity. This grand ambition, though, reveals the important role community played for the Beats; they could not be content as misfits but felt the need to provoke larger change. Conversely, the slackers cannot be said to have any larger agenda than to be left alone to do (or not) what they please. While the Beat mission may no longer be in vogue, the current trend of individualistic, fast-paced writers such as Chuck Palahniuk and Dave Eggers could not have occurred without the groundwork laid by Kerouac and Ginsberg. But this new focus on the individual is also a product of the failure of the project of the sixties when people believed in the power of the people, of the group, to effect change and to make countercultural values viable in the mainstream, even to stop war. Since those optimistic bubbles have burst, the idea of the group meets with distrust, even contempt. Slackers argue that the only change which is possible happens at the individual level – for the individual and by the individual. Thus, the organic evolution of the slacker ethos across cultures – in spite of the fact that many subscribe to it – is not equivalent to the previous group movements.

In his analysis of Douglas Coupland's generation-defining novel, "Generation X and the End of History," G. P. Lainsbury suggests that in the "posthistorical" period, particularly from the rift Coupland recognizes in 1974, there is a "loss of the sense of the possibility of the meaningfulness of a commitment to something larger than the self or

the economic extensions of the self” ushering in (or ushered in by; perhaps this is a chicken and egg conundrum) the “new world order of boredom and economics” (para. 10). The accuracy of this judgment is supported by the slacker texts read for this study; none of the narratives involve the characters finding meaning or happiness in larger social constructs, such as employment, community, family, or religion. Rather, the individual tends to recognize his solitude as the only possible meaningful situation.

While many of these works have garnered critical attention individually, and many an urban legend has been told about the notorious Generation X, I believe new ways of understanding this segment of postmodern life and culture as well as new ways of theorizing global literature and culture can be broached by placing these works in a single conversation. From this study, it may be possible to designate the slacker as the hero of late postmodernism and the new cosmopolitanism of globalization, a hero who “prefers not to” and who glories in a heady mixture of international high and popular cultures. But of course this hero is not uncomplicated; his contradictions are many. They begin with the hybrid narrative form which melds satire (a serious social critique which often uses humor to call attention to deficiencies or hypocrisies) and picaresque (an episodic structure detailing the escapades of a rogue or anti-hero) while purporting to have no social or political fish to fry; the picaresque form itself is part of the satire, even masking the satire in ways as it apparently aimlessly recounts the non-stories of non-protagonists who live in a world in which, although this non-ness is anomalous, it is not overly concerning; the slacker fields little criticism of his non-participation.

Additionally, although the slacker does not fit into any mainstream ontology, and in fact rejects these socially-acceptable options outright, he cannot quite be designated a rebel because he does not have any project or agenda of revolution, and nor does he desire one. There is an element of anger in the slacker's response to the world he has inherited, but he is not quite angry enough to do anything about it. As Chatterjee writes, "He had written to his father that he wanted to change jobs but he didn't really want to – that had merely been a gesture, of the rage of despair imprisoned by impotence. He wanted nothing, it seemed – only a peace, but that was too pompous a word" (155). The possibility of creation through passivity and of meaning from rejection without substitution forms the central problem in understanding the slacker.

CHAPTER TWO

HOME IS AN ATTITUDE – PLACE FROM FORSTER TO MURAKAMI

Shift and Accelerate

In Fredric Jameson's explication of postmodernity, the supposed line between the real and the unreal becomes hazy, even problematic, and identities are accepted as fluid and multiple, demonstrating not so much a rift, but, as David Harvey quotes Andreas Huyssen, a "shift in sensibility" from the modern to the postmodern (39). Tracing the manifestations of this shift will be useful in understanding how and why the passive, mobile, and generally indifferent slacker figure emerged as a surprising (anti)hero in international postmodern literature and culture in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. Time and space relationships elucidate the ways concern with history, home, and identity make the dramatic shift from anxiety to indifference, while the pervasiveness of globalization results in the individual no longer forming primary identity from family and community, but rather embracing the fragmentation of self, and making a turn away from the overt political nature of modernism,²⁷ and finally, ontological constructions no longer privilege the "real," preferring a blurred boundary between the real and the unreal, the physical and the fantastic, or what Jameson has called the "derealization . . . of everyday reality" ("Postmodernism" 76). Thus, these three kinds of space – temporal, social, and

²⁷ Though as we shall see, the political does not disappear, but the way it is viewed does change as the local gives way to the global and the disillusion with failed forms of activism translates into a personal passivity or further indifference.

ontological – reveal the shift from a world of furniture to one of mirrors, from the anxiety of place in modernism to the indifference of space in postmodernism.

The slacker figure and the emergence of a global generation in the late twentieth century which, in spite of its poor reputation, provided, sometimes drastic, but I argue viable, strategies for how people live and create meaning in the late postmodern period, making the slacker a candidate for the position of the (anti)hero of postmodernity. The means of constructing, construing, and theorizing identities began shifting early in the twentieth century from being relatively stable – grounded in time and place – to the increasingly fragmented and unstable identity bases which became necessary in the later global postmodern period. As this shift moved on a relatively steady trajectory, the modernists readily discerned this change and anticipated its direction, but their attitudes towards it were fearful and anxious, and thus they were unable to constructively develop effective adaptations to it. Rather, many modernists confined the mantra of “Make it new” to aesthetic issues while simultaneously advocating for a return to traditional attitudes in other venues, selling the reader on the importance of the past and of historic connections to place in making sense of the individual’s place and role in society.

In contrast, by the end of the century, late postmodern individuals could, without anxiety, embrace the need for identities to be fragmented and fluid and to effect this indifference through passivity and comfort with lack, particularly the lack of connection. Visually, this contrast is demonstrated in E. M. Forster’s 1910 novel Howards End by the focus on furniture which is solid and gives history to new places as opposed to the alternative focus on mirrors in Haruki Murakami’s 1982 novel A Wild Sheep Chase.

Conceptually, mirrors are vivid representations of the complexity of postmodern life; as places, they are both real and unreal, both a physical item and an illusory space, inviting reflection while perpetually changing to reflect that which passes in front of them, encapsulating the ideal Foucauldian heterotopia.

This signals a turn away from the overt political and communal nature of modernism and towards an individualized and self-reflexive passive solitude which in its lack of connections found a way to reasonably exist in what Douglas Coupland, in the subtitle for Generation X, has termed an “accelerated culture.” Thus, an examination of the representation of relationships between place or space and identity reveals the shift from a world of furniture to one of mirrors, from the anxiety of place in modernism to the indifference of space in postmodernism, from the plea to “Only connect” to the straight-faced assertion of lack as meaningful presence.

Uprooted

The “rootedness” that David Harvey ascribes to Heidegger’s prescription for modern life (35) finds its challenge in the world of E. M. Forster’s 1910 novel, Howards End, where the rapidly changing, increasingly fractured and alienating nature of society results in an anxious backwards grasp for the historical grounding of place, much as can be seen in T. S. Eliot’s desire to situate “individual talent” within a framework of “tradition.” Forster’s Schlegel clan are about to be uprooted from their residence at Wickham Place and have formed associations with the Wilcox family whose tenure at Howards End seems to have reached its end, regardless of the history Mrs. Wilcox’s

family had created there. The novel is in many ways the narrative of their journey from the first to the second, predicted for the reader by Margaret Schlegel's uncanny spiritual connection to Mrs. Wilcox and Howards End, but the journey is nevertheless fraught with anxiety and filled with ruminations on the role of place in identity, specifically lighting upon the city of London, the suburbs, the countryside, and ultimately theorizing the place of England in the world. As a result, a topography of the modern world, a form of what Jameson calls "cognitive mapping" ("Postmodernism" 91), is created which makes claims on the identities of the Schlegels and, by proxy, all middle-class Britons. Forster's narrator critically compares the modern period to that of an earlier society's, somberly stating the problems with relinquishing rootedness thus:

The feudal ownership of land did bring dignity, whereas the modern ownership of movables is reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilization of luggage, and the historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty. (137)

The call to history and to viewing the present from some future historical vantage point indicate a strong desire to be a part of the history of place which is accorded great deference as compared to the blatantly negative world of consumerism, of "luggage" and "accreted possessions" which ultimately leads to the inevitable failure of aesthetic and intellectual creativity or "imaginative poverty."

It is interesting to note that in Murakami's A Wild Sheep Chase, a nomadic life, where identity has more connections to commodities than to locations, is no longer problematic but is preferable for the elasticity it allows. A Wild Sheep Chase is an existential exploration disguised as a hard-boiled mystery whose nameless protagonist, referred to as Boku by critics, must journey from his home in Tokyo to the wilds of

Hokkaido to find one particular sheep for a shadowy right-wing figure, known as the Boss.²⁸ The Rat, Boku's old friend who is responsible for sending him on the chase, describes his meandering lifestyle and ever-changing identity in a section which begins, "Let me tell you about the towns I've seen" (89), but rather than give a travelogue, the Rat emphasizes the similarity and thus the interchangeability of the towns and the malleability of his identity, taking on new names, identities, jobs, and lovers in each location without reservations. Unlike Margaret Schlegel who feels great pressure to find a permanent, rooted home as soon as possible, the Rat, who is on the run, narrates his rootless wanderings with a playful air. While, perhaps, his is an unusual case, the closest the Rat comes to anxiety is an acknowledgment that he will not be able to keep up the drifter's life forever because he may not have the necessary temperament, but not because this lifestyle is in any way untenable or inherently problematic (90). Enigmatically, the Rat suggests that "Maybe it's impossible to live out a life in context" (88).

Forster's characters in Howards End would find this attitude unthinkable, for it denies the role of place in identity and thus erases the obligations of the individual to place. When Helen Schlegel runs off to Germany to hide her disgrace and later claims to have intended to settle there permanently, the reader feels a fundamental change in her character due to the change in location. Her physical distance from England actually makes her unreadable; her absence from England results in her absence from the narrative until her return. Helen comes into her own as an individual and as a member of the Schlegel/Wilcox family group when she consents to settle in Howards End with

²⁸ All page references for Murakami are to this novel.

Margaret and Henry, demonstrating the inextricable relationships among identity, existence, home, and family in Forster's understanding of the modern world.

Margaret seems to have needed Helen's return in equal measure, for she cannot fully take possession of Howards End until Helen's arrival necessitates this, and she seems to lose some of her strength without Helen nearby. Mr. Wilcox seems to have more control over Margaret when she is absent from her family; when Helen returns, Margaret has the strength to defy Henry and demand their residence in Howards End. Family and place are inextricably linked; without both, Forster's characters stumble. Thus, not only is location essential, but family is also required for these individuals to fully act on their identities which thus prove to have little meaning without the context of home and relations. Murakami's characters, on the other hand, may have families, but in A Wild Sheep Chase, these always figure offstage, if at all.²⁹ Some sense of self-created family does exist in postmodern fiction, but it is often by accident or for the sake of convenience rather than any deliberate, true, or lasting allegiance. Thus, Boku revisits the village of his youth and chooses to visit his old bartender, J, rather than his parents, but like he does with his wife and girlfriends, Boku moves in and out of the bartender's life randomly, without warning or anxiety. While J never seems surprised to see Boku, he also never expects a visit. Boku can do this because he does not define himself by his relations to others, and thus, the possibility of community becomes difficult in the

²⁹ In fact, a later Murakami novel, Kafka on the Shore, is so ambivalent about the role of family in identity that its oedipal overtones make family more to be feared than revered as its title character must run away from home to make any sense of life and his place in it.

postmodern era where connections are often fleeting and, at least for the slacker, designed to be free from obligation or expectation.

Let's Do the Time Warp Again³⁰

Without ties to community or place, the postmodern individual has a different relationship to the notion of time than did the modern individual because he does not have the constant reminders of what has gone before or the expectation to leave an impression for the future. The postmodern does not privilege tradition or history any more than it does the present or the future; all are simultaneous options in its guiltless, smorgasbord-style grazing, where one may choose bits and pieces without maintaining obligations or responsibility towards any. This actually becomes greater than just a lack of reverence for notions of time and historicity. Jameson co-opts Lacan's use of the term "schizophrenia" as a "breakdown in the signifying chain" to argue that when the past and future cannot be reconciled with the present based on an orderliness of the links of signification, then identity which requires situation among these time referents also ceases to be unified ("Postmodernism" 72). The present then becomes dominant, perhaps even all that the postmodern individual recognizes as significant, and thus formerly important relationships to history, and in this case, relationships to place (or their lack) no longer necessarily lead to anxiety. As the postmodern protagonist par excellence, the slacker, as exemplified here in Murakami, lives fully in this overwhelming present. Jameson suggests that the result can be akin to euphoria in its intensity, or as with Boku, can result in an epiphany.

³⁰ This heading comes from the song "The Time Warp" from the film The Rocky Horror Picture Show.

In his disconnection to inherited notions of space and time, the postmodern slacker freely moves among a variety of what in his 1992 book, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,³¹ Marc Augé terms “non-places” – disposable, use-oriented, interchangeable sites – which effectively efface both time and space and, with them, typical notions of identity, belonging, and community. Augé here complements Jameson’s schizophrenia of time with a discussion of the manner in which time and space together traditionally function: “Without the monumental illusion before the eyes of the living, history would be a mere abstraction. The social space bristles with monuments – imposing stone buildings, discreet mud shrines – which may not be directly functional but give every individual the justified feeling that, for the most part, they pre-existed him and will survive him” (60). Those who avoid or do not participate in the social space lack this recognition of monuments and thus lack connection to history. They are more able, then, to pillage any and all aspects of history for their own uses, much as the tale of the Boss does not excite any urgency from Boku for its historical and political significance. According to the whispered legends within A Wild Sheep Chase, the sheep Boku must search for has been “possessing” powerful men since possibly the time of Ghenghis Khan, and its recovery is necessary for the Boss to remain alive and continue his behind-the-scenes work in Japanese politics and communications. The destruction of the sheep, it is implied, would free one whole faction of Japanese politics (with, of course, possible ramifications for the larger world) from the Boss’s control, remove serious hindrances to the media, and prevent the unwitting possession of others by the sheep. Of course, the sheep’s goals and motivations in all of this are unspoken but

³¹ Translated by John Howe in 1995.

assumed to be nefarious.³² As an outsider to the context of the tale and one who does not recognize its monuments, Boku is only persuaded to take on the job for its personal implications and the possibility of adventure.³³ Thus, the denouement, where the reader recognizes the great service Boku has rendered the larger world by completing the destruction of the sheep, only holds importance to him insofar as it has changed him. His brief foray into the realm of activity does not betoken any further expectation of action on his part but again leaves him free to live his life without obligation or restriction.

Boku cannot be yoked by a society, its space, or its time which he does not participate in. While this may be perceived as unforgivable selfishness, the slacker would retort that with so many social, temporal, and spatial signifiers available to him thanks to an abundance of media which transcend time, space, and culture, it is inadvisable – if not impossible – to become too invested in any concrete formulation of those. An excess of constantly changing and constantly available physical, cultural, and informational material results, as Harvey quotes Charles Newman in “an unprecedented non-judgemental receptivity to Art, a tolerance which finally amounts to indifference” (62). I would argue that this attitude applies to more than just art; it is the primary mode in which the postmodern slacker operates, necessitated by his determined lack of connection, his passivity, and his openness to all ideas, possibilities, realities, and unrealities. Thus, indifference to place is no stranger to the slacker than indifference to art, career, or family.

³² The closest explanation comes from the Rat (as a ghost) who suggests that the sheep intended to usher in “A realm of total conceptual anarchy. A scheme in which all opposites would be reconciled into unity” (335), a unity that the postmodern era recognizes as an impossibility, a nightmare of totalitarianism.

³³ A literal translation of the novel’s title is An Adventure Surrounding Sheep. The English title is a gift from the translator, Alfred Birnbaum (Rubin 79).

Now Denial³⁴

Living in the constant present, Boku can readily and without reservation or ambivalence embrace a life of mobility. One indication of Boku's disconnection with time is the marked (and oft-remarked) lack of proper names for both characters and locations, until he reaches The Dolphin Hotel whose primary purpose in the novel is to serve as a repository for history, but which is one of the least real, most surreal settings of the book, suggesting the problematic nature of history for postmodernism. Names connect a person or a place to a specific history, allowing it to be traced backwards and forwards in time. A name is used to discuss its referent and is particularly useful when said referent is removed in either place or time, so that names are a significant tool in establishing historicity. Thus, a lack of a name makes it difficult to confidently communicate the meaning of a person or place; this assumption of stable meaning is exactly what postmodernism desires to call into question. When meaning and identity are fragmented, chaotic, and ever-changing, then names, with their suggestion of stability, no longer hold authority and can be divested with little significant loss. Each person in A Wild Sheep Chase is called by either a nickname or a descriptor, often one which designate his or her function as far as concerns Boku. Thus, he encounters the girl with the exceptional ears, the Boss, the Secretary, the Chauffeur, and the Sheep Professor. Such names are effective from a postmodern standpoint because they make no claims to capture a whole person and are readily shed and replaced; it is difficult to see the

³⁴ In a Generation X marginal note, this is defined as "To tell oneself that the only time worth living in is the past and that the only time that may ever be interesting again is the future" (Coupland 47). This is an attitude Coupland's characters have that slackers do not.

individuals bearing such monikers as anything but fragmented, their current emphasis but one of many possibilities. Boku's cat is the only entity given a name in the course of the novel, and this by the chauffeur for the purpose of convenience. But by the end, in a fever-induced hallucination, Boku hears the chauffeur ask him to remember the name of his cat. Boku responds, "Kipper," but is contradicted: "No, it's not Kipper . . . The name's already changed. Names change all the time. I bet you can't even remember your own name" (341), at which point the hallucination moves to the next vision, leaving this challenge unanswered, for the answer is unimportant. The point, rather, is to cease privileging limiters, such as names, and to live in the present moment, separate from the past and the future.

In addition to the issue of naming, Boku's fixation on the present is demonstrated by his willingness to give himself fully to the search for the sheep. Once this decision is made, he calmly disposes of his current life, abandoning his business partnership of six years over the telephone, depositing his cat with a relative stranger, and methodically shopping for underwear and a travel shaving kit (164, 170, 173). These particular items suggest that he is restarting his life from the present moment, leaving all of the trappings of the past behind, down to his most intimate personal articles. While preparing for the trip, he ponders without concern, "Maybe I'll never come back to Tokyo" (173). Even if he does return, he is aware that nothing will be the same, not his relationships, his job, his apartment, even himself. While loss is an important theme in the novel, it is approached with the attitude of its inevitability. Describing the disintegration of his marriage, Boku comments that "Some things are forgotten, some things disappear, some things die. But

all in all, this was hardly what you could call a tragedy” (26). After this musing, Boku promptly falls into an undisturbed sleep just as he does later after enumerating his losses (175) as quoted earlier. He cannot be overly concerned about such things for movement is an unquestioned aspect of the postmodern life. He expects to move from place to place, partner to partner, and self to self, and so never attaches himself to any one too deeply.

In contrast, while the characters in Howards End are forced into mobility, both in travel and in “moving house,” they attempt to imagine each place as a home, to adjust their identities to the places where they are, hoping that each will be “their” place. Place is important in the world of Howards End because it symbolizes a safe resting place from the uncertainty of the constantly moving world outside. Margaret, most notably upon her visit to Oniton for Evie Wilcox’s wedding, immediately begins to lay a foundation for what she thinks will be her eventual settling in this house and community. The narrator remarks that “on Margaret, Oniton was destined to make a lasting impression. She regarded it as her future home, and was anxious to start straight with the clergy, etc., and if possible, to see something of the local life” (190). When Boku travels to new places, he does not care about the “local life”;³⁵ he merely seeks out unremarkable eateries, watering holes, and movie theaters in which to pass time and take care of necessities. And even if he did feel that immersion in the local life were necessary for the reinforcement and adaptation of his identity, this possibility is rapidly going extinct as each place begins to resemble each other place as a result of consumerism, globalization,

³⁵ Jameson also recognizes the “consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality” (“Postmodernism” 58).

and what Jameson calls “late capitalism” with its “new depthlessness” and “culture of the image” (58) or as Guy Debord labels it, “the society of the spectacle.” This seconds Augé’s assertion that non-places become unavoidable in the postmodern or supermodern era.

All the Lonely People – Where Do They All Come From?

In loneliness there is a possibility of being in equilibrium with oneself rather than seeking equilibrium in things and people that have such a high velocity that they constantly slip away. – Svendsen³⁶

Without Wickham Place to hold the Schlegel family together, Margaret wanders to a couple different houses, never quite obtaining the satisfaction she expects. Meanwhile, Helen exiles herself to Germany when she is compromised and begins to set up surrogate family and home relationships, fully expecting to be there permanently. These new connections include renting a flat with an independent Italian woman who Helen says “is much the best person to see me through” (267). This pattern is so important to Howards End that the novel opens by presenting three letters from Helen written while visiting the Wilcoxes which demonstrate her hasty settling in to Howards End, its mores, expectations, and family life. She promptly finds herself “in love” with a recently arrived Wilcox, as if the place had exerted a pressure on her to find a way to truly belong. This sudden assimilation suggests an anxiety of identity which Helen tries to quell by association to a family with a historical connection to place. Her love seems to have more to do with the place than with the man. Margaret often elucidates her

³⁶ p. 145

philosophy on modern life of “Only connect” by extolling the virtues of connection to place and people: “either some very dear person or some very dear place seems necessary to relieve life’s daily grey, and to show that it is grey. If possible, one should have both” (133). Boku admits his mediocrity, his ordinariness, even his boredom, knowing that neither home nor family can truly bring him above them, while at the same time questioning the need to do this at all. If transcendence is possible, an adventure, involving travel and mystery, is more appropriate to the postmodern sensibilities for finding it; thus the premise of A Wild Sheep Chase and its existential musings are picture-perfect exemplars and representations (so far as this can be done) of the postmodern age.

When Murakami’s Boku travels to Hokkaido, he remains aloof from the places he visits, generally maintaining his same personal habits, keeping his nose in a book or a film, or casually having sex with his girlfriend, an activity he likes to catalogue in his detached manner as “intercourse” (202). While he finds it necessary to interact with the locals, he never attempts to form relationships beyond what is needed to acquire the knowledge or assistance he requires. The closest Boku comes to “settling down” in one place is his thorough cleaning of the Rat’s house, a place he knows he will not inhabit longer than a month. This cleaning is identified by Jay Rubin, one of Murakami’s English translators and critics, as an echo of Buddhist ritual purification (Rubin 87), which mirrors Boku’s own mental and physical purification, eventually leading to a greater understanding of himself and an openness to the appearance of the ghost of his dead friend, the Rat, in the form of the Sheep Man, who gives Boku his final instructions:

destroy the house. Without regret or nostalgia, Boku connects the explosives and detonates the house. The place was merely a location for Boku's personal revelation and not its instigator or validation.

All the Lonely People – Where Do They All Belong?

Augé argues that “In one form or another . . . some experience of non-place (indissociable from a more or less clear perception of the acceleration of history and the contraction of the planet) is today a component of all social existence” (119). Augé argues that “supermodernity” results in “non-places,” where identity is suspended and where interactions are primarily between the individual (as one of many non-connected, but for the purposes of the non-place, identical millions) and the “contract” for operation within the non-place rather than interactions between and among individuals. Thus, no social structures can operate within a non-place; each individual experiences the non-place on his or her own (101-103). Prime examples of this include all manner of transportation, including the routes, centers, and actual vehicles, whether a car on a highway, airports and airplanes, or even, I would argue, the transportation of information on the internet where individuals can interact or not with others as they choose. The internet has particularly become a place where outside social rules and structures hold little sway and identities are created and recreated at will. Increasingly, these non-places are the spaces of postmodernity. Murakami's Boku describes the postmodern attitude toward such places thus:

Boarding a long-distance train without any luggage gave me a feeling of exhilaration. It was as if while out taking a leisurely stroll, I was suddenly like a dive-bomber caught in a space-time warp. In which there is nothing: no dentist's appointments, no pending issues in desk drawers, no inextricably complicated human involvements, no favors demanded. I'd left that behind, temporarily. All I had with me were my tennis shoes with their misshapen rubber soles. They held fast to my feet like vague memories of another space-time. But that hardly mattered. Nothing that some canned beer and dried-out ham sandwiches couldn't put out of mind. (99-100)

Non-places aid the slacker in escaping responsibilities, even if, as Boku acknowledges, this cannot be done forever. On this train, he is beholden to no one, wearing what is his one reminder of the world he casually leaves behind. This luggage- and anxiety-free existence obliterates the modern world of Forster, where objects are valuable because they are the only constant in a shifting world. Boku is content to be without reminders of his point of origin or even contemplation about his destination (his childhood home town), and thus, he exists in the non-places rather than merely passing through them; he exists solely in the present without serious concern for the past or care for the future.

In a world of non-places, identity itself becomes fluid, based upon something other than community or place relations. Augé writes, "[A] person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. . . . The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (103).

Following Augé's construction, the slacker figures of the eighties and nineties are perhaps on the cusp of the turn from postmodernity to supermodernity: they are still reeling from "the collapse of an idea of progress" while experiencing the significantly overwhelming "excess" of supermodernity (30), where so much information, so much access to space, and the awareness of so many events simultaneously occurring leads to a

disorientation wherein individuals seek to ascribe meaning, but inevitably fail, thus essentially finding themselves floating on a sea of excess without destination or moorings, home, community, or identity. Slackers navigate this metaphorical understanding of non-place with almost shocking grace and aplomb for their identities were never predicated upon notions of stability. Home itself becomes problematic, shifting even further along the continuum from place to space – in the broadest sense, accounting for the space of memory and self-creation – for as Augé comments “[I]n the world of supermodernity people are always, and never, at home” (Augé 109).

Kill Your Nostalgia

It's only after you've lost everything . . . that you're free to do anything. – Palahniuk³⁷

Although the scene wherein Boku returns to his hometown may at first appear to contradict this, I believe that it actually provides further proof of this shift from modern to postmodern concepts of place and identity. Boku last returned home four years prior to fill out marriage paperwork and reminisces that “From that point on there was no hometown for me. Nowhere to return to. What a relief! No one to want me, no one to want anything from me” (100). The relationship quickly failed – Boku seems to have put no particular effort into it – and he is relieved to be again without responsibility or expectations. The traditional idea of home held no emotional significance, and its effacement relinquishes Boku from any obligation to limit his identity based on origins, leaving him free to construct both new ideas of home and identity when and how he

³⁷ p. 70

chooses. This passage also emphasizes the boredom and general sense of lack Boku feels in his life, a lack that, perhaps surprisingly, he has no desire to fill. Lack rather than presence forms the slacker identity. This lack is present in every category which is often claimed to form one's identity: place, nation, home, family, career, even race, age and gender are significantly downplayed. Boku often gives a laundry list of all the things he has lost without undue elaboration or sentiment, almost as if this enumeration were his current identity.

While back in his hometown, Boku does not see his family who are still there but stays in a hotel, his only connection to his former life and self a visit to his favorite bartender, J, whose bar has been moved three times. Boku does remark the changes in the bar and the infill of the oceanfront, prompting J to ask, "So, everything's different and you feel out of place?" Boku's response is indicative of the postmodern slacker view of the world, bemused indifference couched in absurdism or surrealism:

'Not really,' I said. 'It's just that the chaos has changed shape. The giraffe and the bear have traded hats, and the bear's switched scarves with the zebra'

'Same as ever,' J laughed.

'Times have changed,' I said. 'A lot of things have changed. But the bottom line is, that's fine. Everyone trades places. No complaints.' (103-104).

Boku may feel a twinge of nostalgia, but he is quick to recognize its futility. Because landmarks change and disappear so rapidly, it is implausible for identity to rest on place in the postmodern world. As the familiar becomes unfamiliar, constant adjustment is needed, and thus, the postmodern individual lives in a constant state of flux. Stability is a thing of the past, not to be expected and never to be trusted.

Perhaps slackers would care more for places if mid-century prosperity had not placed an inordinate value on misguided notions of progress and the new. The land reclaimed from the ocean has been covered with “Faceless blocks of apartments, the miserable foundations of an attempt to build a neighborhood. Asphalt roads threaded through the building complexes, here a parking lot, there a bus terminal. A gasoline station and a large park and a wonderful community center. Everything brand new, everything unnatural” (107). The slacker recognizes society’s missteps, the movement from organic community to antiseptic suburbia, the transition from places to non-places, but feels helpless to do anything. And so he doesn’t, for passivity is essential to the slacker ethos. It might make non-slackers feel good to call these young men lazy, but this inactivity is the result of a loss of idealism, an acknowledgment that individuals get mowed down as a result of the pursuit of corporate interests. This leaves Boku resigned and speechless: “But what was there to say? Already it was a whole new game played by new rules. No one could stop it now” (107). And so he keeps moving, traveling, never truly settling in any place, knowing that it will change or be destroyed by forces beyond his control. There then becomes no point in developing strong connections to places for the cognizant postmodern individual. Somewhat contradictorily, while the slacker may be cynical about the future of society, he is hopeful even romantic about the potential of the individual as long as he does not succumb to community expectations; thus, Boku’s personal revelation at the end of the book happens when he is alone in an isolated house. He cannot save the world, but he can become a stronger and more complex individual.

In “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson argues that modernist “concepts such as anxiety and alienation . . . are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern,” giving way to “the fragmentation of the subject” (63) which is what I believe allows the postmodern slacker to be content without strong connections to places or even notions of home, for he arrives late into postmodernism when depth has been replaced by surfaces and the mass-market consumer society has infiltrated most corners of the globe making all places familiar, covered in international brand names, celebrities, and cultural artifacts. Fragmentation, rather than destroying postmodern individuals, actually strengthens them by destroying impossible notions of wholeness and the necessity of belonging to one culture, community, place, or era; by embracing multiplicity and motion and the inevitable loneliness of personhood, alienation ceases to be meaningful, and anxiety is recognized as pointless. The slacker can recognize “himself” wherever he goes, and because home is merely an accumulation of ideas, he can recreate home in any location. While he may not base his identity on these items, he also does not require a stable place – something he has not known, after all – for identity formation or validation, and thus experiences no anxiety concerning place.

Without significant relations to time, place, or family, the postmodern slacker also remains unconnected to society and the larger world. The modernists foresaw this trend and lamented the alienation of the modern world, leading Forster to imbue Margaret with the philosophy, “Only connect.” This, of course, assumes that individual identity is whole and thus able to meaningfully relate to other self-contained worlds. Connection

was desired because it was seen to hold the key to the progress of both individuals and society. Postmodernism no longer maintains these foundational beliefs. As Harvey argues,

We can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated. . . . Modernism was very much about the pursuit of better futures . . . But postmodernism typically strips away that possibility by concentrating on the schizophrenic circumstances induced by fragmentation and all those instabilities (including those of language) that prevent us even picturing coherently, let alone devising strategies to produce, some radically different future. (53-54)

Thus, the postmodern slacker has actually given up trying to change the larger society or envision a better future, and instead, focuses on how to make the life he has here and now the life he wants to live, how to create the identity of his choosing, how to be comfortable in the fragmented nature of that identity, and then, how to re-imagine notions of home, family and work-life so that they do not compromise his “hard work” of passivity. Boku often ruminates on his mediocrity, but does not seem troubled by it, nor does he seek to “improve” himself. He merely wants to be allowed to live his modest life, unimpeded by societal expectations or communal demands. Thus, the ultimate transformation of his understanding of himself and his place in the world has no great implications for the larger society; he knows the world will not dramatically change on account of him, and so he does not try to go beyond himself. The slacker differs from his precursors in that he is not refusing to participate due to some fervent ideology or well-devised plan to subvert the systems, but merely due to an absence of conscious ideology.

Referencing a magazine interview with Murakami, Giorgio Amitrano, a major Italian critic of Japanese fiction, reports, “the fictional space of his novels always

contains two different worlds . . . this world here and the world out there, ‘our’ world and the ‘other’ world” (25). Note that neither world is designated as real or unreal but that both worlds seem to have different theoretical locations and connections. While A Wild Sheep Chase remains far more in ‘our’ world than does the rather evenly bifurcated Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World³⁸ or many of Murakami’s short stories, its narrative would not exist without the fantastic elements. In fact, the protagonist who lives firmly in the ‘real’ world differs from the otherworldly characters in that they are the ones who act, who direct, who own and bestow knowledge while he is acted upon, follows direction, and receives knowledge, only finally stepping out of his passivity when all the others have disappeared. Boku would have no story, no personal revelation without his connection to “the world out there” which brooks no easy explanations or simple causal relationships.

The lack of causality frustrates many readers of Murakami who find that while many elaborate relationships may be indicated, no solid thread guides them through this labyrinth. As the Murakami critic Matthew Strecher has noted, “By the end . . . all is explained, but nothing is solved” (42). In postmodernism, chaos rather than the relationship between cause and effect is understood to explain the world. Boku’s girlfriend of the amazing ears suggests that this is the more palatable theory because it allows room for the unexplainable: “I know someone who sneezed every time he saw Farrah Fawcett’s nose. There’s a big psychological element to sneezing, you know. Once cause and effect link up, there’s no escape” (37). Psychology may be able to

³⁸ The next novel Murakami wrote which was published in Japan in 1985 and in English translation in 1991.

explain many things, but this total kind of knowledge may end up feeling like – or actually being – a trap, luring the unsuspecting into a conceptual double blind where they cannot imagine – and therefore cannot realize any other possibilities. Cause and effect never quite link up in this novel because there is so little caused, and thus, escaping causality enables an escape from other seeming inevitabilities. Chaos may not seem like a preferable option, but postmodernism has trouble putting faith in anything less all-encompassing.

In discussing heterotopias and postmodern fiction, Harvey suggests that the nature of the narrative has changed: “Characters no longer contemplate how they can unravel or unmask a central mystery, but are forced to ask, ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of myself is to do it?’ instead” (48), a nearly pitch-perfect description of Murakami’s A Wild Sheep Chase, where the narrator even seems ambivalent about whether or not the mystery is important at all. Boku’s extreme passivity is thus as much about his preference to be uninvolved in the world as it is about his general perceived loss and his identity in the face of annihilation. Harvey further wonders that “It seems impossible that these two worlds should exist in the same space, and the central character moves between them, unsure which is the true reality, until the two worlds collide in a terrible denouement” (48), another apt summary of Murakami’s novel. The world Boku has known and accepted as real is abruptly disrupted by the arrival of the Boss’s Secretary who presents him with a seemingly impossible task: find one specific sheep in all of Japan – which may or may not exist – within one month or be essentially erased. Even with such an ultimatum before him, Boku requires the prodding of his girlfriend of

the beautiful ears and psychic powers to agree to the search. This journey takes him out of his comfortable Tokyo and into the wilds of Hokkaido and finally back again. His encounters with the Sheep Man (at one point clearly the ghost of his friend, the Rat) cement the unreal qualities of this other world, a world which, while it appears to exist on the map (and even has a long history written on its settlement) and to commune with the outside world, is disconnected both literally and figuratively.

This disconnection is emphasized by the climactic scene where Boku is talking and drinking whiskey with the Sheep Man and then looks into a mirror which reflects the room and himself but not the Sheep Man. In Foucault's construction, a mirror is that unique place which is both utopia and heterotopia, a real unreal place which exerts a special power to see, "to begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am" (24). Thus, it is in the space of the mirror that Boku finally realizes the whole point of this sheep adventure: to look deeply at himself, to recognize the fact that individuals are each, ultimately, alone, and to then meaningfully construct his life based on this knowledge. Foucault further writes that the mirror "makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (24), making the mirror both an important literal location and symbolic representation of postmodern experience, willing to allow the real and the unreal to coexist.

Furniture and Mirrors

When Margaret and Helen see Howards End with the furniture from Wickham Place unpacked and arranged, they know they have arrived home. They have found a safe haven from the tumultuous motion of the modern world, a place where family and home can work in tandem to validate – even create – their identities. As long as they have Howards End, it is suggested, they will have a place in England, and thus, in the world. Although Forster eerily shows the “creeping” “rust” of the suburbs (308), Howards End has already survived its conversion from working farm to country home, and thus it is possible that it can maintain its island status for a little while longer. Most importantly, Margaret and Helen Schlegel, as modern individuals are not comfortable without a tangible relation to a history in the form of both family and location. While Forster presents history as inexorably marching, possibly to doom, history is still necessary to make sense of the present.

When Murakami's Boku sees the Sheep Man in the room but only his own image in the mirror, all occupying the same real unreal heterotopia, he finally becomes active in creating his own meaning. That this creation involves the destruction of the place where it was realized emphasizes the postmodern inability – even undesirability – of relying on place to determine meaning. Thus, Boku's revelation was a result of his attitude and attention to self, being by himself in a dramatically impermanent location, rather than a product of connection to history, place, or other people.

CHAPTER THREE:

TRADITION IS IMMATERIAL – TIME FROM WOOLF TO CHATTERJEE

Tradition and Hierarchy

For the global era slacker, identity is no longer firmly grounded in home, in family or community, components which depended on history, longevity, notions of origins, and culture as a natural product of place. In a similar way, these individuals can also no longer look to authority – also a product of history – for identity construction. Authority, here, is represented by two concepts, both grounded in an understanding of the world which privileges time as an organizing and generating principle and which venerates the powers imbued in it by history, that “ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 22): tradition and hierarchy.

Tradition presents itself to the individual as received wisdom, as the canon of great works, the accumulation of practices, ideals, and philosophies which have been built sequentially ever-greater over time by never destroying their bases. Tradition supports itself tautologically by validating its mandates with statements which call attention to the article’s age or position as the status quo, such as, “Because that’s just the way we do things,” or “It’s always been (or been done) that way,” and perhaps more menacingly, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” emanating a distrust of questioning, experimenting, and exploring with the resulting possibility of discovering imperfections. As Michel Foucault so coyly wrote, “The nineteenth century found its essential

mythological resources in the second principle of thermodynamics,” (“Of Other Spaces” 22) the principle which proposes that the passage of time leads only to decay, that entropy is inevitable, and which therefore, applied to history, culture, and cultural artifacts suggests that the best has already occurred, has already been thought, uttered, written, or painted. Thus the individual modern artist has little hope that his contributions will be found valuable and must live with the uselessness of aspiration; Harold Bloom’s anxiety of belatedness is the end result.

Anxiety, as the pervasive mood of modernity, is dethroned by the late postmodern simultaneity which discards time as the primary ontological principle. The rejection of time erases the historical connections to place, nation, and community which previously had been vital to both individual and community identities which were then used to make classifications which led to the possibility of anxiety and discrimination. Arjun Appadurai suggests that because modernity is now “at large,” the idea of nation-states as identity arbiters is obsolete and that “the materials for a post-national imaginary must be around us already” (21); I would suggest that the a-authoritarian mode of the slacker, neither anti- nor pro-authority but rejecting the validity of hierarchical ideas from their very foundations, is one of these ingredients which makes the global (not necessarily homogenous but also not restricting) adjective possible. As place-based identities are necessarily grounded in time relativities, the obsolescence of them calls for other time-based notions to be challenged. As a stronghold which was well-defended for centuries, the supremacy of time with its deference for longevity and even the idea of timelessness was summarily rejected by the late postmodern without further trial. While various

conservative cultural critics were lamenting its demise and rallying in its defense, the slacker figure did not find their arguments valid; rather, he holds all texts, actions, traditions, and individuals to the same test of personal use and relevance in the moment. Only in this does he not rest; even what might have worked for him in the past is not guaranteed to in the present or future, and he is always willing to reexamine previous conceptions and interpretations.

Many nineteenth century attitudes still infused the Modernist period, most importantly, a reverence for the past. Tradition, as authority, requires submission; as a component of identity construction, it asks for conformity to societal norms, to the acceptance of a world centered on the economic imperatives of education, career, and stability. In order for tradition to be maintained, individuals must accept the notion of time as a steady progression which necessitates a devotion to career by starting at the bottom and slowly moving up. The rejection of time as an organizing principle led Foucault to, rather, crown space in its stead due to the fact that spatial conceptualizations allow for the necessarily definitive “simultaneity” and “juxtaposition” of postmodern life which is “less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (“Of Other Spaces” 22). The global era of the eighties and nineties, with its proliferation of media and technology, when the unavoidable, constant and constantly changing stream of images and information began to move at MTV-speed, hastened the broad acceptance of this new view of time. Lives were summarized by clusters, by webs, by six degrees of separation from Kevin Bacon rather than by an orderly litany of milestones and accomplishments

Hierarchy, as the ruling of one thing, idea, or person over another based on rank, is, of course, itself inseparable from the tradition which gives it its shape. Authority based on hierarchy then finds its everyday, twentieth-century embodiment in the governmental, parental, and supervisory figures who are primarily in their higher-ranked positions due to time and who tend to base their advice and answers on tradition. Hierarchical constructions are the opposite of the network of relations between ideas and people which define the flattened way of being in postmodernism. The lack of ranked order destroys notions of race and nation, for instead of categorization, all things evolve in tandem, feeding off all others and never resting in essential notions of identity. Without stable definitions, hierarchical ordering cannot work and is, therefore, rejected in all its manifestations.

In postmodern thought, time no longer confers authority, but because enough vestiges of modernism remained viable during the formative years of the first wave of postmodernism, deviation from the values of tradition and hierarchy earned the label rebellion. As this rebellion became more mainstream and visible (assisted by the Beats and a spate of films such as Rebel Without a Cause and The Wild One), a new generation grew up seeing this attitude as just another option rather than as a strong statement. Slackers arrive late enough in the postmodern period to have experienced no major cultural clashes, and thus they have always been comfortable giving equal credence to both old and new. In Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam suggests that Generation X is primarily “inwardly focused” because they have not experienced any major community- or generation-defining events; they have an “absence of collective success stories” to

unify them (259). The depthlessness and focus on surfaces in the postmodern renders Beats, hippies, even punks no longer rebels with revolutionary ideologies but merely colorful fashion statements. As Jameson reports, in the postmodern period, “depth is replaced by surface” (“Postmodernism” 62), and the slacker generation applies this approach to the world even to history. Rejecting the models of their predecessors is not something they feel to be wrong or to carry any moral reprobation, and while they may appear to be disrespectful or rebellious, these do not carry the same meanings as they did for the immediately previous generation. Everything – even nonparticipation – is an option because every option is open to them; “the norm itself is eclipsed” (Jameson “Postmodernism” 65). And while there is nothing for the slacker wrong about rebellion or rejection, there is also nothing necessarily right about them, and so he does not denounce anything just for the sake of being contrary. Rather, without a reverence for society or tradition, nothing is taboo, and thus, there is nothing to rebel against.

In Freud’s theory, in order to survive in society and to be a contributing member, the individual ego must sublimate its id in service of the superego (civilization or society). But this is not an easy or simple action, and thus, as Freud writes,

It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts. . . . It is not easy to understand how it can become possible to deprive an instinct of satisfaction. Nor is doing so without danger. If the loss is not compensated for economically, one can be certain that serious disorders will ensue. (51-52)

Freud did see the potential complications for such an organization of individuals in society, but he seemed unwilling to believe that there would not be some way to “compensate” for the imbalance as if it were a set of financial reckonings. And perhaps

there had not until the slacker appeared, a figure who had known relative prosperity and freedom but did not find these in themselves to be satisfying and, therefore, for whom nothing could compensate for the lack of unrestricted attention to the id. The slacker figure gives up on the ego and the superego, uninterested in their strivings and contestations; he sees nothing of value in the endless strife and anxiety they produce which is intended to produce compliant, self-sacrificing members of society rather than responding to the needs of the living individual. Therefore, the post-Freudian slacker understanding of the relationship between the individual and society privileges the individual who then, necessarily, no longer has strong ties to society and who will not allow himself to be bought for a semblance of stability, belonging, or prosperity.

Deconstruction exposed the inherent instability of a world based on binaries, and the slacker generation no longer defines its world this way, as a tug-of-war between the powerful and the powerless, between black and white, good and bad; they have always believed there were more than two choices in every situation. So while their parents saw the opposition of tradition and rebellion and felt the need to choose one – to be Beat or Square, to be yuppie or white trash – the slacker sees this kind of battling as pointless wrangling over a false and troubling division of *us* versus *them*. The primary duality for the slacker is what works for him as an individual and what does not work for him, which he acknowledges may vary drastically from person to person and from moment to moment. Ironically, perhaps the ultimate respect for the past is demonstrated not by emulating it but by learning from its mistakes. Although slackers may not have a concrete alternative plan, they have taken the first step in forming one by rejecting the

nonviable, ineffective choices which tradition would have expected them to adopt even if they later adapted them. For, of course, to form any new system or plan is to recreate a hierarchy.

Pop Go the Poets

While Virginia Woolf eschewed much that was traditional in her style, her characters – as true moderns – could not escape the censure of tradition, the weight of history, in their responses to modernity and in their creation and valuation of their identities. Thus, while Mr. Ramsay seeks to contribute new thoughts to the discipline of philosophy, his contributions must (for him) remain very much within the discipline and be grounded in his respected predecessors, who, however much he might disagree or find fault with them, he cannot reject outright. To give value and meaning to his work and, as a result, to his personal identity, Mr. Ramsay still needs to know that his work is adding to theirs; they are the giants on whose shoulders he proudly stands. T. S. Eliot perfectly captured this modernist attitude in his seminal essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which insists upon the value of respect for tradition even by new, innovative artists, thus rejecting the notion of original or independent genius. It is this embrace of the freedom of non-dependence that the slacker takes as his foundational creed. The immense weight and pressure of the “historical sense” Eliot lauds which “compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” can be seen in

Woolf's pain on the page and is made irrelevant – even undesirable – for the postmodern author, interestingly enough, by the simultaneity Eliot begins to recognize by the end of this passage (499). The simultaneity of postmodern life confounds the “conformity,” “order,” and responsibility to the past which Eliot promoted. Protagonists of slacker literature do not aim for the esteem of posterity; their authors only hope to present their generation's particular zeitgeist. For the slacker, the “relation to the dead poets” (Eliot 499) is less one of genealogy than it was for Eliot, and if referenced, places the postmodern author and/or his slacker creation on a level plane with the precursor figures, much as Chatterjee does with Marcus Aurelius. The adoption of this new approach towards tradition can be seen when Agastya emanates relief when he is finally able to voice his theory that Marcus Aurelius was a fraud: “He smiled at the page, and thought, He lied, but he lied so well, this sad Roman who had also looked for happiness in living more than one life, and had failed, but with such grace” (322).

Lhamon's notion of congeniality is a deliberate play between high and low culture which he sees as a powerful element of the cultural change happening in the fifties; this requires that one still recognizes these distinctions and places some value on them. While this idea may still seem to be in play for the latter part of the twentieth century, it has actually become obsolete as the slacker's smorgasbord-style grazing happens precisely because he does not discriminate between the classic and the popular, the high and the low. He is just as likely to read only canonical texts (but perhaps from an irreverent, questioning framework and for highly personal purposes and motivations) as he is to read a selection of pop-cultural productions with abject seriousness or to read

what others might consider a mix of high and low texts without irony or subversion or even recognition of juxtaposition. Agastya approaches Marcus Aurelius's Meditations the same way he does Bollywood film pop songs – with a skeptic's eye for falsity or pomposity. The austerity often accorded to Marcus Aurelius does not intimidate him, nor does he attempt to validate himself through or against the Meditations; rather, they are merely one tool in his cultural arsenal which he uses like a mirror to see himself more clearly. He has no reservations in treating Marcus Aurelius as an equal, something Ginsberg cannot quite bring himself to do with Whitman.³⁹

Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse is in many ways a non-story, where extreme interiority creates a narrative world contemplative of inaction. In other words, it is quite possible that the effectiveness of Woolf's mental exploration required a lack of action, a forced passivity in order to more fully demonstrate the fullness of lack. Although Mrs. Dalloway may seem to negate this statement, I argue that To the Lighthouse is remarkable for its dedication to inaction and its ability to address all manner of modern familial, economic, social, academic, and artistic tensions without resort to conventional plot or mere expository narration. In a similar fashion, Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August: An Indian Story also depends upon interiority to comically critique both an international and a specifically Indian postmodern age while emphasizing the absence of action or plot and celebrating the role of boredom and passivity in the narrator's developing understanding of the world and his place in it. As was seen in Murakami, lack thus creates and validates Agastya as a postmodern slacker, a role it seems he and those of his generation cannot avoid, regardless of their initial attempts to forge a place in

³⁹ See "A Supermarket in California."

the traditional world of work. The similarities between this British modernist novel and the Indian postmodern one do not end with interiority and passivity. They also share a sharp attention to detail, unexpected comic turns in serious situations, and unabashed cynicism. Neither should this connection be seen as equal and uncomplicated, for the differences within these (and other) similarities will prove essential in examining the important transition between the modern and the postmodern ways of being and understanding.

He Says, She Says – Tradition Says, Slackers Say

Tradition says, “Get a job, have a career”; this prescription clearly displays modernism’s need for order, for goals, and its need for steady progressive movement. This does not allow room for wanderings or explorations. Mrs. Ramsay, even though she does not hold outside employment, finds her value in her self-appointed role as a caretaker, an orchestrator, in her jobs as wife, mother, hostess, friend, and volunteer social worker. While in dark moments, she may despair of the utility of her work, the decay of the house and family in her absence reinforces the perceived necessity of her work by Woolf. Mr. Ramsay, with his academic career, more openly expresses the anxiety presented by defining oneself by one’s career and the subsequent need for joining the throngs of history based on accomplishments. This causes him to falsely (but humorously) view himself in a heroic mode, much in the same vein as the literature he reads: Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Sir Walter Scott. He muses, “It is permissible even for

a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter” (39); two pages later he cries that he is a failure, wanting “to be assured of his genius” (41).

The slacker removes these struggles and anxieties by renouncing the necessity of career, particularly as a component of identity. Rather, the slacker commandment is “Work when you need to; life is unpredictable. Goals lead to disappointment; therefore, get rid of them altogether.” Although others in Agastya’s world also privilege leisure over work, they do so for very different reasons than his, as a demonstration of status rather than as part of the meandering pursuit of happiness which Agastya ascribes to his own preference not to do (while, of course, always appearing to in the presence of his superiors). The narrator comments, “The Collectors and their wives believed vehemently in the indignity of labour (so did most of Madna believe that one’s social standing was in inverse proportion to the amount of one’s own work that one did oneself),” (68) while Agastya compiles lists of excuses to reasonably beg off work (59). On the other hand, Agastya’s relative immunity in his inactivity is clearly a result of his status as an unmarried, “megalopolitan,” Western-educated, son of a governor, upper-middle-class IAS officer – a string of circumstances he often ruminates upon, though never to any deep revelations or understandings of himself, India, the world, or his place or purpose in them.

Tradition says, “Get married; have a family,” thus clearly defining an individual’s relationships and responsibilities to others. Marriage becomes the symbol of maturity and adulthood, signaling that one is now a full member of society. To the Lighthouse is largely an exploration of the Ramsay marriage and features Mrs. Ramsay’s preoccupation

with marrying off her friends (Paul and Minta Rayley; William Bankes and Lily Briscoe) as a way of perpetuating the world she knows. Agastya assumes he may eventually marry but knows he is not mature enough at this point in his life; the prospect is frighteningly fatal: “In his state of mind marriage was awfully remote—like death in a road accident, it was something that happened to other people” (187). Boku’s marriage fails due to his lack of commitment to the work necessary to maintain personal relationships, but this failure is greeted not with shock or disappointment but with an acknowledgment and acceptance of its inevitability (Murakami 26).

In To the Lighthouse, marriage and relationships are presented as another means of creating order and unity. Lily’s artistic and personal goal illustrates this: “It was not knowledge but unity that she desired [. . .] intimacy itself, which is knowledge” (54), a reiteration of Forster’s mantra to “Only connect.” This goal also suggests a belief in essential selves which are unique and can be known, defined, and then connected, something which is no longer assumed in the slacker philosophy. As Tyler Durden of Fight Club chants, “You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake” (134). The shifting, fragmented identity cannot be grounded in anything, place or time, and is continually re-formed, re-understood, and re-created in the moment; it is not a graspable, eternal thing; it cannot be found because it is always only as performed; it is not definable or limitable. Because identities are always changing and contextual in the global era, the construct of identity is almost rendered completely invalid. This then results in a greater focus on the external in contrast with the High Modernist reverence for the interior as evidenced by Woolf’s extensive exploration of her characters’ internal lives at the expense of external

details such as plot and description. Slacker novels have also rejected plot-driven narrative but have instead adapted the episodic structure of the picaresque which still privileges exterior knowledge.

Tradition says, “Join a group; have a community.” The group is valued over the individual, and thus, the individual has little value without group membership. Community is supposed to provide support and a sense of belonging, but the slacker recognizes that these benefits rarely occur because people are so self-centered that they are more focused on what they are or should be getting from the community than on what they can and should be contributing. People perpetually disappoint; therefore, groups lead only to pain, misery, and work. Rather, the slacker takes in reality and declares that the self is the self’s responsibility – only. Agastya’s coworker Mohan is accused – whether the accusations are true or false the reader is never apprised because the importance of this incident is the reaction of the group – of an inappropriate sexual encounter with his female cook which results in his mutilation (arms chopped off), and the gossipy response of the group is not to embrace and support the wronged member but to assume his guilt and sow mistrust among the other members. This incident sours Agastya on the relationships he had superficially begun to form, cementing his decision to leave his work and community in Madna.

Tradition says, “Get a house; have a stable base.” The slacker rather believes that stability leads to complacency which is the worst kind of boredom. Boredom can be constructive and valuable when it provokes thought. Although the postmodern world attempts to banish all possibility of boredom through relentless bombardment of

entertainment, images, and information, it gives nothing substantial in return. Rather, slackers develop new approaches to boredom which more fully allow it to develop its potential, for as Svendsen suggests:

Boredom pulls things out of their usual contexts. It can open ways up for a new configuration of things, and therefore also for a new meaning, by virtue of the fact that it has already deprived things of meaning. Boredom, because of its negativity, contains the possibility of a positive turnaround. As I've mentioned before, boredom gives you a perspective on your own existence, where you realize your own insignificance in the greater context. (142)

This generation of Indian citizens was raised to become hard-working upstanding members of the community, but they can't understand why they should, partly because they are living in increasingly mobile times where everyone feels dislocated but are not quite sure why or how to change it, and partly because they have no solid connection to their communities or belief in people coming together to improve something. Their disillusionment causes them to merely look to opt out and let someone else deal with it. Capitalism and bureaucracy expect people to become stand-alone, interchangeable units; too deep of a connection to place or family would hinder their ease of mobility.

A Rose by Any Other Name

The choice of Marcus Aurelius for one of Agastya's only reading selections is important in that it both asks the reader to draw comparisons between the two (and perhaps also with Chatterjee, himself, as a real-life beleaguered public servant) while succinctly epitomizing Agastya's internal and external struggles, including the contradiction between the education of his past and his current unfulfilling situation of mindless work and the ultimate rejection of both. On a biographical level, Marcus

Aurelius, like Agastya, was given many names, often corresponding to his character, values, and accomplishments, most notably for this study, Verissimus, a variant on one of his birth names, Verus, which meant “most true and truthful,” for Chatterjee’s novel, is, if anything, unflinchingly true, true both to the nature of his protagonist, and true, in the sense of not romanticizing or glossing over unpleasantness. Some reviewers have credited Chatterjee with showing the true India, not one dressed up in quaint costumes and customs, but a lovingly unvarnished, warts-and-all appreciation for the chaotic multiplicity of modern India free of Bollywood melodrama and the “high” literary lyric magical realism the West devours from writers such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. This devotion to realism renders Agastya, as a slacker, particularly needful of critical attention. Agastya’s schoolboy nickname, English, is the result of his youthful Anglophilia and mixed parentage. As a new civil servant in Madna, he finds the acronym of the agency, IAS, regularly used as a substitute for or addition to his name, sarcastically – for both Agastya and the reader – linking him to the job he feels no commitment to⁴⁰.

As a Roman, Marcus Aurelius writes his *Meditations* in Greek, aligning his writing with the recognized language and culture of philosophy and rhetoric while pointedly dismissing his vernacular as worthy of such serious thought. Marcus Aurelius’s choice was based on elitism, but similar language choices in English, August are for the sake of veracity and openly acknowledge the global nature of the world the protagonist finds himself in. Not only does Chatterjee write English, August in English, the language of the bureaucracy, of the colonizer, of the education system which prepares those destined for upper-middle class success in India and abroad, but Agastya himself is

⁴⁰ Agastya Sen is also variously known as August, Mother Tongue, Ogu, Sen, and the governor’s son.

more comfortable using English than learning any of the local languages he encounters in his stint with the civil service. This separates him from the masses of Madna and the IAS, from his superiors and inferiors (in the hierarchy of his employ which he generally holds in contempt), making his interior meditations (and imitative, though not devoted or particularly insightful or thoughtful, journal-keeping: “From today no masturbation. Test your will, you bastard” [35]) no longer Indian, but global. The choice of English-language composition does not go unremarked; on the first page, as the first of many such intimations, Agastya’s friend Dhruvo comments,

“I’ve a feeling, August, you’re going to get hazaar fucked in Madna.” [...] “Amazing mix, the English we speak. Hazaar fucked. Urdu and American,” Agastya laughed, “a thousand fucked, really fucked. I’m sure nowhere else could languages be mixed *and* spoken with such ease.” (5)

Later, Sathe, the cartoonist, also known as the joker of Madna, whom Agastya befriends, states, “I presume you know at least three Indian languages, English, Hindi and Bengali, yet you find it so difficult to communicate here. And three languages, you could be master of Europe” (57). English is not foreign and is no longer used for the vague “importance” and “confidence” factors Agastya’s more traditional supervisor recommends (70). Agastya uses it as a matter of course, as a non-affiliated citizen of the world who uses whatever serves him best in the given situation without guilt or pride. Agastya often observes the anachronistic use of languages, as when he discovers sleeping pill packaging quoting Macbeth or the overabundance of Gandhi quotes and statues by groups and individuals who are in knowing violation of Gandhi’s principles, both situations which are devoid of any true understanding of what either work initially meant by those who have appropriated them. Agastya, well-educated man that he is, reads both

sides and finds these otherwise miscommunicative events' existence and repetition to be merely amusing.

In the late postmodern, all previously-drawn boundaries are crossable because they are no longer valid, and thus, Marcus Aurelius is read lightly while erotic thumris are dissected with erudition. He easily connects Peyton Place and Waiting for Godot in one paragraph, which does not amuse his uncle but which seems perfectly natural to Agastya (37-38). The European sense of tradition can no longer hold when a cultured person can unashamedly declare that he has packed forty-two cassettes, ranging from European classical (Chopin and Vivaldi), to American pop, Indian traditional (Tagore), and Indian popular, and only three books: Marcus Aurelius, the Bagavad Gita, and a nameless Urdu novel which he never opens. That the slacker is not synonymous with his generation and thus does not fit into essentializing categories is nicely highlighted by Sathé upon hearing that Agastya has some appreciation for traditional Indian music: “You’re interested in music, beyond the noise of Western rock? I’m surprised, I thought you’d be part of our Cola generation” (56).

Agastya sums up the slacker mentality in the closest speech in the book to approach a manifesto:

I don't want challenges or responsibility or anything, all I want is to be happy— . . . He wanted to say, look, I don't want heaven, or any of the other ephemerals, the power or the glory, I just want this, this moment, this sunlight, the car in the garage, that music system in my room. These gross material things, I could make these last for ever. . . . I am not ambitious for ecstasy, you will ask me to think of the future, but the decade to come pales before this second, the span of my life is less important than its quality. I want to sit here in the mild sun and try and not think, try and escape the iniquity of the restlessness of my mind. Do you understand. Doesn't anyone understand the absence of ambition, or the simplicity of it. (166-67)

Chatterjee's character has a delightful irreverence coupled with the charming feeling of a lost youth who knows that the path he currently treads is not tenable for him but does not know yet what to do in its stead. Thus, his rejection of authority, his glorying in passivity, and his attempts to rethink and rewrite classic philosophical and religious texts demonstrate the quandary of a generation who have an idea of how to negotiate the postmodern world – free of connections, responsibility, and accountability – but do not quite have the confidence to immediately enact this new approach. Agastya's critiques of his superiors in the civil service and his family elders – and even of his contemporaries – demonstrate that he understands that old ways do not have the necessary flexibility; that he essentially “falls into” his life of passivity, suggests that this is almost an inevitability, that one who is born into a new era somehow is better equipped to find the appropriate ways of dealing with the prevailing conditions.

CONCLUSION

YOU MEAN THERE'S MORE?

This project began with the – then – shocking discovery of Boku and Agastya, noting their exceedingly non-leading-man qualities and recognizing their similarities to each other but also to the Western character known as the slacker. I began to investigate boredom but then realized that – not being an isolated phenomenon – there might be some other common factors which precluded both the boredom itself and the characters' casual acceptance of it. This led me to look at history, economics, sociology, gender, and class which subsequently helped me to “define” the slacker – or at least to theorize him on a more general level. As a result, this project found some useful limiters, but I stress that I do not want to suggest that slackers (or slacker tendencies, cultures, demographics) are themselves necessarily limited. Because of the chronology of the appearance of these texts, I felt that perhaps Boku and Agastya were at the forefront of the emergence of the slacker as a pop-cultural figure, but I do not want to mummify this character who is still evolving and adapting.

Unfortunately, this work could not adequately cover what I found to be the many variations and later permutations. Rather, I prefer to see this as the beginning of a more careful study of a much-maligned, stereotyped, and, as a result, often misunderstood and misinterpreted trend. Just as anthropologists must attempt to set aside both personal and cultural biases in order to (more) ethically and meaningfully study another culture, so too should cultural studies practitioners, theorists, and commentators be open-minded,

respectful, and balanced in their analysis. This is what I have tried to do, and these are the attitudes with which I believe this subject must be approached if anything of value is to be gained from its study.

Generation X has transcended the “imagined communities” of nation-states and become a global phenomenon because it is the result of a late postmodern understanding of the world, one whose altered conceptualizations and appreciations of time and space have allowed it to approach life and identity construction in novel ways. This term from the title of Benedict Anderson’s seminal work is particularly apt because he argues that communities, particularly nation-states gain their appearance of cohesion through the imaginative work prompted by a shared language, particularly that which is written, published, and disseminated. The written slacker texts can of course be seen to create an imagined community of slackers which, as dramatically shown by the film version of High Fidelity – the film transposes a novel written by an Englishman and set in London into a pitch-perfect American story set in Chicago with great ease – is not bound by political boundaries. But, due to the slacker’s distrust of community, this never quite happens. Any sense of slacker community is merely imagined and does not translate into even the semblance of order or unity.

By denying power to these concepts, the slacker, in particular, has rejected received paradigms, has flaunted its “incredulity towards metanarratives,” in Lyotard’s phrase; while Lyotard does not seem to see this as terribly problematic, I do feel that this leaves a void which, in the absence of action or any new organizing principle, allows the baser elements of society to construct an ever more superficial, more meaningless

“spectacle” to dominate cultural production. So rather than heralding a broadly acceptable new approach to the world, the slacker has essentially allowed the reins of power to be handled by the same media and advertising elements he rejected. The slacker does show the possibilities of not plugging in for the individual, but the results are incompatible with a world which claims to value the individual but which instead gleefully pounds in the nail which protrudes.

I realize that this has taken a more negative tone than the rest of this project, but, as an honest conclusion and retrospective look at this work, I cannot deny the problems presented by the slacker figure. I do still believe that he has been fundamental in the creation of the present, but I doubt this is how he would have hoped or imagined it to be. Inaction and passivity do allow necessary room for reflection, but in order for the slacker figure to move beyond reflection, he may need to shed some of his slacker garb and put his realizations into action. This kind of process can work and is perhaps the only way to effect change which transcends the individual. If the slacker could attempt to be a part of a larger community, of course a redefined notion of community, one as fluid as the slacker’s own identity, then I feel that his contributions would be even more significant. Alternatively, the slacker has perhaps embodied Keat’s Negative Capability better than any others, an approach to postmodern life which seems both necessary and extremely challenging. The slacker, thus, provides a model for existing in uncertainties, an example of the calm equilibrium so sought-after but rarely achieved.

Here, too, I must address the many interesting points which did not find a place or a time in the main argument or body of the paper and which are also ripe for

investigation. One is that, because I found the slacker to be an exemplary representative of the postmodern, I felt that demonstrating the modern to postmodern shift could help “place” the slacker texts in relation to the larger body of literature and history (immediately betraying my own lack of slacker credibility). Another aspect of this would be a closer comparative study of the slacker generation with similar post-conflict generations such as that in Russia which Turgenev addressed in Fathers and Sons, the Lost Generation of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, and more closely, the Beats and other countercultural movements. The focus on the masculine should not be ignored in all of these. A slacker-style response to the countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies can be seen in The Freedom Manifesto, Tom Hodgkinson’s vision of small-living communities where internal community focus replaces problematic overdependence on larger conglomerates, making each member visible and valuable, preventing the possibility of getting lost and disillusioned in the crowd with a philosophy which privileges simple yet quality living (comfort, thought, freedom) over the showy accumulation of quantity.

Obviously, I did not spend much time with Western slackers, and in a way I believe this step will need to be taken to truly “map the plane” of global slacker literature as David Damrosch argues is necessary in any study of world literature (300). This project would have many texts to draw from – Coupland’s Generation X being seminal – and would eventually need to take account of and incorporate the various subgenres and other cultural productions including music, television, and fashion.

Another possibility for study is the relationship of the lovable loser to the slacker, from The 40-Year-Old Virgin to Tim from The Office (BBC) to the Broadway musical Avenue Q and bands such as The Aquabats and Wheatus to so many of Chuck Palahniuk's characters, most memorably the narrator of Fight Club. Other texts which immediately come to mind which belong in any more comprehensive study are Arthur Nersesian's The Fuck-Up and Nick Hornby's lovably clueless protagonists. The slacker also has affinities with the nerd/geek, socially-challenged technocrati as seen in the Britcom The IT Crowd, Coupland's Microserfs, and JPod, and the sport-defined surfers, skaters, and ski-bums.

Yet another element in these texts which deserves further analysis is their treatment of masculinity. The slacker can perhaps be seen to present an ironic a-masculine masculinity. This then leads to the previously mentioned necessity of studying the often unspoken gender issues these texts inevitably bring up by their lack of female characters in both lead and supporting roles. Although the female segment of Generation X gets the short shrift in popular culture and literary representations, in some ways the male slacker is desexualized to a degree which allows women to relate to him, but as said previously, the actual representation of a female slacker still carries too many complications to be well-received or taken seriously. While Bridget Jones may have many correlations with the slacker figures, she is still in too many ways striving to fulfill the expected roles of a young woman: getting older, she feels and internalizes the pressure to find a male partner, to be seen as beautiful, to be competitive and respected. Her element of self-deprecating humor, though, illuminates the difficulty of the position

in which she finds herself: she cannot fully live as a slacker but she wants to. As a female reader, this, too, is where I find myself: identifying with the attitudes, approaches, and philosophies of the slacker, vicariously enjoying his life, relating to him, but knowing I never will lead his life.

The works of Banana Yoshimoto and Amy Yamada – who write quintessentially Generation-X characters – would be the first place I would turn to examine the possibility of sympathetic female exhibition of slacker tendencies. But of course any study of the possibility of a female slacker must address the question, “Would a female slacker be a positive development? What would this character look like and what – if anything – would set it apart from its male counterparts?” and most importantly, “What is the cultural reception of this character?” A novel was recently published called Slacker Girl, but it was one of the most painful, cliché-ridden piece of chick-lit I have encountered; it was mean, ugly, offensive, and demoralizing, perhaps seconding my initial assumptions about females as slackers. I do not see this as a reasonable entrant in the genre nor as the direction it is likely to take.

Of course my geographically-based selections were mere accidents of discovery and not systematically uncovered and chosen. I would be interested in a more comprehensive canvassing of global literature (both written or translated into English and not, though due to the recognition of the slacker figure in the West, I would postulate that these texts might more readily find Western publication and attention than other texts). Although quite American, the Russian immigrant Gary Shteyngart shows the possibility of the Eastern European slacker in Absurdistan whose Misha Vainberg is in many ways

an homage to Oblomov. The strong focus on democracy in this text makes me ask whether slacking is closely related to democracy or at least relative freedom and individual agency. Can slackers thrive in totalitarian or theocratic regimes?

Other questions to ponder include, “Who does the slacker become? Does he ever change? In what ways? Why?” To witness the evolution of the slacker since the 1980s, more study of both Murakami and Chatterjee would be helpful as their slacker figures reappear in the same and related guises in their later fiction. As another author of the new wave of Japanese fiction beginning in the late seventies, Ryu Murakami also deserves some attention. His Almost Transparent Blue would likely be a good pairing with Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting and perhaps the novels of the British Will Self. Through grouping and juxtaposition the many facets of this phenomenon can be seen and analyzed, shedding new light on the slacker, Generation X, and the construction of the postmodern world.

The slacker does not portend the end of civilization, but his is a plangent critique which it would be ominous to ignore entirely. His example – of simply being, of ceasing to strive after ephemerals, of negotiating the fluidity of identity, of re-imagining existence without the constraints of time and place, of seeing lack as possibility, of accepting the boredom and mediocrity of postmodern life – rather than making him shallow, empty, pitiable, or meaningless, demonstrates a strategy for living which others could not see and which makes him an invaluable critic, theorist, and hero of the postmodern era.

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