


Contemporary US-American Satire and Consumerism (Crews, Coupland, Palahniuk)

J.C. Lee  
*University of Rhode Island*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

### Recommended Citation

Lee, J.C.. "Contemporary US-American Satire and Consumerism (Crews, Coupland, Palahniuk)." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.4 (2012): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1839>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1839)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 14 Issue 4 (December 2012) Article 6**

**J.C. Lee,**

**"Contemporary US-American Satire and Consumerism (Crews, Coupland, Palahniuk)"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/6>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 14.4 (2012)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article "Contemporary US-American Satire and Consumerism (Crews, Coupland, Palahniuk)" J.C. Lee focuses on contemporary satire's potential (or lack thereof) for change, reform, or rebellion through an investigation of works by Harry Crews, Douglas Coupland, and Chuck Palahniuk, all of which target consumerism. The said writers employ satire not to initiate rebellion or cultural change, but to reflect the problematic role of institutions in modern life and, in turn, the potential, even hope, for personal growth. Lee's analysis of texts by Crews, Coupland, and Palahniuk is intended to question satire's potential as a form of cultural critique and institutional reform.

**J.C. LEE**

### **Contemporary US-American Satire and Consumerism (Crews, Coupland, Palahniuk)**

With roots tracing back to ancient Greece, satire is one of the oldest modes of (literary) rebellion, what many now refer to as counterculture. While its form has evolved, satire still functions as Jonathan Swift described it: "*a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover everybody's Face but their Own; which is the chief Reason for that kind Reception it meets in the World, and that so very few are offended with it*" (Swift qtd. in Elliott 246; emphasis in the original). The proliferation of satire in our current media-rich world supports Swift's depiction of the "glass" and its "kind reception." From *South Park* to *The Onion* to *The Colbert Report*, satire is well received, yet that "*kind Reception*" may indicate a loss of effect (on *The Colbert Report*, see, e.g., McClennen). Scholars such as Thomas Frank, Joseph Health, and Andrew Potter suggest a decrease in satirical or countercultural efficacy as mainstream corporations continually absorb messages of dissent and rebellion into their marketing tactics.

In the present study I focus on contemporary satire's potential (or lack thereof) for change, reform, or rebellion through an investigation of texts by Harry Crews, Douglas Coupland, and Chuck Palahniuk, all of whom target consumerism. These writers employ satire not to initiate rebellion or cultural change, but to reflect the problematic role of institutions in modern life and, in turn, the potential, even hope, for personal growth. I question satire's potential as a form of cultural critique and institutional reform. Before examining the three books, it may prove useful to illustrate the competing and evolving definitions of satire, which demonstrate the genre's versatility. Linda A. Morris defines satire as: "Work that relies upon humor to expose both human and institutional failures" (377) and elucidates that satires "may be stinging and bitter, or good natured and mild. Works may contain satiric moments, may seem to be built upon satiric impulse, or they may offer sustained critiques of contemporary society" (377). While this indicates the many paths that satires take, Morris's definition, perhaps influenced by her focus on nineteenth-century works, suggests that the majority of satires are driven by a "sense that there is some hope that exposing society's excesses might lead to reform" (377), an assertion that differs greatly from the depiction of satire from Valentine Cunningham, who focuses on far less optimistic, depression-era works, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Of these, Cunningham writes, "Satire does not do happy endings [... and] Modern satire is uniformly dystopian" (419-23).

I refer to post-postmodern satires by Crews, Coupland, and Palahniuk, postulating that while these authors mark difficulties with consumer systems and their institutionalized narratives, none suggests systemic reform: each author's satire suggests reform to the human subject advocating a human connection that improves the lived experience. I explore factors that lead satire away from proposing systemic reform. The ubiquity of consumer institutions makes advocating change a daunting task and perhaps for this reason contemporary US-American satires of consumerism have little recourse to do so. I turn to the larger context of activist discourse to provide a lens by which to view contemporary satires of consumerism. My additional foci may have facilitated a departure from reform-based satires. US-Americans' agency to instigate social change through transgression has faltered within recent years and, therefore, many theorists and activists problematize modes of countercultural reform. Because satire can act as an agent for social change, it is helpful to put these two elements in conversation with one another after a preliminary discussion of contemporary activism.

Nancy Welch discusses her efforts to initiate social change through classroom practice in her work, *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. She declares that the environment of late capitalism and the prevalence of corporate monopolies foster a new environment in which consumption-based activism thrives: "I want to say there is something new about this blunt, unapologetic championing of consumerism as the only sanctioned form of civic participation, the only way to *do something* beside display a flag or give blood. ... There is something breathtaking and terrifying about the dropping of all pretense: The measure of America isn't democracy but capitalism, the measure of one's citizenship isn't one's participation in public decision-making forums but one's spending in the private retail sector" (35). Media technologies and corporate monopolies have changed cultural attitudes toward consumption, as well as consumption practices, modifying conceptions of public activism. According to Welch, personal and corporate philanthropy and fundraising are the primary vehicles for social change because of neoliberalism's increase in privatization (on this, see also McClennen). This leaves little room for

satires that target problematic consumer institutions to instigate reform, especially since such novels must function within consumer systems to reach their audience. The faltering of social vehicles for institutional change may partially explain the prevalence of satires that suggest no institutional change. If consumer-based activism dominates the cultural conception of social change, then causes featuring commercially palatable messages dispersed amid mass consumer outlets will succeed beyond those that do not. In *Pink Ribbons Inc.* Samantha King analyzes the pink ribbon, discussing commercial variables of the Breast Cancer Awareness (BCA) movement. King notes that the mass-audience palatability of the pink ribbon trope connotes a uniform message of survivorship, screening, and treatment, enabling the cause's success. This demonstrates Eric J. Arnould's assertion that consumerism can have productive social purposes when consumers appropriate the market to their own ends (108). However, despite the success of the BCA movement, its widespread consumer-activism silences alternate discourses, a phenomenon of which Barbara Ehrenreich has written at great length.

Even those satires which attempt to escape consumer-based reform systems fail. Kalle Lasn, founder of *Adbusters* and the Culture Jam, works to change the nature of branding and consumption, often by appropriating brands, satirizing them through anti-ads: faux commercials that reduce the public's estimation and fetishization of the brand in question. Lance W. Bennett and Taso Lagos dispute the efficacy of anti-ads, elucidating that, while anti-ads can increase awareness, perhaps altering consumers' spending patterns, severe limitations bound anti-ads and the culture jam movement at large. Lasn himself has written of his early difficulties bringing anti-ads into standardized media outlets such as network television. Ironically, *Adbusters* now advertises alternative culture products. Moreover, companies can emulate the ethics an anti-ad espouses to retain customers, without following these ethics. The visual satires of anti-ads easily fall into consuming activism, rather than initiating it. Lasn's attempts to resist consumption are flawed by their need to function within a consumer system. Arnould proposes that an anti-consumption life cannot function. Those who propose such a life forget the passing of the industrial age. He also argues that the market can be productive when consumers use it to their own ends: an intriguing complication for satires of consumerism. Authors should be able to function within the market — book sales and press releases and public relations — to disseminate social messages that instigate change (on US-American popular culture and consumerism, see, e.g., Heller <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/4>>). However, when their content critiques consumer behavior and materialism, appropriating the market for social change features severe complications, namely because of the layers of contradiction inherent to such an act, but also because, according to Arnould, no genuine alternative to the market exists. Arnould explains that visions of escaping the market are romanticized, citing the real world example of Zinder in the Niger republic. This agricultural society lacks saleable resources, and widespread illiteracy ensures an unskilled populace: "This kind of escape is clearly not the kind envisioned by critics of market capitalism, and yet it is hard to imagine a realistic alternative" (Arnould 104).

Arnould clarifies the market as a long-standing function rather than the inherently negative force that many perceive; he asserts that movements engaging within extant structures will help further the citizenry's participation (104-08). When applied to satires written within late capitalism, Arnould's work suggests that satires can advocate changes to consumption, but when satires rail against consumerism at large, no systemic overhaul can appear. Even if a satirist advocates massive, systemic reform, such as a change to communism (a far less popular ideology now than eighty years ago), one must acknowledge that the global marketplace lacks alternatives to consumer systems. China, the largest communist country, makes many of the products that Westerners consume. In addition to cultural changes in activism and the contemporary climate regarding consumerism, satire's status as a mode of discourse presents another variable that illuminates the increase of satires that reflect without proposing systemic reform. Loizos Heracleous examines dominant, strategic, and marginalized modes of discourse as they function within a corporation. He evaluates satiric cartoons posted throughout the company: in workers' cubicles and within dominant discourse publications, such as the company newsletter. Heracleous argues that, within the company, satire functions as a safe, marginalized counter-discourse, reflecting the employees' shared grievances, allowing them to release stress while avoiding confrontation with the managerial staff. Management (the target of these satiric attacks) views this marginalized counter-discourse and yet satire remains benign enough through its reflective (not reforming) purpose that it passes unchallenged.

Heracleous's study illustrates the connections for which this paper argues. It marks satire as a mode of counter-discourse, and then examines its consumption among a commonly dissatisfied audience, following these satires' paths through the dominant discourse wherein it acts "as a steam-letting device" (1079), but does not initiate change. Satire transgresses, and it always has. Today, one finds a proliferation of satire that transgresses cultural norms, and yet little of it proposes reform. Heracleous's work indicates that satires' need to pass within the very systems they decry may explain satire's reluctance to propose reform. If masked to release steam, rather than subtly suggest change, passing amid the dominant discourse becomes safer. However, as Kenneth Burke writes, "the most inventive satire arises when the artist is seeking to simultaneously to take risks and escape punishment for his boldness, and is never quite certain himself whether he will be acclaimed or punished" (Burke qtd. in Elliott 245). While the need to remain covert can explain some of reform's absence from our satires, covertness has always coupled with subversion in satire. Thus, this alone does not explain the stark lack of contemporary satires that propose reform.

Satire's role as counterculture presents the ultimate variable that inhibits its efficacy as a mode of reform. Heath and Potter problematize the popularization of contemporary culture since World War II. Members of countercultures often believe that their purchases inherently embody acts of rebellion, which complicates consumer identity with a fallacious sense that non-conformity itself instigates social change. Satires, such as those examined herein, may fail to advance solutions to problems because of this prevailing countercultural myth in North American culture. Heath, Potter, and Frank examine the efficacy of countercultures as genuine rebellions against consumer systems. Heath and Potter explore counterculture as a mythos that features the same motivations and characteristics as mainstream culture. They analyze the culturally prescribed desire for difference, asserting that such difference falls within prescribed norms, and they examine multiple cultural movements, ranging from the 1960s to current trends toward organic produce. They assert that, despite the illusion of personality alteration, the underlying consumer drive remains the same.

The population defines itself through its consumption. The brands have changed as the individuals have adjusted their politics with the passage of time, but the underlying drive remains consistent: to enact one's political self through consumption: "The traditional critique of mass society suggests that most people are members of the herd, cogs in the machine, victims of mindless conformity. ... That having been said, who could possibly want to be a member of mass society? If anything, people should be desperate to prove that they are not victims of conformity, that they are not merely cogs in the machine. And of course, as the critique of mass society became increasingly widespread, this is precisely what people tried to do" (Heath and Potter 128). Counterculture grows from the larger phenomenon of identifying oneself through ones' purchases, through clothing, culture, and the food that one consumes. Post-postmodern contemporary US-American satires of consumerism may illustrate the complications that Heath and Potter emphasize.

Terminal satires, which imply changes in individuals' behaviors without advancing systemic reforms to the problematic institutions on which they touch, prevail in the twentieth century. Crews's *The Mulching of America* (1995), Coupland's *All Families Are Psychotic* (2001), and Palahniuk's *Survivor* (1999) all satirize consumerism, but none proposes solutions to consumerism's challenges, illustrating the difficulty of resolving issues of consumer institutions that pervade. Crews focuses on Hickum Looney who devotes his existence to the Soaps for Life Corporation. Two friends, Ida Mae and Gaye Nell O'Dell, try to help Hickum gain independence and individuality, but the Boss' influence and the grip of the company itself prevent this. One might dismiss the lack of reform in Crews's satires by noting his reluctance to write message-driven fiction. As Crews writes in the essay "Getting It Together" that "Messages are best left to Western Union" (10). However, Crews does not ignore social content altogether. He told Jim Knipfel "I am afraid I have an agenda when I start to write a novel. And nothing kills a piece of fiction like an agenda" (<<http://www.harrycrews.org/Features/Interviews/KnipfelJ-StoriesToldInBlood.html>>). Crews claims a different purpose for his fiction: "all of the best fiction is about ... somebody trying to do the best he can with what he's got" (Crews qtd. in Lytal 538). While Crews resists explicitly message-driven work, his novels are influenced by his experiences and perspectives. Despite his reluctance to accept labels, he acknowledges that many have been applied to his fiction: "first the reviewers got on the freak business, then they got on the gothic business. Then they began to use the word 'satirist.' Now, I never thought of myself as a satirist, but I guess, damn, I guess that's

as close to what I do as anything else, is satirize things"

(<<http://www.harrycrews.org/Features/Interviews/KnipfelJ-StoriesToldInBlood.html>>).

*The Mulching of America* is one such satire that explores the human drive for material goods and the tendency to identify the self through the material. One representation of material identity comes in the form of the Lincoln Town Car that Hickum owns: the same make and model as the Boss' car: "Just to look at it made Hickum Looney proud to be an American" (Crews 55). Hickum identifies the car with the U.S. Consequently, owning the car allows him to self-identify as patriotic and an equal to his wealthy employer. Crews, who "dislike[s] cars immensely" and who only learned to drive at the age of 21 (<<http://www.harrycrews.org/Features/Interviews/KnipfelJ-StoriesToldInBlood.html>>) explains that his first car: "owned me much more than I would ever own the car ... since that day, I've never confused myself with a car, a confusion common everywhere about us" ("The Car" 15). Hickum represents the conflation of self and product. When he first meets Gaye Nell O'Dell, he describes his Lincoln Town Car as "the only thing I own ... Everything I've got in the world is tied up in it," and Gaye Nell responds, "It's the American Way" (Crews 62). Through the satire, no alternative mode of behavior appears. Hickum's town car embodies the developed world's materially constructed identities. Like many Americans, Hickum has willingly entered into debt to achieve status. As James Twitchell clarifies, "The average American consumes twice as many goods and services as in 1950; in fact, the poorest fifth of the current population buys more than the average fifth did in 1955" (Twitchell 47). Heath and Potter synthesize the endless futility of such behavior, when they write "as a society as a whole grows wealthier, consumer behavior increasingly acquires the structure of an arms race, it's like turning up your stereo in order to drown out the neighbor's music" (Heath and Potter 115). Hickum has entered into a battle that he cannot win, not for lack of effort, but because, ultimately, this contest has no prize. However, the text's critique of the consumer arms race evolves into nothing more. Crews raises a mirror to Hickum's product-based identity and ends at reflection, rather than advocating a larger behavioral or systemic change.

People often create their identities and seek distinction through the products that they buy. With everyone clamoring for uniqueness, difference becomes the norm, and so it loses its efficacy. As Heath and Potter write, "The quest for distinction is therefore collectively self-defeating – everyone strives to get what not everyone can have" (126). Hickum remains entirely oblivious to this phenomenon even as he so aligns the Lincoln with his identity that he perceives it as "a defense against the Boss" (Crews 57) whom he obeys as blindly as he spends. Rather than fight his boss or pursue alternative employment, Hickum arms himself with possessions, but consumption-based rebellion is an ineffective "defense" (57). Citizens of the developed world inevitably create and enact their selfhoods through consumption. Therefore, while Crews reflects cultural practice and convention and berates Hickum's flagrant identification with the Lincoln Town Car, perhaps admonishing readers not to imbue commodities with more power than their functionality, no alternative to consumption exists, and so no reform appears. In his non-fiction essay, "The Car," Crews warns that "We have found God in cars, or, if not the true God, one so satisfying, so powerful, and awe-inspiring that the distinction is too fine to matter" (11). Through Hickum, Crews expresses wary disapproval of Americans' adoration of products and for cars in particular.

In Hickum, Crews creates a caricature of a helpless worker with coca cola advertisement jingles in his head, whose only proactive behavior is spending. This reflects the activism of which Welch writes: Hickum feels systematically disempowered and so he has learned helplessness, expressing himself most easily through his purchasing power. While this implicitly critiques the consumerism of the developed world, Crews's work concerns itself with the human species, what he refers to in *Celebration* as "the human beast." Crews explains that, as a writer, "you spend most of your time thinking about, meditating upon, trying to dissect and understand just those aspects of the human animal that other human beings try their damndest never to think about" (Crews qtd. in Ketchin 346). Crews's satire revolves more around the human than the social experience, and so while depictions of Hickum feature both human and larger cultural implications, Crews remarks rarely upon the latter. While the narrator brings the reader to a state of disapproval over Hickum's conflation of self and product, he does not advocate change to that system. Crews focuses on the underdevelopment of Hickum's selfhood more than the efficacy of the system that fosters it. Crews reflects a corrupt business environment that dooms men like Hickum, but he presents no solution through the telling. As Robert C. Coovel explains, many of Crews' characters "search for significance and meaning within a world in which the traditional

answers have lost their efficacy. They are generally social outcasts for whom the traditionally approved sources of meaning and purpose (love, religion, family and community) have either lost their original value or have become tainted and perverted" (Covel 75). In *The Mulching of America*, the joys which Hickum finds in friendship and love resolve this search temporarily, but the conflation of the self with the inanimate remains unsolved. The consumer institutions in place appear so massive, so intricately interwoven, that they form a daunting and inescapable web. No suggestion for systemic change develops. How can a solution appear, once the novel has successfully illustrated the impenetrability of the corporation?

Crews's own aesthetic reveals that he embraces an early postwar ideal of the countercultural. Jim Knipfel describes him as "Greaser, Mohawk, buzzcut, tattoos, shades, scowl, mustache, squint. Over the past 30 years or so, that face has changed considerably. So has he" (<<http://www.harrycrews.org/Features/Interviews/KnipfelJ-StoriesToldInBlood.html>>). This variation of the countercultural philosophy saturates Crews's work largely through the recurrence of what many have labeled "freaks," prominent characters in each novel who diverge, physically, and behaviorally, from the mainstream. These depictions reveal a personal empathy with the otherness of the outsider. Unlike contemporary counterculture, which often screens degrees of insider/outsider by others' participation in shared countercultural cool, Crews perceives alternative culture as a screen for personality, filtering away those with whom he does not wish to interact: "If you can't get past my 'too' — my tattoo — and my 'do' — the way I got my hair cut — it's only because you have decided there are certain things that can be done with hair and certain things that cannot be done with hair. And certain of them are right and proper and decent, and the rest indicate a warped, degenerate nature; therefore I am warped and degenerate. Cause I got my hair cut a different way, man? You gonna really live your life like that? What's wrong with you?" (Crews qtd. in Lytal 538)

Crews's early-postmodern conceptions of counterculture suggest that he is uncritical of the social re-appropriation of counterculture. His satire celebrates alternative subcultures but does not explore counterculture's relationship to rebellion. As in *The Mulching of America* Crews critiques consumer identity, so too does Coupland's *All Families Are Psychotic*. Coupland portrays a world largely devoid of hope, but not hopeless. Coupland's Canadian heritage has prompted much discussion and Karen E.H. Skinazi discusses Coupland's popularity in the United States, clarifying that he writes US-American fiction more than Canadian literature. Skinazi proposes that Coupland "uses his unique vantage point as a Canadian who is writing 'American fiction' to re-write Canada back into American history" (2) and this emphasizes the role of globalization in consumer systems and discourse thereon.

*All Families Are Psychotic* features the Drummond family, who gather at Cape Canaveral for, Sara's space launch. The family includes Sarah's divorced parents, Janet and Ted, Ted's new wife, Nickie, and Sarah's brothers, Wade and Bryan. Desperate for money, Ted enlists his sons in pursuit of a priceless letter from Princess Diana, and, predictably, hijinks ensue. In this novel Coupland alludes to countercultural movements. Since Coupland labeled his generation "Gen X" and his first work by that title, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) influenced a generation of North Americans, this focus on alternative culture is no surprise. In *All Families Are Psychotic*, Coupland presents countercultures through the perspective of Janet, the outsider, whose struggle to adapt to contemporary life provides readers with a unique perspective of consumerism. In an Internet café, she sees that "Godless children in black outfits up near the front casually sipped elaborate coffees that in the Toronto of her youth would surely have been banned as threats to society. The shop's background music was a popular song called 'Boompboompboompboompboompboomp'" (36). Coupland pairs the setting of this young adult with the adult Janet's hometown of Toronto, inviting comparison both of the different generations and of the different cultures. This passage both illustrates Coupland's endeavor to return Canada's presence to the canon and emphasizes the global nature of consumerism. Additionally, Janet marks a generational change in alternative culture. In the "Godless children," Janet sees a shallow generation. Much like Hickum Looney in *The Mulching of America*, these "children" define themselves by purchases. This invites a return to contemporary scholars who examine counterculture's inability to counter mass culture successfully. These "threats to society" (36) suggest rebellion through their wardrobe and music, but they partake in a paradoxically mainstreamed coffee-consuming culture. This reflects Thomas Frank's assertion that "the counter cultural idea[']s frenzied ecstasies have long since become an official aesthetic of consumer society ... dreadlocks and ponytails bounding into Taco Bells" (33). The developed world's conception of

rebellion has marketably merged with ideas of non-conformity. Coupland follows this dominant understanding of counterculture, and so, while Janet views these young adults as "other," than her, the narrative throughout *All Families Are Psychotic* subscribes to the mythos of countercultures, and the satire proposes no change.

Frank writes of industries that create and then target such subcultures profiting from "the 'countercultural idea' [which] holds that the paramount ailment of our society is conformity, a malady that has variously been described as over-organization, bureaucracy, homogeneity, hierarchy, logocentrism, technocracy, the Combine, the Apollonian" (57). Countercultures have multiplied and flourished, through fashion, without advancing any unified political or philosophical message. Many accept the mythos of counterculture as rebellion, and they often do so in lieu of actual change. *All Families are Psychotic* raises the commodification of pseudo-rebellion for scorn through Janet, who does not know how to assess this cultural behavior. Neither she nor any other character suggests explicit change. Coupland's novel reveals a distaste of mass production and consumption that is trapped in irony. As Heath and Potter explain, "Consumerism ... always seems to be a critique of *what other people buy*" (105; emphasis in the original). Perhaps this problematic pitfall prevents *All Families are Psychotic* from proposing an alternative to the consumer system it depicts. The novel marks some spending patterns with disapproval, but the main characters ultimately engage in these same purchasing behaviors while buying different products. Coupland only presents one solution: for people to try in small and manageable doses to rise above it all. At the close of *All Families are Psychotic*, Sarah reflects on the "human ability to rise above the cruel and unusual world," Coupland strives to impress this upon his readers (277).

Coupland's satires share a common message of the need for community. Janet has multiple spheres of family, friendship, and support, and as Skinazi explains Coupland's work "characters are repeatedly and temporarily tying themselves to the communities that they seek out in each location" (12). The power of human interaction to give strength presents one subtly implicit reform; still, the larger questions of consumerism remain unaddressed. Coupland's work depicts a counterculture ironically, yet without any indication that he sees countercultures as a cumulative phenomenon to critique. Instead, Coupland presents an idea of hope without raising lasting solutions. In lieu of systemic reform, Coupland guides readers to find hope in the individual. As with the other novels examined herein, Palahniuk's *Survivor* presents human connection as a salvage crew for the wreckage left in the wake of contemporary culture, but it does so with less optimism than *All Families are Psychotic*. Since his first published novel, *Fight Club* (1996), Palahniuk has published six other works of fiction, all of which use bizarre plot lines bounded by satiric edges and saturated with consumerism. A marketing agent convinces protagonist Tender Branson, the last surviving member of the Creedish Church (an isolated, ascetic community), to become a marketing gimmick. Immediately, the atheist Tender transforms into a figurehead: a spiritual guru whose persona sells products. His brother, Adam, and his friend, Fertility, try to help him out of this commercial oubliette, but only by hijacking a plane with suicidal intent can Tender escape an unjust warrant for his arrest and superstar status.

Like Crews, Palahniuk depicts the conflation of material and self, and like Coupland, Palahniuk's work problematizes mass and countercultures. As Ruben Montiel writes, "Palahniuk has made a career of social satire that, despite its heavy dependence on shock value, seems to hit on some fundamental truth. ... his books deliver blistering social commentary, if not high literature" (<<http://www.chicagomaroon.com/2009/5/19/palahniuk-s-social-satire-sears-but-characters-leave-us-cold>>). Palahniuk creates an alarming world through Tender's narrative voice, which captures the genericity of mass-marketed consumer goods that saturate his landscape. As in *All Families are Psychotic*, Janet notes the corporately produced muzac targeting trendy caffeine addicts, Tender explores the generic melody of mourning, recorded and looped for "ambiance" within the cemetery he visits, when he thinks, "it's music as wallpaper, utilitarian, music as Prozac or Xanax to control how you feel. Music as aerosol room freshener" (Palahniuk 216). Marketers have catered every aspect of the grieving process to the clientele. This berating of mass (and mass-produced) culture is not paired with an alternative mode of functioning.

Fertility Hollis, Tender's only friend, expresses disgust with the superficiality of mass culture, revealing a desire to replace it. Tender's past isolation makes him a beacon of hope: if anyone can escape the societal influences that permeate the very air then an outsider can. Fertility explains to Tender that: "We all grew up with the same television shows. It's like we all have the same artificial memory implants. We remember almost none of our real childhoods, but we remember everything that happened to sitcom families. We have the same basic goals. We all have the same



basic fears. The big question people ask isn't '*What is the nature of existence?*' ...The big question people ask is '*what's that from?*' ... you grew up in a different world ...you're not part of the mass culture, not yet. You're my only hope of seeing anything new ...you're a control group of one. (Palahniuk 110-11; emphases in the original). Fertility hopes that, as someone raised outside of it in an isolated community, Tender will be "a control group of one" (110), but such hopes have already dissolved by the time Fertility expresses the words. Tender already embodies American materialism. Fertility presents a shallow U.S. dominated by television, which has replaced its national and individual memories with the artificial realities of television sitcoms. While Fertility's monologue indicates a dismal perspective of genuine cultural problems, no immediate solution appears. Through its relentless disgust at mass culture, *Survivor* features an undercurrent of faith in countercultures as vehicles for change; but as Fertility learns, no one, not even a man raised on isolated farmland, can live within US-American society without participating in its consumer systems; therefore, the satire advocates no immediate systemic change.

Through her distaste, Fertility implies her own superiority over mass culture, as though she has found enlightenment through her rejection of it. However, Heath and Potter find an inherent paradox in such attitudes: "Perhaps calling other people unconscious is just a way of dismissing the fact that *not everyone thinks the same way you do*" (95; emphasis in the original). Through the character of Fertility, Palahniuk indicates the common trend to privilege one's consumption patterns over those of others, which often appear distasteful, particularly when one defines selfhood through countercultures. Ultimately, while one person may spend money on The Pixies and another on Pachelbel, both participate in the same underlying consumer system. Endeavors to judge right and wrong culture consumption end problematically, because "necessary spending" and "excess" are most often entirely subjective. However, Palahniuk himself revels in the countercultural. As he writes in his foreword to *You Do Not Talk about Fight Club*: "People ask me why I write about characters who seem to live on the margins of society, and my answer is always that the fringe is the future. Outside the mainstream, people are engaged in constant small experiments, testing new social models, new hierarchies, new personal identities. The most successful of those experiments – what begins as cults, fads, crazes, or manias – the ones that serve people best grow to become the next mainstream" (Palahniuk, "The Fringe" 9).

Palahniuk displays raw faith in the countercultural mythos, but as Frank, Heath and Potter note, counterculture rarely provides a means to an end. The same consumption-based system enshrouds both alternative and mass cultures. Even within this critical anthology that Palahniuk prefaced, E.J. Park posits an ironic approach to Palahniuk's work: "After watching *Fight Club*, I resolved to change, to be different, to rebel. I would no longer frequent Starbucks, no longer wear Old Navy, no longer listen to 'N Sync. I was determined to resist consumer culture with a vengeance. So I went shopping, if you're going to be Tyler Durden, you have to have the right look, the right style, the right kick-ass vibe" (117). Park satirically comments on the very complications that underlie the countercultural mythos, to which Palahniuk subscribes. Palahniuk's oeuvre sells the cool of counterculture. While Crews's work largely neglects countercultures as we know them, and Coupland defines the countercultures as he sees them, Palahniuk creates countercultures around him. Some percentage of fans follows Palahniuk's works with such devotion that they emulate exact elements of the novel — often without regard for their figurative significance. Additionally, a layer of marketing inevitably surrounds successful novels, clothing, soap, DVDs, accessories, and more, a detail rich in irony given Palahniuk's frequent thematic preoccupation with consumerism.

Similar to Crews and Coupland, Palahniuk focuses on the role of the individual in society, and the potential for individual growth. When discussing *Fight Club*, Palahniuk explains that no functional alternative to consumer systems exists within the organization of the rebellious Project Mayhem group. Instead, he advocates the act of coming together: "What's important is that the people around [Durden] have a reason to gather, to discover that they all share the same fears, and to take gradual action" (Palahniuk, "The Fringe" 10). Individual reform consistently appears as a vehicle for personal change, but despite continuous attacks on the consumer system, no functional systemic reform appears, illustrating the absence of post-postmodern satires that propose reform. As with many contemporary satires of consumerism, Palahniuk's *Survivor* cannot advocate systemic change because it reproduces the mythos of counterculture that surrounds its reception. Instead, as Sven Birkets explains, Palahniuk "has made it his job to gather up the vectors of our collective unease and brandish them in our faces" (64). This fitting description captures *Survivor's* satirical purpose: reflection. In the introduction to *You Do Not Talk about Fight*

*Club*, Read Mercer Schuchart describes Palahniuk as "a documenter of our world of disparate contradictions. He is our existentialist paramedic" (3-4). Schuchart continues his metaphor on this participant-observer role, writing, "He won't save you, and he won't even give you any medicine, but he'll hold your hand all the way to the hospital. On the way there, he'll show you a mirror, let you see just how badly beat up you really are, and in some strange way, you will arrive at the ER feeling more hopeful, less lonely, and less despairing" (Schuchart 4). Palahniuk's satires reflect the problematic world, and Schuchart remarks carry with them echoes of Swift's "*sort of Glass*" (246).

Palahniuk reinforces the countercultural mythos continually: the sense that consumption-based rebellion legitimately challenges institutions. Through this, in each of his novels he praises and creates counterculture. Like Crews and Coupland, Palahniuk advocates reform through the potential of the individual to develop and find him/herself through creative acts. Palahniuk opens his introduction to his nonfiction essay collection, *Stranger than Fiction*, by explaining, "If you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people" (Palahniuk, "Fact" xv). However, the climate of US-America prevents Palahniuk from propounding larger, institutional reforms. As the Heracleous's study asserts, satires succeed most when their expression reflects, allowing a cultural vent for steam release without openly advancing systematic alternatives (1079). Some might rush to accuse Palahniuk's lack of constructive reform on the philosophical leanings they perceive in his work. Many have labeled Palahniuk a nihilist because of the characters that often appear in his work. Of this, he has explained, "if you don't believe what other folks believe ... then they just write you off by calling you a nihilist. ... it's easy for them to say you don't believe in anything. ... But in fact, I'm totally a romantic. My books are about people destroying their own isolation and creating community" (Pietzman

<[http://archive.dailycal.org/article/24981/interview\\_palahniuk\\_discusses\\_the\\_nihilism\\_label\\_ro](http://archive.dailycal.org/article/24981/interview_palahniuk_discusses_the_nihilism_label_ro)>). Tender Branson brings a more undeniably nihilistic presence to *Survivor* than appears elsewhere in Palahniuk's oeuvre, and yet the cultural context, and not this philosophy, which the novel rejects, prevents the satire from proposing reform. As depicted within *Survivor*, consumerism pervades ubiquitously; when consumer systems are inescapable, reform appears a futile task.

In my opinion readers should interpret this paper neither as a denouncement of terminally reflective satires, nor an indictment of the authors herein. Respect and appreciation for the genre in its many forms drives the desire to see the mode continue to grow. This paper examines generic and cultural variables that coalesce to create a unique climate in which satire predominately functions as reflection. Such reflection serves a valuable purpose. As Sigmund Freud explained, humans escape the confines of repressive societies through wit, which "permits us to make our enemy ridiculous through that which we could not utter loudly or consciously on account of existing hindrances; in other words, wit affords us the means of surmounting restrictions and opening up otherwise inaccessible pleasure sources" (Freud qtd. in Elliott 245). Satiric fiction enjoys a freedom to critique mainstreamed institutional practices, and society grants satire such freedom by allowing the subject to deny him/herself as a target. However, "surmounting restrictions" becomes a different challenge entirely when a countercultural mystique that is more illusory than effective pervades the cultural landscape.

The surrounding culture features an interesting conglomeration of behaviors and ideologies that interact, and in so doing, deter satires from reform. Cultural conceptions of reform and rebellion have changed to suit consumer-based activism, more than behavior- or action-based. Additionally, US-American cultural conversation must facilitate further discourse on consumerism so that ideologies of change can cohere. As Heracleous's study shows, satire moves most freely when it reflects, rather than reforms, but satires of reform feature undeniable value, and scholars and novelists alike can continue to investigate the nature of contemporary satire in order to navigate a place for reform amid the current, cultural context. Satires may be more likely to propose reform if accompanied by self-reflexive praxis that considers the role of the genre, at present and in future.

In conclusion, as readers encounter the above discussed US-American satires of consumerism, perhaps they consider avenues of resistance: shopping locally; eating free-range; buying used. However, as Arnould asserts, even modes of protest, countercultures against consumerism, work within consumer systems, and since the protest movements of the 1960s, consumer markets have continually absorbed protests into the mainstream. Perceptive and intelligent as Crews's, Coupland's, and Palahniuk's satires are, they have no resort but to reflect problematic institutions. The culture at large often appropriates and mutes calls for change. Perhaps only variations, not

solutions, to the problems of consumption exist, and therefore, these authors urge beholders of the glass to see their own faces and change themselves, rather than their institutions.

### Works Cited

- Arnould, Eric J. "Should Consumer Citizens Escape the Market?" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007. 96-111.
- Bennett, Lance W., and Taso Lagos. "Logo Logic: The Ups and Downs of Branded Political Communication." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007. 193-206.
- Birkets, Sven. "Marquee Names." *Esquire* 131.4 (1999): 64.
- Coupland, Douglas. *All Families are Psychotic*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2001.
- Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: Saint Martin's P, 1991.
- Covel, Robert C. "The Violent Bear It as Best They Can: Cultural Conflict in the Novels of Harry Crews." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 27.2 (1994): 75-87.
- Crews, Harry. "The Car." *Florida Frenzy*. By Harry Crews. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1984. 11-15.
- Crews, Harry. *The Mulching of America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
- Cunningham, Valentine. "Twentieth Century Fictional Satire." *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*. Ed. Ruben Quintero. London: Blackwell, 2007. 400-33.
- Elliott, Robert C. "The Satirist and Society." *English Literary History* 21.3 (1954): 237-48.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Welcome to Cancerland: A Mammogram Leads to a Cult of Pink Kitsch." *Harper's Magazine* (November 2001): 43-53.
- Frank, Thomas. "Why Johnny Can't Dissent." *Reading Popular Culture*. Ed. Michael Keller. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2002. 67-68.
- Heath, Joseph, and Andrew Potter. *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*. New York: Harper Business, 2004.
- Heller, Dana. "Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors in American Literature and Popular Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.3 (2003): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/4>>.
- Heracleous, Loizos. "A Tale of Three Discourses: The Dominant, the Strategic, and the Marginalized." *Journal of Management Studies* 43.5 (2006): 1059-87.
- Ketchin, Susan. "Harry Crews." *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction*. By Susan Ketchin. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994. 326-51.
- King, Samantha. *Pink Ribbons Inc: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Knipfel, Jim. "Stories Told in Blood." *The Harry Crews Online Bibliography* (2002): <<http://www.harrycrews.org/Features/Interviews/KnipfelJ-StoriesToldInBlood.html>>
- Lasn, Kalle. *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Consumer Binge and Why We Must*. New York: Quill, 1999.
- Lytal, Tammy, and Richard R. Russell. "Some of Us Do It Anyway: An Interview with Harry Crews." *Georgia Review* 48.3 (1994): 536- 53.
- McClennen, Sophia A. *Colbert's America: Satire and Democracy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Montiel, Ruben. "Palahniuk's Social Satire Sears, but Characters Leave Us Cold." *Chicago Maroon* (19 May 2009): <<http://www.chicagomaroon.com/2009/5/19/palahniuk-s-social-satire-sears-but-characters-leave-us-cold>>.
- Morris, Linda A. "American Satire: Beginnings through Mark Twain." *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*. Ed. Ruben Quintero. London: Blackwell, 2007. 377-99.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. "Fact and Fiction: An Introduction." *Stranger than Fiction*. By Chuck Palahniuk. New York: Anchor Books, 2004. xv-xxii.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: Norton and Company, 1996.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. "The Fringe is the Future." *I Am Jack's Completely Unauthorized Essay Collection: You Do Not Talk About Fight Club*. Ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008. 7-11.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. *Survivor*. New York: Anchor Books, 1999.
- Park, E.J. "Rebel Consumer." *I Am Jack's Completely Unauthorized Essay Collection: You Do Not Talk About Fight Club*. Ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008. 117-18.
- Pietzman, Louis. "Interview: Palahniuk Discusses the Nihilism Label, Romanticism, and Why 'Rant' Opened up New Doors for His Writing." *The Daily Californian* (10 May 2007): <[http://archive.dailycal.org/article/24981/interview\\_palahniuk\\_discusses\\_the\\_nihilism\\_label\\_ro](http://archive.dailycal.org/article/24981/interview_palahniuk_discusses_the_nihilism_label_ro)>.
- Schuchart, Read Mercer. "Chuck Palahniuk, Existentialist Paramedic." *I Am Jack's Completely Unauthorized Essay Collection: You Do Not Talk About Fight Club*. Ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008. 1-6.
- Skinazi, Karen E.H. "A Cosmopolitan New World: Douglas Coupland's Canadianation of AmLit." *AmeriQuests* 4.1 (2007): 1-4.
- Twitchell, James. "Two Cheers for Materialism." *Reading Popular Culture*. Ed. Michael Keller. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2002. 47-56.
- Welch, Nancy. *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2008.

Author's profile: J.C. Lee is working towards her Ph.D. in rhetoric and writing at the University of Rhode Island with a dissertation entitled *Opting in Online: Participants' Perceptions of Knowledge Construction in Forum Communities*. Her interests in research include cultural studies, contemporary satire, public writing, and the study of online discourse. Lee has published articles in the collected volume *Shopping for Jesus: Faith in Marketing in the USA* (Ed. Dominic Janes, 2008) and in journals such as *Moria: A Poetry Journal* (2006) and *Association for the Study of Ethical Behavior in Literature Journal* (2009). E-mail: <[jennifer\\_lee@my.uri.edu](mailto:jennifer_lee@my.uri.edu)>